

## CHAPTER 7. READING ISRAEL'S WISDOM AGAIN

1. In Israel's wisdom literature we encounter the dailiness of life in ancient Israel.  
The focus of this literature is more on the everyday. Its central concerns are the eminently practical questions, "How shall I live?" and "what is life about?"
2. Israel's wisdom is extraordinarily rich.  
It ranges from the pithy wisdom sayings of the book of Proverbs through the melancholic reflections about life's mysteries in Ecclesiastes to the anguished and magnificent book of Job.
3. It covers every thing from sage advice about the raising of children to deeply reflective thought about the nature of reality and the meaning of life. Its voices are diverse and provocative.

### INTRODUCTION

1. Israel's wisdom books are found in the third and final division of the Hebrew Bible: the Writings.  
This is a miscellaneous collection dating primarily from the postexilic period. In addition to the wisdom books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job includes also: the Psalms, the apocalyptic book of Daniel, -stories of heroic Queen Esther and the good Gentile woman Ruth -the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs -and the historical books of I and II Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.
2. Wisdom books difficult to date with precision, largely because they contain no references to historical events contemporary with the by which they might be dated.  
They do not refer even to historical events from Israel's past.
3. Wisdom literature finds us the postexilic period that began in 539 BCE.  
Proverbs in its present form is a postexilic composition put together around 500 BCE.  
Book of Job is most commonly seen as an exilic or postexilic document, though a few scholars would date it in the seventh century BCE.  
Book of Ecclesiastes is the latest, composed in the third century BCE.
4. During these centuries, the Jewish people continued to live under the political control of foreign empires:  
-under the Persian Empire until its conquest by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE  
-and then under the Hellenistic Empires descended from Alexander.  
Jewish political independence was not regained until the time of the Maccabees in 164 BCE.
5. It was a religious community seeking to consolidate its identity and preserve its traditions.  
During this period of exceptional activity, the Pentateuch was put into its present form (including both consolidation and some creation of legal traditions), the Pentateuch was put into its present form  
-the Prophets as a collection of books took shape  
-and most of all of the Writings were composed.  
It is an impressive literary and religious accomplishment for a small group of people.
6. Israel's wisdom traditions also include two books:  
-Ecclesiasticus. This book was written quite late in the postexilic period, probably between 200 and 180 BCE, and its author was a Jewish wisdom teacher in Jerusalem named Jesus Ben Sira, or Jesus son of Sirach.

The second book, The Wisdom of Solomon, apocryphal wisdom book, was written even later, commonly dated to the first century BCE. Its author is unknown.

### SUMMARY

1. It is more concerned with the individual. It looks at the individual as embedded within family and kinship systems and society.  
It is not concerned with Israel's sacred story as a people or with the criticism and reshaping of the social order.
2. Its tone and form are also different.  
-it does not claim to be the product of divine revelation but is grounded in observation of and reflection upon human experience.
3. Wisdom is insight based on experience.  
Wisdom is crystallized experience--practical insights about how to live generated by long experience of the world.

### PROVERBS

1. Book has 31 chapters and falls into two main parts.  
-the first part (made up of the first nine chapters) is a series of "wisdom poems"  
-most of rest of book is a collection of individual proverbs--the short, memorable sayings that give the book its name.  
-not the work of one person, the pithy proverbs the accumulated sayings of generations of wisdom teachers.

THE WISDOM POEMS IN PROVERBS 1-9 page 149

THE PROVERBS OF CHAPTERS 10-30 page 151

PROVERBS CHARACTERIZED BY ELEGANCE AND HUMOR page 152

I have chosen some proverbs to illustrate central themes and others because of their linguistic elegance and occasional humor.

PROVERBS DEALING WITH WEALTH AND POVERTY page 154

~~PROVERBS DEALING WITH THE REWARDS OF RIGHT LIVING~~ page 157

PROVERBS DEALING WITH THE REWARDS OF RIGHT LIVING page 157

PROVERBS AS CONVENTIONAL WISDOM page 159

### ECCLESIASTES page 161

1. For many modern people, Ecclesiastes is the most "user-friendly" book in Hebrew Bible. It requires of its readers no knowledge of Israel's history, its language strikes people as speaking immediately to life, and its melancholic tone seems to fit the modern spirit.
2. Its author is "Qoheleth" which is not a name in Hebrew but a title or office. Mostly likely, the word means "teacher"--wisdom teacher.
3. The book is one of the latest in the Hebrew Bible, typically dates around 300 to 250 BCE.

### QOHELETH'S TWO CENTRAL METAPHORS

1. First is "Vanity of vanities: all is vanity."  
-it is a repeating refrain throughout.  
Hebrew word translated as "vanity" is hebel. Hebel is connected to: breath, vapor, mist, or fog.  
All is breath; all is vapor; all is mist, all is fog.



Second metaphor—"chasing after wind" also cucurs freqnelty.  
q it is an image of futility.

### THE KING'S SPEECH

Ooheleth speaks as King Solomon. the Strategy is brilliant.

As traditional father of wisdom in Isrel, Solomon had great reputation.

Yet what Solo mon has is declared to be vapor or fog: insubstantial, ephemeral, unsatisfying. "All is vanity and a chasing after wind."

The Righteous Sometimes do not Prosper , p. 163

The Specter of Death p. 164

Ecclesiastes is haunted by death. Stresses the utter inevitability of death.  
Then How Live?

Then How Live? p. 165

What then is life about?

Ooheleth's answer, surprisingly simple and brief, is repeated several times for emphaiss. Here are its first two appearnaces:

There is nothing better for morals than toe at and drin, and find enjoyment n their toil

I know that thre is nothing better for poele then to be happy and enjoy themslevs as long as they live. Moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

### READIGN ECCLESIASTES AND HEARIN QOHELETH p. 166

Borg explains te passage:

For everyting there is a seasosn, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;

Eccles: 3:1-8

1. Live fully, whatever time it is. Be present to what is.

His critique of conventioanl wisdom is similar to what we hear in the writings of Lao-tzu, a 6th century BCE Chinese wisdom eacher whose teacing is preserved in th Tao-te-ching. Lik Qoheleth, Lao-tzu offers a radical critique of conventioanl wisdom.

2. The way of living in accord with The Tao is "nog grasping"

The way most of us live most of tiem--is way of grasping.

But grasping is futile. It is priamry source of suffering.

3. Qoheleth's claim thta we canot make straight what God has made crooked points to the Mystery of the sacred.

For Qoheleth, God is not absent; God is simply beond all of our attempots to domesticate the diven God.

His central metaphors of "chasing the wind point to the futility of grasing: we cannot lay hld of what which is insubstatnial and ephemeral.

4. For Qohelth, death is not only the spece that haunts convetnaional wisdom, pointg to te futility of grasping. Death is also the master teacher whot ~~teache~~ <sup>teache</sup> us how to ive:

"Ir ias vwrrwero foro rw hoauwod moeunifn rhN RO FO RO RHW Houaw od  
dwAREIN: FOR HIS IS THE END OF EVERYONE, AND THE LIVING WILL LAY IT TO  
HEARG. The heart of the wise is in the hosue of morning; but the heart  
of fools is n the hosue of mirth. Eccles. 7:2-4.

True wisdom means carpe diem: "seize the day". Don't miss it; don't let it slip by unnoticed; don't live it in the fog; don't waste it chasing the wind.

The wisdom of Qoheleth is thus a subversive wisdom.

His teaching undermines and subverts "the way" taught by conventional wisdom.

It is also an alternative wisdom, for it points to another way, one that leads beyond convention. To use a familiar phrase from Robert Frost, the subversive and alternative wisdom of Qoheleth is "the road less traveled."

### JOB

The dialogue and conflict with Israel's wisdom tradition continue in the book of Job.

Radical questioning of conventional wisdom is this document's central feature—a document whose magnificent language, provocative content, and stunning climax make it one of the most remarkable books in the Bible.

Job has received extraordinary accolades.

-Martin Luther spoke of it as magnificent and sublime as no other work of Scripture

-Alfred Lord Tennyson, famous poet of 19th century, called it the greatest poem of ancient and modern times

-Historian Thomas Carlyle, said that nothing that has ever been written, in the Bible or out of it, is of equal merit.

Book of Job was probably written during the Babylonian exile in 6th century BCE.

It begins with a brief prose prologue (first two chapters) and concludes with an even briefer prose epilogue (42:7-17).

In between is the main body of the book, cast in the form of poetry and running almost 40 chapters long (3:1-42:6).

It is common to see the book of Job as wrestling with the problem of innocent suffering.

This common view is only partly correct.

On one hand, it is true that the main character, Job, suffers intensely and does not know why: he cannot see that he has done anything to deserve the intensity of his pain and loss.

On other hand, I do not see that the author provides any answer to that question—nor, I am convinced, does she intend to do so.

His purpose, I will suggest, is quite different.

#### THE PROSE PROLOGUE: Chapters 1-2

Satan then challenges God to a wager. Take away everything Job has, he says, and see how faithful Job is then. God agrees, and the wager is on.

Job's life of blessedness then ends.

Satan takes it away. In stage one, Job's flocks are all stolen  
in stage two, Satan afflicts Job with "loathsome sores . . . ."

In both times, Job remains faithful to God.

Can interpret book within framework of question, "why do the righteous suffer?"

Borg: that's not the answer.

Book has another purpose:

that purpose is expressed in the question Satan asks God: "does Job fear God for nothing?"

The question is both provocative and profound and it signals the author's repudiation of conventional wisdom. Why be religious? What take God seriously? Is it because "there's something in it for me?"

That is the answer of conventiaonl religous wisdom. Follow this way-- it will take you go a good plce. beive in god an Jesus and you'll go to heaven, or you'll prosper

Satan's question leads us to reflect on the central issue raised by the prologue: is thre such a thing as religion unmotivatred by self-intrest?

What would it mean to take God seriously not as a means, but as the ultiamte end?

The prolgoe has anotehr purose as welll.

It sets up the dailgoe between Job and his friends taht fills mosft of the poetic main body.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar arrive...their purose is to comfort Job. so shocked are they at his miserable appeance tha they sit on the groud with him i nsielnce for seven days.

#### THE POETIC DIALOGUE BETWEEN JOB AND HIS COMFORTERS p. 173

Job's suffering is relentless.

Job cannot understadn why he is suffering. He knows that he has done nothing to deserve this degree of torment and accuses God of destorying the rightoues as well as te wicked.

Then Job addresses God directly.

#### Job's Friends' Res;osne

The central issue shows the inadequacy of conventiaonl wisdom.

The frids, are, of course, the voice of Isrel's conventiaonl wisdom. if your life's not ging right, it's your fault; if your life's not going right, fix it.

Conventiaonl wisdom, whether biblcial or secular, offrs an inadquate explanaton of suffienrg; it fails to acocunt for the way the world is orderd.

#### Job's Dialgoe andEncotenr with God.

Throughout the long central section, Job not only rejects the wisdom of his friends, but expresss a strong desire ot meet God face-to-face that he might confront God with the unfairness of his sufferig.

Job's desie is granted, but the meeting turns out different than he had imagined it.

The last five chapters contain God's answer to Job, experssed in the most remarkable nature poetry in thd Hebrew Bible.

God answers Job "out of the whirlwind".

In a series of rhetorical auesitons, God displays the wonders of cration to Job:

-the foudnations of the earth, the sea, the dwelling place of light, etc etc, and ultimately the mythological sea monsters of Behemoth and Leviathan.

The lanaguage is marvelous, the display magnificent.

The effedct of the latter is twofold.

On one hand, the display spekas of the absolute difference (though not distance) between the creator and the created.

On the other hand, it spaks of the world of undomesticated nature--the nonhuman worl of creation beond culture--as an epiphany or disclosure of God.

The display stusn Job into smallness and silence:

"I am of small account; what shall I answer you?  
I lay my hand on my mouth; I have spoken once, and I will not answer;  
twice, it will proceed no further.

Then Job does speak to God one more time. His words are the climax of the book:  
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.  
Job 42:5

Seeing God is classical language for mystical experience:  
an intense, immediate exp of the sacred.  
In many traditions, the "vision of God" is the peak peak of the  
religious quest.

Here, in the climax of the book, the author of Job presents the  
character of Job as having a firsthand exp of the sacred.

The contrast between hearing and seeing is the key to the book's climax.  
What Job had heard was the conventional understanding of God as  
conveyed by tradition. No doubt he had accepted it until his time of  
calamity began. Then it no longer made sense to him. It did not fit  
his exp, and he was resolute enough not to agree with those who put it  
forward.

Now, at the end of the book, he sees God -- he experiences the sacred.  
In the words of an older translation, "But now my eye beholds you."

Job's exp of God gave him no new answers or explanations for the problem of  
suffering. But his exp convinced him that God was real in spite of  
the human inability to see fairness in the world.

His exp of God changed him: "Therefore I melt into nothingness, and repent  
in dust and ashes," he said. As his old construction of the world (and  
himself) melted away, he "repented"--that is, he changed.

#### WILLIAM JAMES: firsthand and secondhand religion

William James, a century ago, made a distinction that perfectly illuminates  
the climax of the book of Job.

The most brilliant and influential American psychologist and  
philosopher of his day (brother of novelist Henry James), James  
distinguished between second hand and firsthand religion.

Secondhand religion is religion as learned from others--it is religious  
conventional wisdom.

Firsthand religion is that religion that flows from the firsthand exp of  
God.

Secondhand religion as religious conventional wisdom is not bad.

It can and does produce good. The Spirit of God can and does work  
through it. Indeed, secondhand religion can be a sacrament of the sacred.  
But it is not the same as firsthand religion. The experience of the  
sacred shatters and transforms secondhand religion.

This distinction also helps us to understand the dialogue and conflict within ancient  
Israel's wisdom tradition.

Israel's conventional wisdom, as seen in the cumulative effect of the book of  
Proverbs, is secondhand religion: religion as an orderly set of teachings  
about how things are and how things go.

The alternative voice of Israel's wisdom--the wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes--is  
grounded in the exp of God.

The conflict within Israel's wisdom tradition is one of two major conflicts within the  
Hebrew Bible.

The other we have already seen: the conflict between the imperial theology of  
Egypt and exodus theology  
between the royal theology of Israel's monarchy and message of Israel's prophets.

The NT continues the story of these conflicts.

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## ECCLESIASTES

1. Opposite of "wise" is not "ignorant" but "foolish"

### WISDOM AS GOD'S gift

TRADitioanl concepiton of wqisdom:

wisdom meant only extraordinary skill or insight.

Influence of ISRaels faith: wisdom as GOD'S GIFT.

Yahweh by wisdom founded the earth; b undrstanding he establsihed the heavens, by is knowledge the deeps broke forth, and the clouds drop down the dew. Proverbs 3:19-20.

WISDOM is a gift of GOD, NOT A Human achievement:

No wisdom, no udnerstandng, no counsel can avail agianst Yahweh.

THE HROSE is made ready for the day of battle, but the vctory belongs to Yahweh. Proverbs 21:30-31

ECCLEsiastes was one of the three boks whoses right to be included in the Bible was seriously questioend by the rabbis at the Concil of Jamnia in about AD 90. A FAVORable decison was rendered at that timel butr a strong minority vote of disapproval was expressed.

### THE TIMES OF MAN'S LIFE

Nature of TIME, chapter 3.

He does not speak of time abstractly. RATHER, he wirtes of concrete times. "For everyting thre is aseason, and a time for every matter under heaen. 3:1.

### THE PROBLEM OF DEATH

1. DEATH of indiidiaul had not loomed as a serious problm in the early period of Isarel, for then it was belived that the indiidiaul's life was given meaning by his paricipation in the covenatn community.

TJHE FATHER lived on in his son, and all gneraitons were bound together in the psychic solidarity of Israel.

2. Israel was not preoccupied with death.

Ecclesiastes is govnerend by the individualistic spirit of the Hellenistisc age, rather than b the covenatn thinking of priests and prophets of Isael.

SEPARated from a histoiral communit that beaars life's meaing, the destiny of individul beocmes an acute problem.

3. Man is a mortal being. THERE IS NOTHING In him that is immortal or deathless.

### THE SHADOW OF DESPAIR

1. His skepticism is fundamentally religious.

His conception of God is fundamental to his world-outlook.

He uses the geneeral name ELOHim instead of Yahweh.

THE BASIC tenet of his theolgoy is that GOD IS hidden.

GOD WO reveals himself also concdals himself.

GOD Had revealed is name, but Yahweh also was the Oly One hiddne from human sight.

Ecclesiastes writes within the shadow of despair. FOR HIM, GOD IS transcendent, completley other, separaed form man by an infinite gulf (cf

Nootrher writer puts more emphaiss on the soveriegnty of GOD. He orders and contorls, but his soveriegnty is complet ely hidden to human understandn (3:10-11; 8:17; 11:5)



Book of ECclesiastes is a vigorous repudiation of the claim that wise men can discern te purpose of GOD.

The sages of the book of Proverbs had claimed optimistically that wisdom, beginning with "the fear of Yahweh" and identify the travelers along the way.

BUT ECCLEsiastes iniss ed that wisdom can do none of this, for man's midn cannot fathom the wisdom of GLD:

When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the busienss that is done on earth, how neither day nor night one's eyes see sleep; then I saw all the work of god, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even thogh a wise man cliams to know he cnot find it out.

Ecclesiastes 8:16-17

Bernhard W. Anderson, Dean and Professor of Biblical Theology, Theological School, Drew University. 1957. Understanding the Old Testament

THE BOOK OF JOB page 484

We turn now to the greatest monument of wisdom literature in the OT.

THE IMPATIENCE OF JOB

Strange thing is that many who celebrate Job have only a faint understanding of what the book is about.

This ignorance is clearest among those who refer to the "proverbial patience" of Job. In the popular mind, Job is a model of piety—a man who patiently and serenely suffered "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" without losing his faith.

But this portrait holds true only in the Prologue (1:1-2:13) and the Epilogue (42:7-17)

both of which are written in prose.

The main part of book is in poetic form, and here Job is anything but a paragon of patience.

He begins by cursing the day of his birth and his spirit gathers the fury of a tempest as he hurls his protests to God.

Only at the very last, after Yahweh has rebuked him, does he repent of his wild and impatient charges, lapsing into something like the full that follows a storm:

PROLOGUE

1. Narrative tells story of Job, a man renowned for his piety and blessed with the divine favor that accompanied his righteousness.

But Job's sincerity was suspect to one of the members of the Heavenly Council—"the Satan". (meaning the Adversary)

In prologue, Satan is an angel in good standing in the Heavenly Council whose special function is to investigate affairs on earth.

2. When Yahweh boasts to the Council about his servant Job, the prosecuting Angel, suspecting that Job's service was motivated by self-interest, cynically asked: "Does Job fear God for naught?"

Thereupon he made a wager with Yahweh that if Job's prosperity and family were taken away his faith would be destroyed.

These losses did not shake Job's faith for in his sorrow he patiently murmured: "Yahweh gave and Yahweh has taken away; blessed be the name of Yahweh."

3. So Satan proposed a more severe test.

Job was stricken with loathsome sores from head to foot, making it necessary for him to sit alone in a refuse ground. Ignoring his wife's advice, he still refused to "sin with his lips" by cursing God.

Then his three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—came to comfort him in his plight.

In the end, according to the epilogue,

Yahweh accepted Job's prayer and restored to him twice as much as he had before. And, as in all good folktales, Job lived happily ever after.

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE PROSE AND POETRY

Author shows difference between prose and poetry.

author of narrative uses name Yahweh, whereas author of poems uses general terms for deity, such as Eloah (God) or Shaddai (The Almighty)

Narrative is written in charming manner of a folktale,  
whereas poetic sections resemble the wisdom literature in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Then Anderson shows how the prose narrative is related to the poetic meditations.  
page 486.

#### THE POETIC PATTERN

To summarize, the book of Job falls naturally into the following outline:

1. The prose prologue (1:1-2:13)
2. Three cycles of discussion
  - a. Job's lament (ch. 3)
  - b. First cycle:
    - Eliphaz (chs 4-5)
    - Job's answer (chs 6-7)
    - Bildad (ch 8)
    - Job's answer (chs 9-10)
    - Zophar (ch 11)
    - Job's answer (chs 12-14)
  - c. Second cycle:
    - Eliphaz (ch 15)
    - Job's answer (chs 16-17)
    - Bildad (ch 18)
    - Job's answer (ch 19)
    - Zophar (ch 20)
    - Job's answer (ch 21)
  - d. Third cycle:
    - Eliphaz (ch 22)
    - Job's answer (23:1-24; 17, 25)
    - Bildad (25:1-6; 26:5-14)
    - Job's answer (26:1-4; 27:1-13)
    - Zophar (24:18-24?; 27:13-23?)
    - Job's answer is displaced by the chapter on wisdom (28)
  - e. Job's final defense (chs 29-31)
3. Yahweh's answer from the whirlwind
  - a. The first speech (chs 38-39), followed by Job's submission (40:1-5)
  - b. The second speech (40:6-41; 34), followed by Job's repentance (42:1-6)
4. The prose epilogue (42:7-17)

#### THE AUTHOR OF JOB, page 488

Date and authorship of poem of Job are exceedingly difficult to determine, for the writer gives us no hint of the historical circumstances of his time. Like Ecclesiastes he displays no interest in the traditional motifs of Israel's faith, such as Yahweh's activity in history or the election of Israel.

Two assumptions about authorship:

- one theory, author was an Edomite, not an Israelite. From land of Ua (from which Job's friends came) (2:11)
- plausible to assume that author was an Israelite sage who lived perhaps in outskirts of Palestine.

The date of Job is not essential in interpreting the poem, for it deals with a human situation but cannot be confined to any particular time.

In last analysis, the historical question is the religious question raised with infinite concern. What is he meaning of my life. The poet looked intensively into the depths of one's human existence and in so doing exposed the human question.

BABYLONIAN JOB

JOB AND OTHER WISDOM LITERATURE 489

1. Babylonian Job.

1. Man who was originally rich and influential was suddenly stricken with great illness and trouble.

Bitterly he complained that his prayers and sacrifices had seen in vain. Like Job, he protested his innocence.

Oh that I only knew that these things are well pleased to a god.

What is good in one's sight is evil for a god.

Wah is bad in one's own mind is good for his god.

Who can understand the counsel of the gods in the midst of heaven?

The plan of a god is deep waters, who can comprehend it?

Were has befuddled mankind ever learned what a god's conduct is?

--Laments 33-38; cf. Job 9:1-12

Finally, when the hero was on the verge of death, the god Marduk suddenly rewarded him for his virtue and restored him to health.

2. Babylonian "Dialogue about Human Misery"

Between a skeptic with, having known nothing but suffering, questions the justice of the gods and a pious friend who advocates humble surrender to divine will and faithful performance of religious obligations.

As in the book of Job, the conversants speak in turn.

The skeptic begins, the pious man responds, and so on.

3. From Egypt come other examples of the literary form used in the book of Job.

"Complaints of the Eloquent Peasant", the poetic discussion is framed between prose and epilogue.

FROM DESPAIR TO FAITH

False assumption of Job:

-problem of suffering (evil)

-raise philosophical question of how absolute goodness and absolute power are reconciled in the nature of God.

Job does not intend to answer them.

Rather these two assumptions provide the occasion for probing a much deeper question namely, the character of man's relationship to God.

1. Job's faith is explored at a much deeper level

Finally, after the discussion has ranged through the whole realm of exp,

Yahweh gives an answer out of the whirlwind.

2. Job then submits in silence and repents, whereupon his life is put on a new axis.

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN JOB AND HIS FRIENDS

1. Underlying the friends' argument is the doctrine of rewards and punishments that was widespread in the wisdom literature of antiquity.

According to this view, virtue was rewarded with prosperity, health, and long life, and conversely, sins were punished by poverty, sickness, and untimely death.

This doctrine was applied to Israel's national history by the Deuteronomic historian.

1. Dialogue introduced by Job's lament, one of the most poignant passages in Bible. It expresses the aching misery of existence in language of rare imaginative power.  
Job's death-wish springs from his sense of the emptiness of life when he is estranged from a meaningful relation to God.  
Clinging adamantly to his integrity (27:6; 31:36) he virtually sets himself up as judge of God.  
In one mood he wishes that he could escape God's clutch, and in another he wishes that he could meet God in a fair debate, even as an equal. Like Prometheus, Job is a titanic figure who doubts, rebels, and shouts defiance at God.

#### JOB'S PLEA FOR VINDICTION

1. Throughout his spiritual struggle, Job is tortured by the remoteness and hiddenness of God—the God who "hides his face" (13:24).  
His poignant cry is: "O that I knew where I might find him. (23:3)
2. With increasing clearness he sees that a great gulf is fixed between the Creator and the creature,  
and that man is foolish to try to span the chasm (9:32-33)  
At times, he admits that the wisdom of God so surpasses the wisdom of men that men may know God only if God chooses to speak and reveal himself.  
He knows that God is "God and not man".  
And by contrast he knows that man is an earth-bound creature, held under the power of sin which taints his nature (4:17-21; 14:4; 15:14-16; 25:4-6) and subject to the dominion of death (4:19; 7:6)
3. Although Job finds no access from man to God, he dares to hope that some day, somehow, a reconciliation will take place.  
Then the impassable gulf will be bridged, and the contradiction between God as he appears (remote power) and God as he is (near and personal) will be resolved. Apparently this is the meaning of the well-known passage in which Job affirms that his Vindicator (Go'el) will restore him to fellowship with God.  
I know that my redeemer (Vindicator) lives, and at last he will  
stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
then without my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side,  
and my eyes shall behold, and not another, My heart faints within me.  
—Job 19:25-27
4. Job's search for the meaning of life has carried him to the very limits of thought, where momentarily his vision is enlarged.  
However, his stance is not changed. Still he is concerned primarily with his own self-justification.  
Still his questions betray his stubborn self-sufficiency, his determination to find the meaning of life on his own terms.  
To the very end he asserts his integrity.  
Far be it from me to say that you are right; till I die I will not  
put away my integrity from me. I will hold fast my  
righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not  
reproach me for any of my days.  
—Job 27:5-6.
5. Job's concluding discourse is a long declaration of the high ethical standards by which he has lived, and a vivid portrait of the righteous man (chapters 29 and 31).  
His final word is a ringing challenge: "Let the Almighty answer me." (31:35)

#### THE VOICE FROM THE WHIRLWIND



### THE VOICE FROM THE WHIRLWIND

1. Then Yahweh answers Job out of the whirlwind—but not in response to Job's cry for vindication.

In fact, the speech of Yahweh is not so much an answer as a series of ironical questions that make Job's questions irrelevant.

The effect of the questions is to remind Job that he is a creature whose finite standards are ineffective for judging the Creator:

"Who is this taht darknes counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. --Job 38:2-3.

2. Then follows a superb account of God's work as Creator, Sustainer, and Provider. God's questions are designed to remind Job of the deity of God and the humanity of man.

Was Job present at the time of the Creation,

"When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?—Job 38:7

3. Job had been talking as if he knew exactly how God should run the world. His sense of integrity had been the basis of his presumptuous claim that God should have treated him better.

Outraged that he could not square his innocent with his fate, Job had dared to challenge and judge his Creator.

His religious quest had been motivated by a Promethean defiance.

Therefore, Yahweh's answer came in the form of a rebuke—an overwhelming reminder that the first religious obligation of the creature is to acknowledge and glorify the Creator.

### JOB'S REPENTANCE

1. Yahweh's speech raised questions that Job could not answer.

He had presumed to know too much, to be more than he was.

Silence, he admits that he has no ground for arguing with God (40:1-3)

As his final word, he retracts his rash charges and casts himself humbly and repentantly before God:

"Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,

Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know

I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,

but now my eye sees thee;

therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.--Job 42:3; 5-6)

2. Along with Job's confession of his sin of self-sufficiency went a new consciousness of fellowship with God—not the God of traditional religion, but the "Living God".

### THE KEY TO BOOK OF JOB

It is not about suffering or the goodness and omnipotence of God.

It is about Job's repentance, and the preceding discourses which come to a climax with the voice from the whirlwind.

From the very first the fundamental issue is Job's relationship to God.

The climax of the poem occurs at the very end, when a false relationship based on self-sufficiency is converted into a relationship of personal trust and surrender.

In the words of Job, formerly he had heard of God by hearsay—that is, he was related to a conception of God received from tradition.

But "now my eye sees thee". Job in the moment of repentance was related to God himself in an act of personal faith.

By repudiating the smug orthodoxy of his friends, his life was open to receive the gift of God bestows to those who truly seek him with all their heart.

The mystery of suffering is left rationally unanswered, as it is finally unanswered in the Bible as a whole.

FOR THE drama of the human problem, according to Israel's faith, is not the fact of suffering but the character of man's relationship to GOD.

Outside the relationship for which man was created, suffering drives men to despair or to the easy situations of popular religion.

WITHIN THE REALITY OF faith, suffering may be faced in the confidence that man's times are in GOD'S HAND THAT "in everything GOD WORKS FOR GOOD WITH those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." (ROMAN 8:28)

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THE PERSONIFICATION OF WISDOM

1. One of the most important development in the wisdom tradition occurred. It was to regard wisdom as having a special and an almost independent status in GOD'S CREATION.
2. WE HAVE noticed that in the book of Proverbs wisdom is personified as a woman who stands in the market place, summoning men to follow her ways (Proverb 1:20-22)
3. BUT THE glorification of wisdom was carried further, as can be seen from a superb lyric in Proverbs (3:13-20), where it is affirmed that wisdom is the most precious of treasures, for  
Yahweh by wisdom founded the earth;  
by understanding he established the heavens. --Proverbs 3:19

WISDOM'S COSMIC STATUS

1. A HYMN TO wisdom, found in Proverbs 8 and 9, depicts wisdom as a distinct personality who was present with Yahweh at the time of Creation. WISDOM, it is said, was created by Yahweh as his first creative act and was "beside him like a master workman" as he did his work.  
WHEN HE ESTABLISHED the heaven, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep  
then I was beside him, like a masterworkman;  
and I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the sons of men--Proverbs 8:22-31 (in part)

In these cases it is clear that wisdom has a cosmic status.

WISDOM is or is moving toward becoming a distinct entity.

2. THIS LOFTY CONCEPTION of wisdom was subjected to a special development in the Israelite tradition.  
In the magnificent hymn to wisdom found in Job 28, it is affirmed that wisdom, the plan of the universe, is hidden from men.  
GOD UNDERSTANDS THE way to it, and he knows its place.  
FOR HE LOOKS TO the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens;  
WHEN HE gave to the wind its weight, and meted out the waters by measure;  
When he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder  
then he saw it and declared it;  
he established it, and searched it out.--Job 28:23-27.

Cosmic significance of wisdom received even greater attention:

in ECCLESIASTICUS, wisdom is compared to the breath issuing from the mouth of GOD. An emanation that penetrates all things:

"I came forth from the mouth of the Highest,  
and like vapor I have covered the earth;  
I have made my abode in the heights,  
and my throne on a pillar of cloud."--ECCLESIASTICUS 24:3-4

Here, too, it is said that wisdom was created before all things and poured out upon all that GOD MADE. ECCLESIASTICUS 1:1-20.

HOWEVER, WISDOM is said to have found rest only in Israel, where she was associated with the TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM and the Law of Moses.

--ECCLESIASTICUS 24:8

Thus wisdom came to be regarded as a semi-independent power--the agent of GOD'S CREATION and the intermediary between GOD AND THE world.

In the late period of Biblical Judaism, wisdom was understood in relation to God's redemption of Israel.

In Ecclesiasticus, wisdom was understood in relation to GOD'S redemption of Israel.

by identifying WISDOM AND TORAH, brought the wisdom literature into the central stream of the Mosiac TRADITION.

WISDOM was "nationalized", that is, related positively to the redemptive activity of God in history.

In order to find WISDOM, one must keep the commandments of the TORAH. ECCLESIASTICUS 1:26)

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47. Isa. 49.14–15.
48. Isa. 40.27–31.
49. Isa. 40.11.
50. Isa. 42.9.
51. Isa. 43.15–19.
52. Echoing Isa. 55.11, and quoting 55.12.
53. I owe this wonderful phrase to Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley. 1991).
54. Mic. 4.3–4. The full oracle in Mic. 4.1–4 is almost exactly paralleled in Isa. 2.2–4, suggesting that it was widely known in prophetic circles.
55. In the contemporary United States, we see this in the naming of high taxes as a (and perhaps *the*) primary political issue. The anti-tax sentiment of our society is fueled and financed primarily by the wealthy. Can anybody seriously believe that the anti-tax movement serves the interest of the society as a whole, and not simply the narrow self-interest of the wealthy? Unfortunately, many do; elites know how to shape public opinion (and thus the system as a whole).
56. “Pharaoh’s household” is a metaphor for those who derive benefits from the domination system without being primarily responsible for it or even in favor of it.

## 7

## Reading Israel's Wisdom Again



In Israel's wisdom literature we encounter the dailiness of life in ancient Israel. (The focus of this literature is more on the individual and the world of the everyday than what we encounter in the exodus and prophetic traditions. Its central concerns are the eminently practical questions, “How shall I live?” and “What is life about?”)

Israel's wisdom is extraordinarily rich. It ranges from the practical and pithy wisdom sayings of the book of Proverbs through the melancholic reflections about life's mysteries in Ecclesiastes to the anguished and magnificent book of Job. It covers everything from sage advice about the raising of children to deeply reflective thought about the nature of reality and the meaning of life. Its voices are diverse and provocative.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Israel's wisdom books are found in the third and final division of the Hebrew Bible: the Writings. This is a miscellaneous collection



dating primarily from the postexilic period. In addition to the wisdom books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, this section of the Bible includes the Psalms (Israel's prayer- and hymnbook), the apocalyptic book of Daniel, the stories of heroic Queen Esther and the good Gentile woman Ruth, the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs (sometimes called the Song of Solomon or Canticles), and the historical books of I and II Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

(The wisdom books are difficult to date with precision, largely because they contain no references to historical events contemporary with them by which they might be dated. Indeed, in striking contrast to both the Law and the Prophets, they do not refer even to historical events from Israel's past. History, whether secular or sacred, is not one of their concerns.<sup>2</sup>)

From ancient times, Israel's wisdom has been associated with King Solomon, who reigned in the tenth century BCE. Much of the book of Proverbs is attributed to him, the book of Ecclesiastes claims him as its author, and the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon is named after him. But there is a scholarly consensus that these books do not come from the time of Solomon. Thus the connection to Solomon is traditional (as are the connections between the Pentateuch and Moses and between the Psalms and David) and without historical significance.

(Wisdom literature finds us not in Solomon's day, then, but in the postexilic period that began in 539 BCE.) Though the book of Proverbs as a collection of sayings no doubt contains some earlier material, in its present form it is a postexilic composition put together around 500 BCE. The book of Job is most commonly seen as an exilic or postexilic document, though a few scholars would date it in the seventh century BCE. The book of Ecclesiastes is the latest, commonly dated in the third century BCE.

(During these centuries, the Jewish people continued to live under the political control of foreign empires: under the Persian Empire until its conquest by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE and then under the Hellenistic Empires descended from Alexander. Jewish political independence was not regained until the time of the Maccabees in 164 BCE.)

At the beginning of this period, we should imagine the Jewish community in the land of Israel as very modest in size and mostly clustered around Jerusalem. The temple in Jerusalem was the political as well as religious center of the community. Because theirs was a province in a foreign empire, the Jewish people had no king, of course. Thus domestic political authority as well as national-religious identity gravitated to the temple and its high priest. Over time, a native aristocracy emerged around the temple, consisting mostly of families from whom a high priest had been chosen. The Jewish people were in the process of becoming a "temple state" and a "theocracy"—a society ruled by God through God's priests and scribal interpreters.

We also need to imagine a religious community seeking to consolidate its identity and preserve its traditions. During this period of exceptional activity, the Pentateuch was put into its present form (including both consolidation and some creation of legal traditions), the Prophets as a collection of books took shape, and most or all of the Writings were composed. It is an impressive literary and religious accomplishment for a small group of people.

Israel's wisdom traditions also include two books found in the Christian Apocrypha but not in the Hebrew Bible. The first is known by several names: Sirach, or the Wisdom of Ben Sira, or Ecclesiasticus.<sup>3</sup> This book was written quite late in the postexilic period, probably between 200 and 180 BCE, and its author was a Jewish wisdom teacher in Jerusalem named Jesus Ben Sira, or "Jesus son of Sirach." The Wisdom of Solomon, the second apocryphal wisdom book, was written even later, commonly dated to the first century BCE (and perhaps even to the early first century CE). Its author is unknown. As part of the Christian Apocrypha, these two books are seen as sacred scripture by Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Christians, but not by most Protestants. Though they contain very interesting material, we will focus on the three wisdom documents included in the Hebrew Bible: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

Israel's wisdom literature is very different in content, tone, and form from the Pentateuch and the Prophets. Its subject matter, as

mentioned earlier, is more concerned with the individual. It looks at the individual *as embedded within family and kinship systems and society*, however, so it is not "individualistic" in the modern American sense of the term. But unlike the rest of the Hebrew Bible, it is not concerned with Israel's sacred story as a people or with the criticism and reshaping of the social order.

Its tone and form are also different. It does not claim to be the product of divine revelation but is grounded in observation of and reflection upon human experience. Unlike the laws of the Pentateuch, which are said to have come from God, and unlike the prophets, who claim to speak the "Word of the LORD" on God's behalf, Israel's wisdom does not claim to be revealed truth.

Instead, wisdom is insight based on experience. Sometimes, as in the short sayings of the book of Proverbs, wisdom is crystallized experience—compact insights about how to live generated by long experience of the world. As the product of the community's experience over centuries, Proverbs is thus to a large extent "*community wisdom*." Ecclesiastes and Job, on the other hand, are sustained reflections on experience from the vantage point of their particular authors. But all three books are based on observation of life: they say, in effect, This is what life is like.

As we explore these books, we will not only taste the riches of Israel's wisdom tradition, but also become aware of an intense and probing dialogue—even a conflict—within it. Is life as simple as knowing the right things to do and doing them? Does everything work out if you live right? And if life is *not* so simple but much more mysterious, what does that say about the nature of God, the purpose of life, and how we are to live?

## Proverbs

The book of Proverbs has thirty-one chapters and falls into two main parts. The first part (made up of the first nine chapters) is a series of "wisdom poems" that might be labeled "in praise of wisdom." Most of the rest of the book is a collection of individ-

ual proverbs—the short, memorable sayings that give the book its name. Not the work of one person, the pithy proverbs of the second part are the accumulated sayings of generations of wisdom teachers.

## The Wisdom Poems in Proverbs 1–9

The poems in the first part of the book introduce us to the central metaphor of Israel's wisdom tradition: life as a "way" or "path." They abound in images related to moving along that path: walking, running, following, stumbling, falling. The poems develop the metaphor by contrasting two paths: the wise way and the foolish way, the path of wisdom and the path of folly. Other contrasting pairs are also used: the way of righteousness and the way of wickedness, the way of life and the way of death. The book as a whole develops the choice between the two ways.

The foundation and starting place of the wise way is announced in the first chapter: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."<sup>4</sup> The phrase "fear of the LORD" does not mean "fright," as one might be frightened of a tyrannical ruler or parent. Rather, it refers to awe, wonder, and reverence in the presence of the One who is the maker of heaven and earth and the lord of life and death. The beginning of wisdom lies in taking seriously that we are dealing with a reality that transcends the world of the everyday, even as that reality is *known* in the world of the everyday.

These chapters also introduce us to the personification of "Wisdom" in female form, commonly called "the wisdom woman" or "Sophia." "Sophia" is not only the Greek word for *wisdom*; as a woman's name it better expresses the personification than the more abstract and neuter-sounding "Wisdom."

Wisdom/Sophia is of inestimable worth. Following her is the wise way, and that way leads to life, riches, honor, peace, and happiness:

Happy are those who find wisdom,  
and those who get understanding.

Her income is better than silver,  
 and her revenue better than gold.  
 She is more precious than jewels,  
 and nothing you desire can compare with her.  
 Long life is in her right hand;  
 in her left hand are riches and honor.  
 Her ways are ways of pleasantness,  
 and all her paths are peace.  
 She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;  
 those who hold her fast are called happy.<sup>5</sup>

So important is Wisdom/Sophia that she is spoken of as having been with God at the creation of the world:

The LORD created me at the beginning of God's work,  
 the first of God's acts of long ago.  
 Ages ago I was set up at the first,  
 before the beginning of the earth.<sup>6</sup>

Wisdom/Sophia offers food and drink. She hosts a banquet of bread and wine to which she invites all who will come:

You who are simple, turn in here!  
 Come, eat of my bread,  
 and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
 Lay aside immaturity, and live,  
 and walk in the way of insight.<sup>7</sup>

This personification is the first stage of a process whereby Wisdom/Sophia becomes a female image for God in Jewish wisdom literature.<sup>8</sup> This development is the background for the New Testament's use of Sophia imagery to speak about Jesus as prophet of Sophia and as incarnation of Sophia. It is also the basis for the increasing attention paid to Sophia in recent Christian theology.<sup>9</sup>

There is a second personification in these poems. Namely, the way of folly is personified as "the strange woman" or "the alien

woman." Often portrayed as an adulteress and seductress, she has an appeal that is described with remarkable literary elegance and psychological astuteness.<sup>10</sup> Not only does she invite people to follow a way, but she mimics Sophia. With the same words, she too calls people to her house and banquet: "You who are simple, turn in here!"<sup>11</sup> But her way leads to folly, wickedness, and death.

These two personifications symbolize the two ways of which the book of Proverbs as a whole speaks. Following Sophia and the way of wisdom leads to life:

For whoever finds me finds life  
 and obtains favor from the LORD;  
 But those who miss me injure themselves;  
 all who hate me love death.<sup>12</sup>

Following "the alien woman," on the other hand, leads to death:

Do not let your hearts turn aside to her ways;  
 do not stray into her paths.  
 For many are those she has laid low,  
 and numerous are her victims.  
 Her house is the way to Sheol,  
 going down to the chambers of death.<sup>13</sup>

To avoid a possible misunderstanding, it is important to emphasize that the Jewish tradition did not yet affirm an afterlife. Belief in a heaven and hell beyond death was still two or three centuries in the future.<sup>14</sup> Thus the two ways—one leading to life, the other leading to death—are not about eternity (about heaven and hell), but about two different ways of living *this* side of physical death.

### The Proverbs of Chapters 10–30

We turn now to the collection of individual proverbs that fill the rest of the book. Generally speaking, proverbs are short, wise

sayings designed to be memorable. To use a definition attributed to the Spanish author Cervantes, proverbs are short sentences founded upon long experience and containing a truth. As observations about life, proverbs are typically indicative rather than imperative statements, though an imperative is implied.

One of the best nonbiblical examples of a proverb is "A stitch in time saves nine." Short, rhythmical, and using repeating sounds, it is easy to remember.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, though it uses an image from sewing, it obviously refers to more than sewing. Finally, though the sentence is indicative, the imperative is clear: *make* the stitch in time.

We can only speculate about the origin of the proverbs collected together in the second part of the book of Proverbs. Some probably originated within family and village life, others may have been the product of sages (teachers of wisdom), and some were borrowed from other cultures.<sup>16</sup> As a completed collection in the postexilic period, they may have been taught in schools for young men of the upper classes. The method of instruction would have been oral, of course, and we might imagine the teacher saying the first line of a proverb and the students responding in unison with the second line.

These proverbs are like snapshots depicting the wise and foolish ways announced in the wisdom poems of the first nine chapters. The best way to understand what they are and how they work is to look at a number of them.

*Proverbs Characterized by Elegance and Humor* I have chosen some proverbs to illustrate central themes and others because of their linguistic elegance and occasional humor. In the latter category, on a miscellany of subjects:

The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body. (18.8; repeated in 26.22)

Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings to a heavy heart. (25.20)

The legs of a disabled person hang limp; so does a proverb in the mouth of a fool. (26.7)

Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly. (26.11)

As a door turns on its hinges, so does a lazy person in bed. (26.14)

Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing. (27.14)

Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears is one who meddles in the quarrel of another. (26.17)

*Proverbs Dealing with Children and Family* A repeated message in these proverbs concerns the importance of training children in the paths of wisdom. For example:

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray. (22.6)

Physical discipline is part of this training. One of the best-known proverbs is "Spare the rod, spoil the child." Its full form reads:

Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them. (13.24)

The same theme is sounded in several more passages:

Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die. (23.13)

Folly is bound up in the heart of a boy, but the rod of discipline drives it far away. (22.15)

Blows that wound cleanse away evil; beatings make clean the innermost parts. (20.30)

The book of Proverbs also contains a number of sayings about difficult wives and good wives. These sayings disclose the androcentric perspective of the book (and of the Bible as a whole, for

that matter): there are no sayings about good or difficult husbands. Mentioned often is the contentious or quarrelsome wife:

A wife's quarreling is a continual dripping of rain. (19.13)  
A continual dripping on a rainy day and a contentious wife are alike. (27.15)

It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious wife. (21.9; repeated in 25.24)

It is better to live in a desert land than with a contentious and fretful wife. (21.19)

The sages also knew about *good* wives:

A good wife is the crown of her husband. (12.4)

He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD. (18.22)

House and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord. (19.14)

The ideal wife is the topic of the acrostic poem that concludes the book as a whole. She bears a remarkable resemblance to the "wisdom woman" of chapters one through nine.<sup>17</sup>

*Proverbs Dealing with Wealth and Poverty* The book of Proverbs has much to say about wealth and poverty. In general, prosperity is seen as the result of following the wise way. The attitude toward poverty is more complex. If possible, poverty is to be avoided, of course. The wealthy are urged to be generous to the poor, but sometimes the poor are virtually blamed for their poverty.

Some proverbs are simply observations about the way things are for the poor, with no value judgment (other than sympathy) implied:

The poor are disliked even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends. (14.20)

Wealth brings many friends, but the poor are left friendless. (19.4)

If the poor are hated even by their kin, how much more are they shunned by their friends. (19.7)

Some proverbs recognize that wealth is not good in and of itself and that in some circumstances poverty is better:

Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it. (15.17)

Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice. (16.8)

Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich. (28.6)

Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves. (11.28)

One saying affirms that both wealth and poverty can be dangerous snares:

Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is the LORD?" or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God. (30.8-9)

The poor are to be treated compassionately. In language that anticipates Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, what one does to or for the poor is done to God:<sup>18</sup>

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor God. (14.31)

Those who mock the poor insult their Maker. (17.5)

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full. (19.17)

Thus the wise will be generous to the poor:

Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. (22.9)



Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but one who turns a blind eye will get many a curse. (28.27)

Though none of the sayings directly blames the poor for their poverty, the frequent association of prosperity with wisdom, diligence, industry, and prudence and of poverty with foolishness, laziness, and drunkenness comes close. The lazy person (the "sluggard," in older translations) is one of the villains of Proverbs. In the first part of the book, the lazy person is told to learn a lesson from the ant:

Go to the ant, you lazybones;  
consider its ways and be wise.  
Without having any chief  
or officer or ruler,  
it prepares its food in summer,  
and gathers its sustenance in harvest.  
How long will you lie there, O lazybones?  
When will you arise from your slumber?  
A little sleep, a little slumber,  
a little folding of the hands to rest,  
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,  
and want, like an armed robber. (6.6–11; last three lines  
also in 24.34)

Other sayings make the connection between laziness and poverty:

A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. (10.4)  
Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty;  
open your eyes and you will have plenty of bread.  
(20.13)  
An idle person will suffer hunger. (19.15)

Drunkenness also leads to poverty:

The drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe them with rags. (23.21)

More broadly, failure to follow the way of wisdom produces poverty:

The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry. (10.3)  
Anyone who tills the land will have plenty of bread, but one who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.  
(28.19)  
Misfortune pursues sinners, but prosperity rewards the righteous. (13.21)  
The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to want. (21.5)

There is some truth in these observations, of course. Laziness and folly and drunkenness often do produce poverty and want. But the corollary—that poverty is always the product of these—is not true, though Proverbs comes close to drawing that inference.

*Proverbs Dealing with the Rewards of Right Living* The book of Proverbs affirms with great frequency and confidence that following the way of wisdom will bring rewards. This is such a central theme of the book, and so important for understanding an ongoing tension within Israel's wisdom tradition, that I report, at the risk of tedious repetition, a selection of proverbs extolling the rewards of virtue. A reminder: these sayings do not have an afterlife in mind; they are speaking about *this* life.

The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but God blesses the abode of the righteous. (3.33)  
The blessing of the LORD makes rich. (10.22)  
What the wicked dread will come upon them, but the desire of the righteous will be granted; when the tempest passes, the wicked are no more, but the righteous are established forever. (10.24–25)

The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short. (10.27)

The righteous will never be removed, but the wicked will not remain in the land. (10.30)

Righteousness delivers from death. (11.4)

The righteous are delivered from trouble, and the wicked get into it instead. (11.8)

Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but whoever pursues evil will die. (11.19)

Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will escape. (11.21)

The good obtain favor from the LORD, but those who devise evil God condemns. (12.2)

The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous will stand. (12.7)

No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. (12.21)

Those who despise the word bring destruction on themselves, but those who respect the commandment will be rewarded. (13.13)

The house of the wicked is destroyed, but the tent of the upright flourishes. (14.11)

The perverse get what their ways deserve, and the good, what their deeds deserve. (14.14)

In the house of the righteous there is much treasure, but trouble befalls the income of the wicked. (15.6)

The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous. (15.29)

Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established. (16.3)

Those who keep the commandment will live; those who are heedless of their way will die. (19.16)

The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life. (22.4)

Do not envy the wicked, for the evil have no future; the lamp of the wicked will go out. (24.19-20)

One who walks in integrity will be safe, but whoever follows crooked ways will fall into the Pit. (28.18)

The faithful will abound with blessings. (28.20)

*Proverbs as Conventional Wisdom* The repetition of this theme has a rhetorical function, of course: the purpose of Proverbs is to extol the importance of the path of wisdom, and it does this by affirming again and again, "Follow this way, and your life will go well." The cumulative effect of the repetition: Proverbs becomes a book of conventional wisdom (or at least the most common way of reading Proverbs turns it into conventional wisdom).

Conventional wisdom is the heart of every culture and of most subcultures. As I use the term, it always has two defining meanings. On the one hand, conventional wisdom is "cultural wisdom" or "community wisdom" or "folk wisdom": it is "what everybody knows" (or should know). It is collective wisdom, the consensus of the culture or community about how life should be lived. Its subject matter is vast, covering everything from etiquette to central values to images of the good life.

Included within "what everybody knows" is the second defining feature of conventional wisdom: the notion of rewards for living life right. Not only is this claim that virtue will be rewarded central to Proverbs, but it is the core of all forms of conventional wisdom, religious and secular: follow this path, and life will work out for you. Its variations are familiar, as this brief sampling shows:

You reap what you sow.

Work hard and you'll succeed.

Do (or believe) X, Y, and Z and you'll go to heaven.

People get what they deserve.

What goes around comes around.

Follow the Lord and you'll be happy.

Follow the American way of life and you'll reap the fruits of the American dream.

Lose fifty and pounds and you'll be happy.

Conventional wisdom thus leads to a performance-and-rewards view of life. The quality of our life depends upon our doing things right. By making this connection, conventional wisdom also images life as orderly and, to that extent, under our control: if we follow *this* path, we will not end up at a dead end.

There is, of course, truth in conventional wisdom. There *are* ways of living that do lead to dead ends. Pride often *does* go before a fall. Diligence, industry, honesty, humility, generosity, and integrity *are* virtues. Injustice, strife, deceit, and violence *should* be avoided. Etiquette *can* make dining more pleasant.

Not only does conventional wisdom often contain truth, but we could not live without it. We could not live together in groups without taken-for-granted expectations about human behavior, ranging from the taboo against cannibalism to confidence that people will stop at stop signs.

Moreover, some forms of conventional wisdom are better than others. One needs only to think of the conventional wisdom of the Third Reich versus the conventional wisdom of societies strong in human rights, or conventional wisdom about race in the United States now compared with that of fifty years ago. So conventional wisdom and its content *matter*.

But conventional wisdom has a cruel corollary. If your life fails to work out, it must be because you have done something wrong. Trouble is *your* fault. Just as conventional wisdom about the importance of disciplined work can often lead to the poor being blamed for their poverty, so those for whom life is hard are often seen (in their own mind or in the minds of others) as responsible for their hardship.

The problem posed by the corollary of conventional wisdom brings the central claims of Proverbs into question. *Do* things work out if you live right? (Always, or only sometimes?) *Are* the righteous rewarded and the wicked punished? (Always, or only sometimes?) *Is* life fair? (Always, mostly, sometimes, or seldom?)

As noted earlier in this chapter, the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible does not speak with one voice on these issues.

While Proverbs is fairly unambiguous, the other two wisdom books hint at randomness and chance. And if life is not so well ordered as Proverbs suggests, what does that say about how we should live? What does it say about the purpose of life? What does it say about the nature of God?

These are the questions with which the authors of Ecclesiastes and Job wrestle.

## Ecclesiastes

For many modern people, Ecclesiastes is the most "user-friendly" book in the Hebrew Bible (and perhaps in the Bible as a whole). It requires of its readers no knowledge of Israel's history, its language strikes people as speaking immediately to life, and its melancholic tone seems to fit the modern spirit. Almost uniformly, my students report liking Ecclesiastes.

Its author is "Qoheleth," which is not a name in Hebrew but a title or office. Most likely, the word means "teacher"—more specifically, "wisdom teacher"—and in this case probably a teacher who lived in Jerusalem. The title of the book—Ecclesiastes—is the Greek word for Qoheleth. Though the words are thus interchangeable, I will follow the convention of referring to the author as Qoheleth and the book as Ecclesiastes.

Though Qoheleth writes as King Solomon in the first two chapters, this is clearly done for rhetorical effect rather than to reflect actual authorship by Solomon. The book is one of the latest in the Hebrew Bible, typically dated around 300 to 250 BCE.

Scholarly assessment of Ecclesiastes varies greatly. Some scholars find it so unrelievedly pessimistic that they wonder how it ever got into the Bible. They claim that the author's skepticism about generally accepted religious convictions is so thoroughgoing as to suggest that he might as well have been an atheist. Other scholars greatly admire Qoheleth, not just for his honesty but for his religious vision. Whether to think of him as a wisdom teacher gone bad (perhaps "burned out") or as among the wisest of the wise is the central issue in the interpretation of this book.

But before I turn to that, I will identify Qoheleth's two central metaphors and look at the themes raised in key passages of Ecclesiastes.

### Central Metaphors

The first central metaphor is "Vanity of vanities: all is vanity." Not only does Qoheleth begin and end his book with this thematic metaphor, but it is a repeating refrain throughout.<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew word translated as "vanity" is *hebel*. Though sometimes translated with the quite abstract words "emptiness," "meaningless," or "absurdity," *hebel* has more concrete literal meanings that are the basis for its metaphorical meaning in Ecclesiastes: breath, vapor, mist, or fog. All is breath; all is vapor; all is mist; all is fog. The connotations are *insubstantiality* (one cannot get hold of breath, vapor, mist, or fog), *ephemerality* (insubstantial substances such as vapor come and go), and obscured vision (especially if mist or fog is emphasized).

A second metaphor—"chasing after wind"—also occurs frequently. That phrase is sometimes translated as "herding" or "shepherding" the wind. It is, of course, an image of futility.

### The King's Speech

The two metaphors named above are central to the opening speech of the book. From the middle of the first chapter through the end of the second, Qoheleth speaks as King Solomon.<sup>20</sup> The strategy is brilliant.

As the traditional father of wisdom in Israel, Solomon had an unrivaled reputation for sagacity. Moreover, he was fabled for having everything a human being might desire: not only wisdom, but power, fame, wealth, reputation, security, possessions, sensual pleasure. Solomon had everything that the conventional wisdom of most cultures desires.

Qoheleth imagines Solomon turning to all of these in his search for a satisfying life. But they do not satisfy. About all that conventional wisdom prizes, the verdict is the same: they are "vanity" and "chasing after wind." Ten times in the speech, one or both of the metaphors occur. All that Solomon has is declared

to be vapor or fog: insubstantial, ephemeral, unsatisfying. The final line of the speech brings the two metaphors together: "All is vanity and a chasing after wind."<sup>21</sup>

### The Righteous Sometimes Do Not Prosper

Solomon's speech is the first stage in Qoheleth's indictment of conventional wisdom. The next step is the rejection of conventional wisdom's central claim: if you follow the path of righteousness—the wise way—you will do well and be rewarded.

In my vain life I have seen everything: there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing.

There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous.

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.<sup>22</sup>

Qoheleth knows that people often suffer from oppression through no fault of their own; they are simply the victims of power:

Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power.<sup>23</sup>

Qoheleth's perception of life's inequities leads to despairing statements about whether life is worthwhile at all:

And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both

is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.<sup>24</sup>

### The Specter of Death

Ecclesiastes is haunted by death. The author returns to the subject again and again. He does not simply say that we are mortal; he dwells on that fact, *emphasizes* it.

Qoheleth stresses the utter inevitability of death. We are no different from the animals—one fate awaits us all:

For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust and all turn to dust again.<sup>25</sup>

He also stresses the randomness of death. Not only are we fated to die, but the timing of our death is as random as what happens to fish and birds:

For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.<sup>26</sup>

The inevitability and randomness of death make our conventional pursuits meaningless. Death comes regardless:

Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of us. Then I said to myself, "What happens to the fool will happen also to me. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this is also vanity. For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools? So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a chasing after wind.<sup>27</sup>

For Qoheleth, the certainty and randomness of death drive an arrow into the heart of conventional wisdom. Nothing that we do or have—none of what we spend our lives seeking to achieve, possess, and control—can forestall death, can alter its inevitability or timing. Moreover, when death comes, it takes away everything we have acquired: wisdom, wealth, honor, a good name, family, possessions.

Nothing can affect this, says Qoheleth. Neither wisdom nor righteousness nor goodness nor worship can change either the inevitability or the randomness of death:

The righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate, one does not know. Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone.<sup>28</sup>

Qoheleth's case against conventional wisdom is complete. The rewards of conventional wisdom do not satisfy; even Solomon, who had them all to a superlative degree, found them lacking. Reality is not organized in such a way that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished. Death comes to all, and comes randomly. Conventional wisdom, whether in Proverbs or elsewhere, affirms that reality is orderly. But in Qoheleth's view, God has made the world not orderly and straight, but crooked.<sup>29</sup>

### Then How Live?

If this is the way things are, what then is life about? What should we concern ourselves with? Qoheleth's answer, surprisingly simple and brief, is repeated several times for emphasis. Here are its first two appearances:



There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. . . .

I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live. Moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

In its longest form:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved of what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might.<sup>30</sup>

But even this simple, world-affirming advice is followed immediately by the specter of death:

For there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.<sup>31</sup>

Sheol does not mean "hell" as a place of punishment where *some* go. Sheol is the land of the dead, where *all* go.

### Reading Ecclesiastes and Hearing Qoheleth

What are we to make of this? As mentioned earlier, there is no consensus among scholars regarding how to hear Qoheleth's message. To some, his pessimism and gloom seem to speak of a world from which God is absent. His disparagement of life's common goals suggests aimlessness. His positive advice sounds difficult to distinguish from the familiar "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." Is this really wisdom, or is this the way the world looks when someone has given up on life?

As we puzzle about how to hear Qoheleth, let me suggest that context and inflection make all the difference. I invite you to imagine three different ways of saying (and thus hearing) the best-known passage in Ecclesiastes. Because of its length, I will not quote it all:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . .  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing . . .  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.<sup>32</sup>

1: *First scenario.* Because the words of this passage became the lyrics of a popular folksong, most of us have heard them sung. I can remember some performances that gave the text a moral meaning, expressing a preference for one-half of each set of opposites: *this*, not *that*. The inflection made it clear that *this time* (our time) is a time for peace, *not* war; a time for love, *not* hate; a time to heal, *not* kill; a time to dance, *not* mourn. However, I do not imagine that Qoheleth meant this.

2: *Second scenario.* Imagine this passage as read by a depressed Swedish Lutheran pastor in an Ingmar Bergman movie. The church is almost empty, the cold light of a gray winter morning makes everything pale and colorless, the voice is flat with despair, and there is virtually no one to hear it. Life is bleak—unbearably so—an endless cycle of meaningless repetition. This is an exaggerated form of some scholarly ways of reading Ecclesiastes.

3: *Third scenario.* Imagine these same words as read by the Dalai Lama. The meaning would be very different. Not *this*

versus *that*," and not "everything is meaningless." Rather: live fully, whatever time it is. Be present to what is.

This third scenario is how I hear Qoheleth. His critique of conventional wisdom is similar to what we hear in the writings of Lao-tzu, a sixth-century BCE Chinese wisdom teacher whose teaching is preserved in the *Tao-te-ching*. Lao-tzu's thought is similar to that of Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism. Like Qoheleth, Lao-tzu offers a radical critique of conventional wisdom.

The Tao (pronounced "dow") is Lao-tzu's word for both ultimate reality and "the way" of living in accord with it. Language cannot capture or domesticate the Tao as ultimate reality, as the opening line of the *Tao-te-ching* makes clear: "The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao." The Tao is thus intrinsically ineffable, "Mystery" with a capital *M*. The way of living in accord with the Tao is "not grasping." The way most of us live most of the time—the way of conventional wisdom—is the way of grasping. We grasp not only by seeking to domesticate reality, but also by seeking those satisfactions that convention urges us to seek. But grasping is futile. Indeed, in Buddhism, it is the primary source of suffering.

The similarities to Qoheleth are striking. Qoheleth's claim that we cannot make straight what God has made crooked points to the Mystery of the sacred. For Qoheleth, God is not absent; God is simply beyond all of our attempts to domesticate the divine.

His central metaphors of "all is vanity" (vapor, mist, fog) and "chasing the wind" point to the futility of grasping: we cannot lay hold of that which is insubstantial and ephemeral. Moreover, that which we can *momentarily* possess is ultimately unsatisfying.

His emphasis on death also fits this way of reading Ecclesiastes. For Qoheleth, death is not only the specter that haunts conventional wisdom, pointing to the futility of grasping. Death is also the master teacher who teaches us how to live:

It is better to go to the house of mourning  
than to go to the house of feasting;

for this is the end of everyone,  
and the living will lay it to heart.  
The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;  
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.<sup>33</sup>

The striking poem with which Qoheleth ends the book makes the same point. Filled with images of aging and decline, it includes the line, "Remember your grave in the days of your youth."<sup>34</sup> This injunction reflects not a melancholic, pessimistic attitude that robs even youth of its joy, but the belief that the awareness of death teaches us about what is important in life. Death is the teacher of true wisdom.

In this context, Qoheleth's admonition to live the life of simplicity does not sound like a cynical or burned-out "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die"; rather, it comes across as genuine wisdom:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine  
with a merry heart. . . . Enjoy life with the wife whom you  
love. . . . Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your  
might.<sup>35</sup>

To do whatever you do "with your might" suggests living strongly, not tentatively; living fully, not holding back. Thus, in Ecclesiastes, life is not about pursuing the rewards promised by the path of conventional wisdom (religious or secular), but about living in the present. Seeing the futility of grasping and the inevitability and yet unpredictability of death drives us into the present.<sup>36</sup> True wisdom means *carpe diem*: "seize the day." Don't miss it; don't let it slip by unnoticed; don't live it in the fog; don't waste it chasing the wind.

And so I see Qoheleth as among the great wisdom teachers of the world. If it is not too bold a claim, I see him as a Jewish Lao-tzu. I do not think the similarities between Qoheleth's thought and Eastern thought are due to cultural contact with Eastern religions. I doubt that he had any awareness of the *Tao-te-ching* or

Buddhist teachings. Rather, I think the similarities flow out of similar reflections on human experience, perhaps even out of similar experiences of the sacred.

The wisdom of Qoheleth is thus a subversive wisdom. His teaching undermines and subverts "the way" taught by conventional wisdom. It is also an alternative wisdom, for it points to another way, one that leads beyond convention. To use a familiar phrase from Robert Frost, the subversive and alternative wisdom of Qoheleth is "the road less traveled."

## Job

The dialogue and conflict within Israel's wisdom tradition continue in the book of Job. Radical questioning of conventional wisdom is this document's central feature—a document whose magnificent language, provocative content, and stunning climax make it one of the most remarkable books in the Bible.

Job has received extraordinary accolades. Martin Luther spoke of it as magnificent and sublime as no other work of Scripture. Alfred Lord Tennyson, a famous poet of the nineteenth century, called it the greatest poem of ancient and modern times. Another nineteenth-century Englishman, the historian Thomas Carlyle, said that nothing that has ever been written, in the Bible or out of it, is of equal merit.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the book of Job was probably written during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE or shortly thereafter. It begins with a brief prose prologue (the first two chapters) and concludes with an even briefer prose epilogue (42.7–17). In between is the main body of the book, cast in the form of poetry and running almost forty chapters long (3.1–42.6). The prose prologue may be an old folktale adapted by the author of the poetic body as the framework for his work.

There is no scholarly consensus about either the relationship of the prose prologue to the poetic body or the literary unity of the book as a whole. Some scholars see considerable tension between the prologue and the poetic body, and some see the poetic body itself as containing the work of more than one author.

Without trying to resolve any of these questions, I will treat the book as a whole in its present form.

It is common to see the book of Job as wrestling with the problem of innocent suffering. This common view is only partly correct. On the one hand, it is true that the main character, Job, suffers intensely and does not know why; he cannot see that he has done anything to deserve the intensity of his pain and loss. On the other hand, I do not see that the author provides any answer to that question—nor, I am convinced, does he intend to do so. His purpose, I will suggest, is quite different.

## The Prose Prologue: Chapters 1–2

The prologue introduces the character Job and the situation that led to his predicament. The first verse reminds us of the "once upon a time" of folktales about long ago and far away: "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job." The next two verses tell us that he was a very good and prosperous man—one who lived the life of wisdom: he was "blameless and upright, feared God and turned away from evil." Life was going well for him. Not only a paragon of wisdom and virtue, he was blessed with ten children and great prosperity: "seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants." Indeed, he "was the greatest of all the people of the east."

With that groundwork laid, the prologue then turns from earth to heaven, where the dramatic action of the book is set in motion. There, we are told, a meeting is held between the heavenly beings and God. Among them is a figure called "Satan"—not yet the evil power opposed to God of later Jewish and Christian tradition, but a servant of God whose task is patrolling the earth as a kind of espionage agent. God brags to Satan about his righteous servant Job:

There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.<sup>38</sup>

Satan is unimpressed. After all, why shouldn't Job be faithful—God has given him everything. So Satan says to God:



you and restore to you your rightful place. . . . God will not reject a blameless person.<sup>48</sup>

Zophar, the third friend to speak, is beginning to lose his patience. Accusing Job of being "full of talk" and "babble," he mocks Job and says that Job should suffer more than he already is:

You say, "My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight."  
But oh, that God would speak and open his lips to you,  
and tell you the secrets of wisdom!  
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.<sup>49</sup>

Like Eliphaz and Bildad, he also suggests that repentance is the way to get back on God's good side and bring about a reversal of Job's misfortune.

Not surprisingly, Job does not find much comfort in all of this. He calls his friends "worthless physicians" and "miserable comforters." About their wisdom and counsel, he says, "Your maxims are proverbs of ashes."<sup>50</sup>

The central issue in the long section of the book reporting the exchanges between Job and his friends is the inadequacy of conventional wisdom. The friends are, of course, the voice of Israel's conventional wisdom. Their point of view, perhaps in hardened form, is the conventional wisdom of the book of Proverbs: the righteous will flourish; the wicked will wither. The friends draw the obvious corollary: if you are not flourishing but withering, you must be doing something wrong. Indeed, the friends are the voices of conventional wisdom in other times and places as well: if your life's not going right, it's your fault; if your life's not going right, fix it.

They also demonstrate the peril of quoting all parts of the Bible as if they reflect God's point of view. According to the book of Job, what Job's friends say at considerable length reflects a point of view that not only the character of Job and the author reject, but that God also rejects.<sup>51</sup> Conventional wisdom,

whether biblical or secular, offers an inadequate explanation of suffering; it fails to account for the way the world is ordered.

*Job's Dialogue and Encounter with God* Throughout the long central section, Job not only rejects the wisdom of his friends, but expresses a strong desire to meet God face-to-face that he might confront God with the unfairness of his suffering.

Job's desire is granted, but the meeting turns out different than he had imagined it. The last five chapters contain God's answer to Job, expressed in the most remarkable nature poetry in the Hebrew Bible. God answers Job "out of the whirlwind." In a series of rhetorical questions, God displays the wonders of creation to Job: the foundations of the earth, the sea, the dwelling place of light, the storehouses of snow and hail, the constellations, clouds and rain and lightning, lions, mountain goats, deer, the wild ass and wild ox, the ostrich, the war horse, the hawk and the eagle, and ultimately the mythological sea monsters of Behemoth and Leviathan.<sup>52</sup>

The language is marvelous, the display magnificent. The effect of the latter is twofold. On the one hand, the display speaks of the absolute difference (though not distance) between the creator and the created. On the other hand, it speaks of the world of undomesticated nature—the nonhuman world of creation beyond culture—as an epiphany or disclosure of God.

The display stuns Job into smallness and silence:

I am of small account; what shall I answer you?  
I lay my hand on my mouth; I have spoken once,  
and I will not answer;  
twice, but will proceed no further.<sup>53</sup>

Then Job does speak to God one more time. His words are the climax of the book:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,  
but now my eye sees you.<sup>54</sup>

Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence [a positive image of protection] around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.<sup>39</sup>

Satan then challenges God to a wager. Take away everything Job has, he says, and see how faithful Job is then. God agrees, and the wager is on.<sup>40</sup>

Job's life of blessedness then ends. In two stages, Satan takes it away. In stage one, Job's flocks are all stolen or destroyed, most of his servants are killed, and his children all die as a house collapses on them. But Job's response is impeccable:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.<sup>41</sup>

In stage two, Satan (with God's permission) goes after Job's own body, inflicting him with "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." His possessions gone, his children dead, he is reduced to sitting among the ashes, scraping his sores with a broken piece of pottery. But he remains faithful to God: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?" The narrator hardly needs to add, "In all of this, Job did not sin with his lips."<sup>42</sup> God has won the wager.

If we interpret the book of Job within the framework of the question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" the answer provided by the prologue is very strange. Job's suffering was caused by something that happened completely "over his head": a wager in the heavenly council between God and one of God's servants. I doubt that Job would have been impressed with this explanation. Neither should we be.

Rather, the prologue and the book have another purpose. That purpose is expressed in the question Satan asks God: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" The question is both provocative and profound, and it signals the author's probing of conventional

wisdom. Why be religious? Why take God seriously? Is it because "there's something in it for me"?

That is the answer of conventional religious wisdom, ancient and modern, Jewish and Christian, and as found in other religions. Follow *this* way—it will take you to a good place, whether internally or externally, whether in this life or the next. Its Christian forms are many: believe in God and Jesus and you'll go to heaven, or you'll prosper, or you'll have peace of mind, or you'll be fulfilled. All of these turn taking God seriously into a means to some other end. But Satan's question leads us to reflect on the central issue raised by the prologue: Is there such a thing as religion unmotivated by self-interest? What would it mean to take God seriously not as a *means*, but as the ultimate *end*?

The prologue has another purpose as well. It sets up the dialogue between Job and his friends that fills most of the poetic main body.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar arrive at the end of the second chapter; their purpose is to comfort Job. So shocked are they at his miserable appearance that they sit on the ground with him in silence for seven days.

### The Poetic Dialogue between Job and His Comforters

The author has structured the poetic body of the book as a series of interchanges between Job and his friends. Job speaks, then Eliphaz; Job speaks, then Bildad; Job speaks, then Zophar; and the cycle repeats itself three times. Though the language is often magnificent, the content is quite repetitious. Rather than expositing all three cycles, then, I will provide passages that illustrate the depths of Job's suffering and questioning and the core of his friends' responses.

*Job's Torment* The portrait of Job in the prologue is responsible for the proverbial "patience of Job," a phrase first used in the letter of James in the New Testament.<sup>43</sup> As we turn now to the Job of the poetic main body, we will see that he is anything but patient.

Job speaks first. His suffering is so great that he curses the day he was born:

Let the day perish in which I was born,  
 and the night that said, "A man-child is conceived."  
 Let that day be darkness! . . .  
 That night—let thick darkness seize it!  
 Let it not rejoice among the days of the year. . . .  
 Yes, let that night be barren:  
 let no joyful cry be heard in it. . . .  
 Why did I not die at birth,  
 come forth from the womb and expire? . . .  
 Why was I not buried like a stillborn child? . . .  
 For my sighing comes like my bread,  
 and my groanings are poured out like water.<sup>44</sup>

Job's suffering is relentless. Even sleep gives him no relief: "When I lie down, I say, 'When shall I arise?' But the night is long, and I am full of tossing until dawn". He accuses God of giving him no rest:

When I say, "My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint,"  
 then you terrify me with dreams and terrify me with visions,  
 so that I would choose strangling and death rather than  
 this body.  
 I loathe my life. . . .  
 Will you not look away from me for a while,  
 let me alone until I swallow my spittle?  
 Why have you made me your target?<sup>45</sup>

Job cannot understand why he is suffering. He knows that he has done nothing to deserve this degree of torment and accuses God of destroying the righteous as well as the wicked:

I am blameless; I do not know myself.  
 I loathe my life.  
 It is all the same. Therefore I say,  
 God destroys both the blameless and the wicked.

When disaster brings sudden death,  
 God mocks at the calamity of the innocent.

Then Job addresses God directly:

You know that I am not guilty,  
 and there is no one to deliver out of your hand.  
 Your hands fashioned and made me,  
 and now you turn and destroy me.<sup>46</sup>

*Job's Friends' Responses* Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar consistently respond with the same refrain: you must have done something wrong. They defend the honor of God by reaffirming the claim that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Eliphaz says to Job:

Think now, who that was innocent has ever perished?  
 Or where were the upright cut off?  
 As I have seen, those who plow iniquity  
 and sow trouble reap the same.

Eliphaz, who sees what is happening to Job as divine discipline, offers his advice. If I were you, he says:

I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause. . . .  
 God sets on high those who are lowly,  
 and those who mourn are lifted to safety. . . .  
 How happy is the one whom God reproves;  
 therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. . . .  
 We have searched this out; it is true.  
 Hear, and know it for yourself.<sup>47</sup>

Bildad makes the same point:

If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty, if  
 you are pure and upright, surely then God will rouse up for

*Seeing* God is classical language for a mystical experience: an intense, immediate experience of the sacred. In many traditions, the "vision of God" is the peak experience of the religious quest. Here, in the climax of the book, the author of Job presents the character of Job as having a firsthand experience of the sacred. I am persuaded that the author knew this kind of experience in his own life. I have difficulty imagining how he could have written the climax as he does if he had not.

The contrast between *hearing* and *seeing* is the key to the book's climax. What Job had *heard* was the conventional understanding of God as conveyed by tradition. No doubt he had accepted it until his time of calamity began.<sup>55</sup> Then it no longer made sense to him, despite the fervent repetition of it by his well-intentioned friends. It did not fit his experience, and he was resolute enough not to agree with those who put it forward. But his rejection of conventional wisdom called everything he had once believed into question. Now, at the end of the book, he *sees* God—he experiences the sacred. In the words of an older translation, "But now *my eye beholds you*."

Job's experience of God gave him no new answers or explanations for the problem of suffering. But his experience convinced him that God was real in spite of the human inability to see fairness in the world.

His experience of God changed him: "Therefore I melt into nothingness, and repent in dust and ashes," he said. As his old construction of the world (and himself) melted away, he "repented"—that is, he changed.<sup>56</sup>

A century ago, William James made a distinction that perfectly illuminates the climax of the book of Job. The most brilliant and influential American psychologist and philosopher of his day (and brother of the novelist Henry James), James distinguished between secondhand and firsthand religion. Secondhand religion is religion as learned from others. It is religion as a set of teachings and practices to be believed and followed—in other words, religious conventional wisdom. Firsthand religion is the religion that flows from the firsthand experience of God. At the

end of the book of Job, the main character moves from secondhand religion—from what he had learned—to firsthand religion: "I had heard of you with the hearing of the ear, but now my eye beholds you."

Secondhand religion as religious conventional wisdom is not bad. It can and does produce good. The Spirit of God can and does work through it. Indeed, secondhand religion can be a sacrament of the sacred. But it is not the same as firsthand religion. The *experience* of the sacred shatters and transforms secondhand religion.

This distinction also helps us to understand the dialogue and conflict within ancient Israel's wisdom tradition. Israel's conventional wisdom, as seen in the cumulative effect of the book of Proverbs, is secondhand religion: religion as an orderly set of teachings about how things are and how things go. The alternative voice of Israel's wisdom—the wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes—is grounded in the experience of God.

The conflict within Israel's wisdom tradition is one of two major conflicts within the Hebrew Bible. The other we have already seen: the conflict between the imperial theology of Egypt and exodus theology, between the royal theology of Israel's monarchy and the message of Israel's prophets. The New Testament, to which we now turn, continues the story of these conflicts. It does not resolve them, however; if anything, it intensifies them. It also names the central tensions and conflicts that run through subsequent Christian history.

## NOTES

1. The most accessible introduction to Israel's wisdom literature is Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988). Other books I have found especially helpful are James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Roland Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler, *New International Biblical Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999); Leo Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

2. For a persuasive argument that Israel's wisdom tradition is centered in God as creator, see Leo Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).
3. Usually abbreviated as either "Sir." or "Ecclus." Note how close the latter is to the common abbreviation of Ecclesiastes: "Eccles."
4. Prov. 1.7.
5. Prov. 3.13–18. She is first introduced in 1.20–33, where she speaks like a prophet.
6. Prov. 8.22–23. The poem, which continues through v. 31, stresses Wisdom/Sophia's presence with God at the creation: "When there were no depths, I was brought forth. . . . Before the mountains had been shaped . . . when God established the heavens, I was there," and so forth.
7. Prov. 9.4–6; the banquet passage begins in 9.1.
8. Other primary texts in the Jewish wisdom tradition: Sir. 24; Wisd. of Sol. 7.7–8.16, esp. 7.22–8.1, and chap. 10.
9. For my chapter-length treatment of Sophia imagery and its application to Jesus, see *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1994), chap. 5.
10. See the seduction scenario in Prov. 7.6–23. Other relevant texts: 2.16–19, 5.3–14.
11. For her banquet, see Prov. 9.13–18; the invitation is in 9.16.
12. Prov. 8.35–36.
13. Prov. 7.25–27. See also 2.16–19, 5.3–14, 9.18.
14. The first unambiguously clear affirmation of an afterlife is in Daniel (see chap. 12), a book commonly dated around 165 BCE.
15. For a masterful exposition of how this proverb works, see John Dominic Crossan, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), pp. 12–13.
16. Notably Prov. 22.17–24.22, a collection that borrows freely from an Egyptian wisdom text known as the Instruction of Amenemope.
17. Prov. 31.10–31. An acrostic poem is one in which each line begins with a successive letter of the alphabet (in this case, of course, the Hebrew alphabet).
18. Matt. 25.31–46. The major point of the parable: whatever is done "for the least of these" (the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, imprisoned) is done to Jesus.
19. Eccles. 1.2, immediately following the superscription of the book; 12.8, ending Qoheleth's words and preceding the brief epilogue probably added by an editor.
20. Eccles. 1.12–2.26.
21. Eccles. 1.14, 17; 2.1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26.
22. Eccles. 7.15, 8.14, 9.11.
23. Eccles. 4.1.
24. Eccles. 4.2–3.
25. Eccles. 3.19–20.
26. Eccles. 9.12. See also 8.8: "No one has power over the day of death."
27. Eccles. 2.14–17.

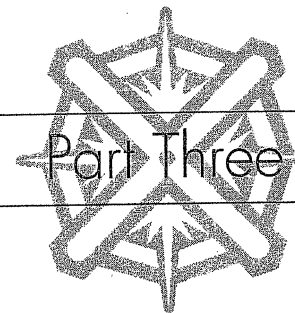
28. Eccles. 9.1–3.
29. Echoing Eccles. 1.15. Elizabeth Huwiler, *New International Biblical Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), p. 159, comments that for Qoheleth, human experience is not "meaningful, controllable or predictable." She adds, as I also will, that for Qoheleth human well-being and enjoyment are nevertheless possible.
30. Eccles. 2.24, 3.12–13, 9.7–10. White garments and the act of anointing one's head with oil are associated with festive meals. See also 3.22, 5.18–20, and 8.15.
31. Eccles. 9.10.
32. Eccles. 3.1–8.
33. Eccles. 7.2, 4.
34. Eccles. 12.1–8. Though the first verse is commonly translated "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth," several commentators note that the Hebrew word translated as "creator" more likely means "grave" or "cistern" (as a metaphor for "grave").
35. Eccles. 9.7–10.
36. Thus I hear Qoheleth's wisdom as positive and not as unrelieved pessimism. For an equally positive reading, see Kathleen O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Wilmington: Micahel Glazier, 1988), pp. 114–33; see her note 6 on p. 123 for a citation of negative readings.
37. Cited by Samuel Terrien in *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1954), vol. 3, p. 877.
38. Job 1.6–12. Quoted passage is v8.
39. Job 1.9–10.
40. Job 1.11.
41. The first calamities are narrated in Job 1.13–22. Quoted words are from 1.21.
42. The second stage is described in 2.1–10. Quoted words are from vv. 7, 10.
43. James 5.11.
44. His first speech is in chap. 3. Quoted passages are from vv. 3–4, 6–7, 11, 16, 24.
45. From Job's second speech, chaps. 6–7. Quoted passages are from 7.4, 13–16, 19–20.
46. From Job's third speech, chaps. 9–10. Quoted passages are from 9.21–23, 10.7–8.
47. From Eliphaz's first speech, chaps. 4–5. Quoted passages are from 4.7–8; 5.8, 11, 17, 27.
48. From Bildad's first speech, chap. 8. Quoted passages are from vv. 5–6, 20.
49. From Zophar's first speech, chap. 11. Quoted words are from 11.2–6; subsequent section on repentance and the reversal of fortune it will bring is from vv. 13–21.
50. Job 13.4, 16.2, 13.12.
51. Explicitly in Job 42.7.
52. Job 38.1–41.34. The display is interrupted by a brief dialogue between God and Job in 40.1–5; then it resumes.
53. Job 40.4–5.



54. Job 42.5.

55. Explicitly affirmed in chap. 29, esp. vv. 18–20.

56. Job 42.6. English translations commonly read “I despise myself” instead of “I melt into nothingness.” But the latter phrase better expresses the meaning. The meaning of the final line, “I repent in dust and ashes,” is difficult to express. It does not mean that Job finally realized he was guilty of great sins after all; minimally, it means that the experience changed Job.



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## THE NEW TESTAMENT



Gunther Bornkamm, Jesus of Nazareth

Chapter 3: Jesus of Nazareth

1. Nature of the sources does not permit us to paint a biographical picture of life of Jesus against the background of the history of his people and his age.
2. We can draw a rough outline of his life and his work.
  - with John the Baptist
  - enough from his Jewish background: birth, parents; brothers
  - last decisive turning point in his life: to go to Jerusalem with his disciples in order to confront the people there with his message in face of the coming Kingdom of God.
  - at the end of this road is his death on the cross.These meagre, indisputable facts comprise a very great deal.

PICTURE-OF WORLD JESUS WAS BORN INTO

1. Past and future, determine in a unique way the thought, exp and hopes of Jewish people.

This people finds its God and itself in the past, in which its life and character were given to it and in the future, in which its life and its character are to be restored to it.

It knows no other security. Nothing in the present.

It knows its sole task as that of guarding faithfully this past and this future.

Thus the world in which Jesus appears is a world between past and future; it is so strongly identified with the one and with the other that, according to Jewish faith, the immediate present is practically non-existent.

The whole of life is caught in a network of sacred traditions.

Everyone has his place within a structure determined and ordered by the law and promise of God.

Whoever lives up to this divine system can claim eternal salvation; whoever does not is rejected.

All time is tied between, and as such it is a time of stewardship, founded in God's decision of the past and looking forward to God's decision in the future, which mean salvation or destruction for each one.

We can now understand the strange picture presented by the historical milieu in which Jesus lived.

It is comparable to a still hardening and barren through its age-long history and tradition, yet a volcanic, eruptive ground, out of whose cracks and crevices break forth again and again the fire of a burning expectation.

This world comes alive and is immediately present in the story of Jesus, as told by the writers of the Gospels.

All the characters who encounter Jesus bear the stamp of this world: the priest, scribe, Pharisee, publican, rich, poor, healthy, sick, righteous and inner.

Yet all the characters, however great their diversity, present a very human appearance. In their encounter with Jesus—they come to this amazing event, their meeting with Jesus, as fully related people.

Jesus belongs to this world.

Yet in the midst of it he is unmistakable otherness.

This is the secret of his influence and his rejection.

He is a prophet of the coming kingdom of God

Yet he is in no way completely contained in this category and differs from customary ways of a prophet.

Prophet has to produce his credentials; Jesus never speaks of his calling

He is a rabbi; but a different kind of rabbi.

he does not only teach in synagogues, but also in open field, on lake, during his wanderings. And his followers are a strange crowd.

Above all, his manner of teaching differs profoundly from that of other rabbis.

A rabbi is an interpreter of Scripture. This lends authority to his office.

Jesus teaching never consists merely in interpretation of authoritatively given sacred text. The reality of God and authority of his will are always directly present and are fulfilled in him.

Many of his teachings: men do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel (Matt 15)...Jesus draws into the service of this message the world of nature and life of man; everywhere especially wherever one knows an answer, without using the established structure of sacred traditions and texts.

Listener is never obliged to look for premise which would give meaning to Jesus' teaching.

His directness is part of the picture of the historical Jesus.

-he bears the stamp of his directness right from the very beginning

-the immediate present is the hallmark of all his words, of his appearance and his actions.

This directness lies between past and future.

#### TO MAKE THE REALITY OF GOD PRESENT

this is the essential mystery of Jesus.

This making present of the reality of God signifies the end of the world in which it takes place.

This is why the scribes and Pharisees rebel, because they see Jesus teaching as a revolutionary attack upon law and tradition.

This is why the demons cry out, because they sense an incursion upon their sphere of power "before the time" (Mt 8:29)

This is why his own people think him mad (Mk 3:21).

But this is also why the people marvel and the saved praise God.



#### CHAPTER 4. THE DAWN OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel Mk 1:14ff)

From that time Jesus began to preach saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Mt 4:17.

Mark in language of first Christian mission

Matthew in language of first Jewish-Christian community (kingdom of heaven instead of Kingdom of God.

no difference in substance: God's kingdom is near. That is the core of Jesus' message.

#### WHAT IS MEANT BY THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

##### 1. Yahweh's kingdom is praised in the psalms 145

All thy works shall give thanks to thee, O Lord; and all they shall bless thee

They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom and tell of thy power

Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endures throughout all generations

Every year the ancient Israelites celebrated in their worship Yahweh's enthronement, his ascending to be king of all nations, his victory over all his enemies. Psalm xlvii, xciii, xcvi, et)

113 106

##### 2. Kingdom is also an expression of hope.

The revelation of kingdom of God is very essence of hope, which will find its fulfilment only at the end of time.

It is still hidden, still held back, the powers of evil--tribulation sin and death--are still in control, but the hope of the appearing of God's kingdom holds firmly and unerringly to a belief in his victory and to the certainty of his promise.

Upon this hope is built the certainty that God is the Lord of this puzzling world, and will always remain afar off, but will reveal himself and vindicate his word.

##### 3. Jesus' message lives by this same certainty.

For him, too, God's kingdom means God's future and victory, overcoming the powers of devil, a shift from this aeon to the next.

Blessed are you poor: for yours is the kingdom of God

Blessed are you that hunger now; for you shall be satisfied

Blessed are you that weep now: for you shall laugh. Luke 6:20f

Immediately, however, the striking thing about his preaching in contrast to the hopes of the Jews emerges.

No word does he say either to confirm or renew the ancient hopes of his people.

He refuses to have anything to do with the political Messianic movement of the Zealots.

His message is much more closely allied to the apocalyptic, cosmic expectations of his day.

Jesus, too, speaks of the day of judgment, soon to dawn violently, of the end of this world, of the coming of the Son of man, Judge of the World (Mark 8:38; 13:24f)

And yet here, contrast between his message and the Jewish apocalypticism, is deep and fundamental. Latter: extravagant flights of fancy.

Jesus gosepk is remakrable for a distinct reticence.

It is not given to any man to know the day and the hour.

That is why he refuses to depict in dtail the future world, with its terrors and its joys.

The only ting that coutns: taht God will reign.

This is the first peculiarity of his message.

Its real individuality lies in the directness—in NT language: the authority—with which Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is near and calls for conversion.

The kingdom of God is already dawning.

Now is the hour of which the prophets promised: The vblind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and deaf hear.  
Matthew 11:5

It is happening now in Jesus words and deeds.

God's victory over Satan takes place in his words and deeds.

and it is in them that the signs of this victory are erected.

"But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Luke 11:20

"Kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:20f)

But the sign is not the thing itself.

He himself in his own person neither replaces nor excludes the kingdom of God, which remains the one theme of his message.

## 2. THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD'S REIGN

1. God's reign is hidden from us, and must be believed and understood in its hiddenness.

Hidden in the everyday world of the present time,  
where no one is aware of what is already taking place.

Of this Jesus speaks in his parables of the kingdom of God.

### JEESUS PARABLES

1. Rabbin use parables to clarify a point in their teaching and explain the sense of a written passage.  
But not so with Jesus.
2. For him, the parables are the preaching itself  
and are not merely serving the purpose of a lesson.  
He uses parables at making things clear.  
They make use of the familiar world, with all that goes on in the life of nature and of man.
3. It starts with "which of you..."  
it is always a question aimed straight at the hearer himself.  
no presupposition about the hearer. Just him. Thus the hearer is gripped just where he really is, and the strongest appeal made to his understanding.

### THE MYSTERY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1. And yet in the parable a mystery lies hidden.  
the mystery of the Kingdom of God.
2. This is what is spoken of in the two parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. Mt. 13:31-33.

Mustard seed, smallest of all seeds; yet a tree grows from it and the birds of the air seek shelter in it and nest in it.

Peasant-woman puts only a little leaven in dough, and yet it is sufficient to leaven three measures of meal, which makes a meal for over one hundred and fifty hungry mouths.

Conclusion: the end comes from the beginning.

God's kingdom comes in concealment. A sower goes out to sow, and his seed falls by the wayside, but other seeds fall into good soil and increase yield.

These parables attempt to show: Kingdom comes through man's effort.

But by itself.

"THE KINGDOM OF God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow up, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. Mark 4:26ff).

It is not man's work and effort that bring but the kingdom.

No, just as the earth "of itself" brings forth fruit so the kingdom comes by its own power alone.

We are always brought back to this same feature:

the hiddenness, the insignificance of the beginning, in which the promise of what is to come is nevertheless imbedded.

So the beginning of the kingdom of God is an insignificant event in this time and world. Within this time and world it sets an end to both. For the new world of God is already at work. p. 74

Warning:

if you interpret signs and say, "look there, look here Luke 27:20; Mark 13:21. wants to know too much, but is fundamentally in error about God and himself.

#### THE BEATITUDES, "Blessed are the Poor"

Jesus Beatitudes are not wisdom sayings but, like the word of a prophet, they are a summons and a promise.

Who are those that are addressed? Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God (Lk 6:20; Mt v.3

Since the days of the prophets and psalms, "poverty" and "mourning" have had their place in history of Jewish piety.

One group after another claimed them for their own, to distinguish themselves from the impious and to make sure of God's goodwill toward themselves.

But that is not the group that Jesus points to.

As Jesus uses the words, poverty and humility have their original meaning.

THE POOR AND THEY THAT MOURN are those who have nothing to expect from the world, but who expect everything from God.

They look towards God and also cast themselves upon God, in their lives and in this attitude they are beggars before God.

These are people who are directed to the very end of the world and its possibilities: the poor, who do not fit in to the structure of the world and therefore are rejected by the world;

-the mourner, for whom the world holds no consolation

-the humble who cannot longer extract recognition from world

-hungry and thirsty who cannot live without righteousness that God alone can promise and provide

- the merciful, who without asking about rights, open their hearts to another
- peacemakers, who overcome might and power by reconciliation
- righteous, who are not equal to the evil ways of the world
- finally the persecuted who with scorn and pains of death, are cast bodily out of the world.

See what God is doing:

GOD WAITS BEYOND THE limit, or rather he no longer waits, but comes to those who wait for him.

THOUGH HIS KINGDOM BE IN THE FUTURE; yet it breaks even now like a ray of light upon the darknesses of the oppressed, with "BLESSED ARE YOU."

THE BLESSED Are not entering heaven. Menas: GODS KINGDOM COMES TO you.

ALL the beatitudes are directed towards the coming kingdom of GOD AND embraced in one idea, that God wills to be present with us and will be with us all.

It is a happening, an event, the gracious action of God.

God will comfort them; God will satisfy them, be merciful to them, call them his children. He will give them the earth for their inheritance, will allow them to see his face; for their good he will administer his kingdom. This, his Kingdom is near.

THEFORE THIS IS A TIME OF JOY and the time for mourning is past.

Mark 2:19

IN JESUS DAY, there were boundaries defined by standards of radical belief.

-ancient conviction that people of Israel were sole objects of hope and promise had been questioned in late Judaism for some time.

-it still exists--even up to the time of growth of CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

-Groups as "Pious", the "SEPARATE" (Pharisees, the "CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT", the "CONGREGATION OF THE COVENANT" all sharply divided from one another...all tried to form the "holy remnant"

Jesus preaching betrays not a trace of all this group.

He does not gather together the holy and the good, but he is "A FRIEND of tax collectors and sinners (Mt 11:19)

THE MEANING BEHIND JESUS SITTING WITH TAX COLLECTORS? SINNERS

MEANING OF JEUS SITING AT TABLE WITH TAX COLELCTORS AND SINNERS

Thjios called for the mocking and derisive words: "Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax colelctors and sinners (Mt 11:19)

1. Eating with others is for the Jew the clsoest form of intimacy.

Ther is a natural conenction here with quesitons of honour. That is why th  
the quson of whom one invites; to wom threofe one shows this honour,  
and how one palces the guests at talbe (Lk 14:7-14) is so important

2. Jeus parables show that the felowship Of the table is, a symbol of the  
closest fellwoship with God, and apicture of that joyful age brought by  
the Messiah (Mt. 8:11; Mk 2:15ff

So there can be no dobu that Jeus earlthy fellwohsp with tax colelctors  
and sinner has also a stornng neconenction with his preacing  
of the comgn of the kingdom of God

Story of the healing of the paralytic Jesus says to the sick man:

"My son, our sins are forgivne." Why are his opponenes enraged at this?  
Not bucase he expresses the idea of the ove of God and the hope of his mercy,  
but cuase he is doing what is God's prerogative. "Why does this man speak  
thus? It is blasphemy. Who can forigve sins but God aloen? Mark 2:7)

REPENTANCE AND READINESS (The Callof the Hour) page 82

Jesus call to repentance opens up quite a new horzizon. It is heard in view  
of the dawning of the kingdom of God. This gives it its reason and its  
ultimate urgency.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heavnen is at hand. Mt 3:2; 4:17)

Repentance now means: to lay hold on the salvation which is alared at hand,  
and to give up everyting for it. "The kigndom of heavn is like treeasure  
hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and  
sells all tat he has and buys taht field.

Again trhe kigndom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who,  
on finidng one pearl f of great value, went and solsd all that he had and  
bought it. Mt 13:44-46.

Repentane now means: no longer to make excuses with a tousnad toherwise cogent  
reason, like the guests who were first invited to the supper; but  
to accept the ivnietiaton, to set out, to come. Lk 14:16; Mt22:1ff)

This very call to repentace speaks, too of a decison and an action on God's  
part firs,t which comes before all aciton and decison on the part of men.

To accept the invitaiton, to ris eup, to come—that means, of course,  
renunciation, giving up all , offeirng up his life: "Whoeer seeks to gain his life  
will lose it, bt whoever loses his life with preerve it. Luke 17:33)  
If your eye causes you tos in, pluck it out and throw it from you. Mt 18:8f

Salvation and repentace, have now changed palces. Jewish ways: repentace is the  
first ting. Now repetnace comes by means of grace. Tjopser who sit at the table  
of the rich lord are the poor, the cirppples, the blind and lame.

Repentance, means, humbling oneself before God. "For everone who exaltshimself  
will be h mbled, and he who huumbles himself shall be exalted. Lk 14:11x



- not only is Hebrew Bible part of Christain Bible, but it was the sacred scripture for Jesus, his folwers, early Christian movemnt and autors of NT.

that place within psyche in which images of God, God/relationship, God/human relationship reside.

They grew up with Hebrew Bible and throughout their lives lived within the symbolic universe constituted by its words, images and stories. It shaped their identity and their vision, their sense of who they were and their way of seeing, as individuals and as a community.

Jesus and his early follwoers were all Jewish and saw thesmelves as doing domething within Judaism, not as foudning a reigon sepaete from Jdudaims. Paul di dnot regrd himself as covnerting to a new rleigon, but saw himself as a Jew allof his life.

Yet, a "paragon" of the ways began to become visible near the end of the first century.

Several factors accounted for the video:

- gentile covnersts who idid not beocm Jewish
- Roman percpetions of Christian movt as a new religion separte from Judaism.

A majority of Christians were still Jewish in origin as late as the middle of third century.

Thus we understand the NT best when we see it within the world of first-century Judaism, including the way that world was shaped by the Hebrew Bible.

And we understand early Chx best when we see it as away of being Jewish.

1. Jewish people regained their national independence in 164 BCE after a heroic war of revolt against the Hellenistic Empire of Antiochus Epiphanes. The book of Daniel, the latest book in Hebrew Bible, was written shortly before the revolt.

The books of the Maccabees, Jewish documents in the Christian Apocrypha but not in Hebrew Bible, tell story of revolt and its aftermath.

2. Independence lasted only a century, however.

In 63 BCE, the Jewish homeland was incorporated into the Roman Empire. Roman imperial control was administered for awhile by "client kings" appointed by Rome.

The most famous of these was Herod the Great, who became king in 37 BCE. At his death in 4 BCE, his kingdom was divided into three Roman rule through prefects, and governors, sent from Rome. The most famous of these was Pontius Pilate, prefect from 26 to 36 CE.

3. During these centuries, great majority of Jews did not live in Jewish homeland itself, but in the Diaspora (outside of Palestine.) 80% or more lived in Diaspora.
4. Number of Jews living in homeland: estimated at about one million, whereas four to six million lived in Diaspora.
5. In the Jewish homeland itself, the first century was a restive and violent time.  
The violence took several forms:
  - there was the institutional and structural violence of Herodian and Roman rule, including economic and taxation policies that deprived more and more Jewish peasants of their ancestral landholdings and drove them into severe poverty,
  - there was the violence of social bandits, groups of Jews who attacked and robbed Romans and wealthy of their own people.]

There was also the violence of armed revolutionary movements.

- In 4 BCE, when Herod the Great died, armed revolts broke out in most parts of his kingdom, including Galilee.

Roman reprisal was quick and brutal.

Sepphoris, capital of Galilee was burned to the ground and many of survivors were sold into slavery.

Revolutionary violence simmered throughout much of the first century CE, culminating in the catastrophic war of revolt against Rome in 66.

The Romans brutally reconquered the Jewish homeland and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70. With the destruction of the temple, Jewish sacrificial worship ceased. The temple was never rebuilt, and Judaism changed forever.

#### an introduction to the new testament

1. Most of 27 documents NT were written between 50 CE and end of first century. although a few were written from early to middle second century. NT written in one hundred years or less and is the literature of a sectarian movement numbering only a few thousand people. (7,500)

#### 27 "books" of NT.

2 are only a page long; longest 40 pages.

Documents fall into 4 categories:

- largest is letters of epistles (21, 13 of them to Paul)
- next largest category is gospels (four)
- last two categories are represented by one book each:
  - apocalypse (Revelation or Apocalyptic of John)
- last is history of movement (Acts of Apostles, or simply Acts)

#### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS

1. Jesus lived in first third of first century. Born around 4 BCE, he was executed by Romans around year 30 CE
2. Gospels written in last third of 1st century, between 65 and 100 CE. Mark earliest. Names were not assigned to these writings until sometime in second century.
3. Historical Jesus and Canonical Gospels. (after Easter Christ)

1. Matthew and Luke both used gospel of Mark, incorporating mosts of Mark's material as well as his narrative strucutre of the publi activity of Jesus:  
a iriod of teaching and healing in Galilee in the north of the country followed by a journey south to Jerusalem and death, all occuring within one year.
2. Matthew and Luke also used an early colleciton of Jesus teacings known as "Q".

#### MARK

1. written around 70 CE, the year that Jerusalem and the temple were reconquered and destroyed by Roman Empire as the Jewish war of revolt led to its virtually inevitable climax.  
That event casts its shadow on gospel.

#### Apocalyptic Eschatology

1. See the impact of war and its climax especially in 13th chapter of Mark.

The chapter begins with a warning of temple's destruciton.

"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down."

What will happen to temples will be followed by suffering "such as has not been from the beginning of creaiton."

Then in language that refer to second coing of Jesus, the Jesus of Mark speaks of "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."

When will this happen? Soon.

Thus Mark viewed the events of 70--the suffering of the final stages of the war, the destruciton of Jerusalem and the temle--as signs that "the end" was athand.

In short, Mark's gospel has an apocalyptic eschatolgoy. "Truly, I tell you, thre are some stadning here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God coming with power.

#### Jesus' Inaugural Scene

The imminence of the kingdom of God is theme of Jesus brief inaugural address in Mark:

"the tiem is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the good news."

Mark's emphasis on the imminence of kingdom, accoutn for little of his gospel. Instead, much of his gospel is about antoehr majro theme: the way--the "way" or "path" or "eoad" of follwoing Jesus.

Mark opens with a citation from Isaiah 40: "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."

The language takes us back to the exile: the gospel of Mark is about a way of return from exile. The way of return is the way of Jesus.

The story of Jesus journey from GALilee to Jerusalem is filled with teacing about the "way" of discileship. That way leads to Jerusalem, the place of confrotnation with domination system, death, and resurreciton.

As Jesus jourensy o is way, he solemly spaks three tiems of his own impendin death and resurrction and afer each invites his disciles to follow him. For Mrak, the "say" of Jesus is the path of death and resurreciton.



### The word "Repent"

The way of return connects to the "Repent"

Repentance here does not mean contrition for sin.

Rather, its meaning is rooted in the exile story: to repent is to return from exile.

To connect that concept back to kingdom of God language: to repent to embark on the journey of return--is to enter the kingdom of God.

Thus, for Mark, the canonical Jesus calls his followers to the way of cross. the path of death and resurrection.

The way of Jesus--the way of repentance and return from exile--

involves dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being.

### MATTHEW

1. Content points to a later-first century community of Christian Jews in conflict with other Jews.

Matthew is both the most Jewish and the most hostile to Judaism.

#### Hostility to Judaism

1. Jews are referred to as if separate from Matthew's community.

Matthew intensified Jesus' criticism of scribes and Pharisees by turning it into invective. In a lengthy chapter of condemnation, the formula "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" is used six times and scribes and Pharisees are called "blind guides" "blind fools" "serpents" and "brood of vipers."

2. To Mark's version of parable of wicked tenants, Matthew adds a verse addressed to leaders of the Jewish people: "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation (or people) producing the fruits of it."

He assigns responsibility for Jesus' condemnation to the Jewish crowd and their descendants.

3. The intensity of conflict with Judaism in Matthew reflects the situation of his community.

After the Roman reconquest of the Jewish homeland, the survivors sought to consolidate and preserve Jewish identity in spite of loss of the temple.

Along with the Torah, the temple had been one of the two centers of Jewish practice and identity. Soon after the temple's destruction, the Jewish community began to ostracize Jews who followed Jesus as the messiah, claiming that they were no longer true Jews.

One of Matthew's central concerns is to claim the opposite: that his community of Christian Jews is faithful to the traditions of Israel.

#### Continuity with Judaism

1. Matthew does this by emphasizing continuity with Jewish tradition.

He quotes Hebrew Bible more than any other gospel-writer.

He quotes forty times with an explicit phrase such as "it is written" another 21 times without such a phrase.

He traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham, father of Jewish people.

He reports that Jesus during his lifetime restricted his mission to Jews and ordered his disciples to do the same.

2. In a saying found in Matthew alone, Jesus is said to affirm the enduring validity of the Law and the Prophets.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. Matthew: 5:17-18

1. He gathers the teaching of Jesus inot five major blocks of mateiral and concludes each with a similar formula: "When Jewus had finished saing these tigns...."  
The arrangement of Jesus teaching inot five blocks calls to mind the five books of the PEntateuch.
2. In presenting the story of Jesus birth, Mattahew echoes the story of Moses birth.  
Just as life of Moses was threatneed by Pharaoh's command that all male Hebrew babies be killed, so Jesus life as an infant is threatened by King Herod's command that all male infants in area of Bethelenn are to be Killed.  
Mattahew's menaing is clear. Jeus is like Moses, Herod is like Pharaoh, and what is happenign in and thru Jesus is like a new exodus.

### Jesus' Inaugural Scene

1. The Moses typology is also reflected in Jesus' inaugural address.  
Matthew condenses and slightly changes Mark's advance summary of Jesus message to "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Matth 4:17
2. Sermon on the Mount...distsicntive about Jesus inauguraladdress in Matthew.  
Thee chaptres long, five bloocks of Jesus teacings.  
Called "sermon on the MOutn" seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountian and taught them.  
Why does Matthew set teachings on a mounain? Dong so fits his Moses typology: just as Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to rceive the Torah, so Jesus now goes up on a mountain to dleiver his teaching.  
The five bloics is like the five books of Moses.

### LUKE-ACTS 199

1. Gospel of Luke is the first volume of a two volume work, second of which is the book of Acts.
2. Luke's gospel narrates Jesus mission to the Jewish peole in the Jewish homeland; Acts descirbes the sprad of ealry christianity into the Roman Empire beond the Jewish hoemlad, beginning with Jews of Diaspora and soon inclding a mission to Gentiles as well.  
The gospel begisn and ends in Jeursalem; Acts begins in Jerusalmen and ends in Rome. Movmetn: from Jerusalem to rome.

### The Spirit: Promise and Fulfillment

1. Central to LUke's themaitc construcion is repeated emphasis on the Spirit of God.  
Matrthew and Mark speak of Sprit, but Luke does soe ven more ofen.  
Frist two cahpters of Luke narrate Jesus cocnpetition by Sprit, but also repor that Elizabeth and Zechariah (parents of John the GBaptizer) are filled with Holy S;irit, as is the aged Simeon.
2. Like Matthew and Mark, Luke reports Spirit descended upon Jeus at his baptism and led him into the wildnerness.  
Then Luke adds antoehr rfernce to Spirit as Jeus begins his public activity: "Then Jeus, fileld with power of Spriti, returend to GALilleee."  
Gospel ends with risen Jeus promisign to send Spirt upon his follwers.

1. Acts opens with a twofold repetition of Jesus' promise of Spirit. And that promise is soon fulfilled. In Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (the Jewish "Festival of Weeks", held fifty days after Passover), the Spirit descends on the community.
2. In the rest of Acts, the Spirit is so central that it is virtually the book's main character. Not only does he give birth to the community at Pentecost, but the Spirit directs significant advances in the community's mission.
3. Spirit also guides decision of Jerusalem council about whether to impose conditions on Gentiles who are joining the movement.

#### Jesus Inaugural Scene

1. The centrality of the Spirit and a fore-shadowing of Gentile mission are crystallized in the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity in Luke.
2. Luke replaces Mark's inaugural text (The time is fulfilled...) with story of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown = The scene begins with Jesus reading a passage from the book of ISAIAH. Portrait of Luke's Jesus: he is a Spirit-anointed social prophet whose activity is directed especially to the poor and oppressed.
3. Jesus speaks about two prophets from the Hebrew Bible. Congregation didn't like Jesus say one of prophet sent to a Syrian leper named Naaman. Crowd seeks to hurl him off a cliff. But Jesus passed through their midst and went on his way.

Borg writes, "This is not history, of course."

#### JOHN

##### John as Distinct from the Synoptics

1. Chronology. In the synoptics, Jesus' public activity fits into a year; in John, three to four years. In synoptics, overturning tables of money-changers in temple occurs in last week of Jesus' life and is the cause of his arrest; in John, the event occurs at the beginning of Jesus' public activity.
2. Geography. In synoptics, most of Jesus' public activity occurs in Galilee; in John, Jesus is more often in Judea and Jerusalem.
3. Jesus' message. In synoptics, Jesus' message is about the kingdom of God, not about himself; in John, much of it is about himself. "I and Father are one" "I am" the light of world; bread of life; resurrection and life" the way and the truth and life.
4. Style of Jesus' teaching. In synoptics, Jesus teaches in parables and short memorable sayings; in John, long and remarkably dense theological discourse.

Yet alongside the dense wordiness of discourses is the rich symbolic language about Jesus in the NT: Jesus as the Word made flesh, as light of the world, etc. etc.

##### Jesus Inaugural Scene

Jesus' public activity in John is a richly symbolic narrative. Focus is on inaugural deed; not on inaugural address (synoptics) Jesus changes water into wine at a wedding banquet, etc. etc.

### Jesus' Inaugural Scene

1. Differs from synoptics, where it is inaugural address; whereas in John it is inaugural deed:

-Jesus changes water into wine.

-Jesus changes water into wine.

Not a miracle, but a "sign"—signs point beyond themselves, they signify something and what they signify is their significance.  
Signify: a wedding banquet.

-Wedding banquet.

the most festive occasions in world of 1st century Palestine, esp in peasant class. Banquets commonly lasted seven days. Lots of food, etc.

So what is this text which John places as the inaugural scene of Jesus public activity saying?

In Judaism, banquet was a frequent symbol for messianic age. Marriage also used as a metaphor for relationship between God and Israel.

In NT, Jesus is sometimes spoken of as the bridegroom and community of followers as the bride.

A wedding could symbolize intimacy of divine-human relationship and marriage between heaven and earth.

Is all this true? In any case, it is clear what John is saying: the story of Jesus is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out.

### SELECTED TEXTS: METAPHORICAL NARRATIVES 205

Two kinds of metaphor: intrinsic metaphor and historical metaphor.

#### INTRINSIC METAPHOR

is shorthand for metaphorical meanings intrinsic to story itself.

#### HISTORICAL

is shorthand for additional metaphorical meanings that flow out of the specific historical association of language.

Find out distinction with wedding story

-intrinsic: story of Jesus and wine never runs out

-historical: association of banquet and marriage wedding imagery in Judaism and early Chx.

### THREE TEXTS

1. Walking on Water
2. Feeding the Multitude
3. Sight to the Blind

#### WALKING ON WATER

Intrinsic: has many interpretations

Historical: interpretation of sea imagery

-Jesus participates in power/authority of God

post-Easter Jesus is one with God. Jesus stills storms, takes away our fear, rescues us—and does so because he participates in power of God.

Skipping the other two: feeding sight to blind.

Borg interprets changing water into wine.

If we focus on the event's "happenedness", we miss the message.

Meaning of this story, does not depend upon its "happenedness"

Instead, it is a "sign". Signs point beyond themselves; they signify something and what they signify is their significance.

So what is the meaning of this story as a "sign"?

primary symbolic feature of the text: a wedding banquet.

1. Wedding banquets were the most festive occasions in the world of first-century Palestine, esp in peasant class (and Cana was a peasant village). Wedding banquets commonly lasted seven days. They featured dancing wine and vast quantity of food

To this metaphorical meaning of a wedding banquet can be added historical associations of banquet and wedding imagery in Jewish and early Christian traditions.

In Judaism, a banquet was a frequent symbol for the messianic age.

Marriage was also used as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel.

In NT, Jesus is sometimes spoken of as the bridegroom and the community as bride. Book of Revelation refers to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Jesus)

A wedding could thus symbolize the intimacy of divine-human relationship and the marriage between heaven and earth. It is a common mystical symbol, and John is the most mystical gospel.

#### SELECTED TEXTS: METAPHORICAL NARRATIVES

Two kinds of metaphor: intrinsic metaphor and historical metaphor

Intrinsic metaphor is shorthand for the metaphorical meanings intrinsic to the story itself

Historical metaphor is shorthand for the additional metaphorical meanings that flow out of specific historical associations of language.

John Dominic Crossan calls stories like these "parables".

Jesus, he says, told parables about God.

The early Christian movement likewise told parable about Jesus.

He suggests that we ask the following question about the stories in the gospels. whether you read the story as history or parable, what is its meaning—for then, for now, for always?

Borg takes two illustrations:

Walking on Water and Feeding Multitude (pages 207, 209)

CONCLUSION

Canonical Jeus makes extraordinary claims about him.

- he is one with God and shares in power/authrity of God
- he is revealtion of God
- he is also the rev of the "way "
- he is the bread o f life who stisifes the deepst hunger of human beings  
and the light shining in dakrness who irngs enlighement.
- he liftsus out of death into life
- he is theWord and Wisdom of God embodied in a human life
- he is the disclosure of what a life full of God—a life fileld with the  
Spirit—looks like.

This is who jeus is for us as Chisians.

For Chrsitians, these cians shojld not be waered down.

For us as Christians, Jesus is not less than thsi—he is all of this.

And we can say "this is wo Jesus is for us" wthout alsosaying,  
"and God is known only in Jesusu"

The gospels—are Chx's primal narratives.

To say this means that these are the most important stories  
we kno, and we know them to be decisivley true.

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CHAPTER 8. REDING THE GOSPELS AGAIN

BORG: THE GOSPELS AER AT A very general level "public BIOGRAPHIES" accounts of the puglic life--the message and acitvity--of Jesus. 189

BORNKAMN: Nature of sources does not permit us topaint a biogrphical picutre of th life of Jeuss. BUT WE CAN DRAW ROUGH otulien of his lfie/work

-with John the Baptist

-enough form his Jewish backgorund: birth, parents, brothers

-last decisive turnign point inhis lfie: go to Jersalem with his disciples

-at end of this road is his death on the cross.

These meagre, indusputalbe facts comprise a very great deal.

BORG: In this chapter I founs on the canonical Jesus. My purose is to illustrate how to read the gospels in their presnt form as the primal nattavtives of the early Christian movemnt. page 191

BORG: Mark: apocalypitc eschatology (Marek 13 chapter) all very ture.

BORNKAMN: True, Jesus message is closely allied to the apoclayptic, cosmic expectations of his day He speias of th day of judgment soon to dawn vioelntly of the end of htis world, of the comign of the SON OF man, Mark 8:38; 13:24f

AT THE SAME TIME Jesus is remarkable for a ditinc reticence.

It is not given to any man to know the dya and the hours.

That is why he rfuses to depict in detial the future world, with its terrors and its joys. THE ONLY THING THAT COUNTS: that God will reign.

He proclaims the Kingdom is near and calls for covnersion.

THE KINGDOM of God is already dwning. Now is the hour of which the prophets promise: the blind recieve thier sights; the lame walk, the leprs are clenases and the deaf hear. Matthew 11:5

It is happening now in Jesus words and deeds.

God's victory over SATAN TAKES PLACE in his words and deeds and it is in them taht the signs of this victory are erected. "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast our dmeons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Luke 11:20.

Kingdom of GOD Is in the midst of you. Luke 17:20

BORG: THOUGH JESUS OFEN SPOKE about the kingdom of God, this passage is Mark's thematic consstuciton, announcng a major emphaiss of his gosepl. Yet though Mark's empahiss on the imminence of the igndom, they accoutn for surprisngly little of his gospel's contents. The rest of Mark does not often use the phrase "the kingdom of God". isntead, much of his gospel is abut antoehr majro major theme: the way. page 194

BORNKAMMN; But Jesus pralbes are about the KIngdom.

In mark: some parables: A swioer went out to sow. Mark 4:3f.

In same chapter 4: The kingdom of god is like this: a man scatters seed on the land; he goes to bed at ngiht and gets up int hemronign and the seed sprouts and grows--how, he does not know. THE GROND PRODUCES a crop by itself,.... How shall we pciture the kginom of GOD. IT is like the mustard-seed, which is smaller than any seed..btu ONCE SOWN, IT SPRIGNS up and grows taller. Mark 4:26ff.

MATTHEW. BORG, HE MENTIONN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. BUT does not develop it further. page 198

# Discussion

BORG Concludes chapter with summary of the canonical Jesus.

"He is one with GOD AND SHARE S IN THE POWER and authority of God

-He is revelation of God.

he is the WORD AND WISDOM OF GOD, etc. etc.

THIS IS HOW JESUS IS FOR US AS CHRISTIANS... For us as Christians, Jesus is not less than this—he is all of this

The gospels; are Jesus' own

statements; are Jesus' own

The gospels are Jesus' primal narratives. This says that these are the most important stories we know, and we know them to be decisively true. page 218

## BORNKAMN

1. Jesus belongs to this world Yet in the midst of it he is of unmistakable otherness. This is the secret of his influence and his rejection.

2. When we try to fit this figure into any of the descriptions and categories then prevalent in Judaism. it's difficult.

-title of prophet used; yet he is in no way completely contained in this category and differs from the customary ways of a prophet.

Prophet has to produce his credentials, "with sacred prophetic saying" "says the Lord"

Jesus on other hand, never speaks of his calling and nowhere does he use the ancient prophetic formula.

Even less do we find any trace of that self-justification typical of the apocalyptic visionaries of later Judaism, who claim the authority of ecstatic states of mind and visions.

Jesus refuses to justify himself and his message in this way.

-he is called a rabbi, who proclaims the divine law, who teaches in synagogues and gathers disciples

Jesus does not only teach in synagogues, but open in open field, on shores in crowd.

His manner of teaching differs profoundly from that of other rabbis.

A rabbi is an interpreter of Scripture.

This lends authority to his office.

Jesus teaching, on other hand, never consists merely in interpretation of an authoritative given sacred text. THE reality of God and authority of his will are always directly present, and are fulfilled in him.

He draws into the service of his message the world of nature and life of man, without using established structure of sacred traditions and texts.

The listener is never obliged to look for premises which would give origin of Jesus teaching, or to recall theory about doctrines and traditions.

This directness, if anything, is part of the character of the historical Jesus.

He bears the stamp of this directness right from the very beginning. the immediate present is the hallmark of all the words of Jesus, of his appearance and his actions, in a world which, had lost the present, because it lived

between the past and the future, between tradition and promises or threats.

Essential feature of historical Jesus

Every one of scenes described in Gospels reveals Jesus astounding sovereignty in dealing with situations according to the kind of people he encounters.



This is apparent in the numerous teaching and conflict passages, in which he sees thru his opponents, disarms their objections, answers their questions, or forces them to answer them for themselves.

He can make his opponent open his mouth or he can bring him to silence (Mt 22:34)

He encounters those who seek help; miraculous powers proceed from him, the sick flock around him, their relatives and friends seek his help.

Tell story, guest of Simon the Pharisee, and a woman, known as a sinner enters, who weeps Jesus feet... Pharisee secretly says of himself, "if this man were a prophet..." Jesus says to him, "SO, PM. O JAV SP, ETJOMg tp sau tp upi////  
Jesus says to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority and not as the scribes (Mk 1:22; Mt 7:29)

### Important

It is the special character of his message and work, that Jesus is to be found in his word and in his actions.

His word is action and event, and his ministry a sign of the reign of God which is already dawning.

God's spirit is at work in his deeds.

Forgiveness and salvation take place through his word for the sick and the sinners, who came to him or were brought to him in faith. In Jesus himself the dawn of the kingdom of God becomes a reality.

The Messianic character of his being is contained in his words and deeds and in the immediateness of his historic appearance.

### RESURRECTION

There is an undeniable tension between the singleness of the Easter message and the ambiguity and historical problems of the Easter narratives Bornkamm 181  
message of Easter we must seek in the Easter stories

Kee & Young, Understanding the New Testament

Chaptr 2. The Community and its Convictions

THE CENTRAL REDEMPTIVE ACT

The decisive point in the whole drama of divine redemption has now been reached.  
Jesus has triumphed over the forces of evil  
-and the deliverance promised thru the prophets has become an actuality.

Both the direction that human destiny will take and the assurance of God's ultimate victory over evil have now been irrevocably established through Christ.

The power of evil will never again be so great, nor the impotence of man to combat it so hopeless, now that Jesus has died and risen.

For this community, Jesus is unique.

Judaism the chosen people has forfeited its right to the promises of God

and the new community is the true Israel and the heir of the promise.

In the wonderful works that Jesus performed, the community recognized the power of God.

To the extent that the rule of Satan was being overcome, the rule of God was already making itself evident. As Jesus phrased it, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

It was the conviction of the community that Jesus did accomplish his marvelous acts by the power of God working thru him, and that therefore his coming brought about the dawn of the long-awaited new age.

To defeat Satan himself, Jesus had to die as the decisive factor in the messianic woes that would bring in the rule of God.

In Mark's account (10:46), Jesus speaks of his coming death as a ransom, the implication being that he liberates men by the sacrifice of himself.

Only in the act of total dedication to the will of God by which Jesus went to the cross was it possible for Satan's stranglehold on the human race to be broken.

The community is convinced that the death of Jesus accomplished this, and that his resurrection demonstrates that deliverance--salvation--has been accomplished.

Death of Jesus meant more than just the destruction of Satan.

It had great creative significance as well.

Sacrificial significance of Jesus would be a major theme in the preaching of early community.

The simple kerygmatic statement was, "Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)

THE CONFIDENT HOPE OF THE COMMUNITY, 60.

The spark that had fanned into flame the dying zeal of disillusioned disciples was the experience of meeting the resurrected Christ.

It was upon this confrontation by the Risen Lord that their authority as apostles rested.

Significance of Resurrection

God, in raising Jesus from the dead, had attested his approval of the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross.

The resurrection is God's public witness to his designation of Jesus as Son of God.

It is the decisive act of God, demonstrating to all that the rejected Jesus of Nazareth has been declared Lord and Christ, triumphing over sin and death.

The new age has now begun.

### THE PARABLES...JESUS

1. Jesus' method of teaching was analogical  
he tried to stimulate men's imagination to new insights by leading them to draw a comparison between a self-evident truth and a truth of another order of reality.
2. The parable form was ideally suited to such a method.

#### WHAT IS A PARABLE?

It is a simple story of an incident that may or may not have actually occurred.

The important point is that it speaks in familiar and lifelike terms, and conveys some vivid impression, some truth.

A parable achieves its end only when it serves as a window through which a truth of another order can be seen.

#### SOME OF JESUS' SHORTER PARABLES

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.'" Luke 15:8-9.

1. Notice vivid and true-to-life situation:  
poor woman loses coin, searched frantically for it, and in her joy of finding it tells all her friends.
2. What was it Jesus was seeking to teach through this parable?  
In Luke, it is grouped with two other parables that are concerned with the joy of God when a sinner repents.
3. So in this parable Jesus is saying that the concern of God for a sinner, and his joy over the sinner's repentance, is like the concern of this woman for her lost coin and her joy over its discovery.

EARLY COMMUNITY did not always understand the meaning of parables.

in part because many of original settings had been lost in oral transmission

and in part because the parable was a challenge to the imagination.

#### ONE OF THE CHIEF SOURCES OF ERROR

was belief that parables were intended to convey some hidden or even esoteric teaching of Jesus.

And in order to get at the hidden meaning the early church often interpreted the parables allegorically.

WHAT IS ALLEGORY

1. It is a story in which one set of ideas is expressed by an entirely different set of ideas.

And every detail of story has a symbolical significance and unless the reader knows what each detail symbolizes he cannot decode the true meaning of the story.

EXAMPLE OF ALLEGORIZING IN THE GOSPELS

The Parable of the Sower--a parable of Jesus is followed by an allegorical interpretation.

The parable itself has all the characteristics of a genuine parable:

Mark 4:1-9; Mt 13:1-9; Luke 8:4-8

1. It is a very lifelike story of a sower who sowed grain, most of which failed to produce but a small amount of which yielded abundantly.

It strikes a note of encouragement, and was apparently spoken by Jesus at a time when his followers had become discouraged over the results of his ministry.

2. In Mk 4:13-20; Mt 13:18-23; Lk 8:11-15 that follows this parable is placed on the lips of Jesus himself.

3. Here the main point of the parable drops into the background and each detail is allegorized.

The seed is the word

each soil is symbol of a type of human response to the word

each condition of growth symbolizes some human situation.

4. This allegorical interpretation has come from early Christian community.

JESUS SPOKE DIRECTLY

e.g. in Sermon on Mount where he repeatedly says, "but I say unto you" (Mt 5:17-48).

He speaks as one who is under the immediate and direct authority of God.

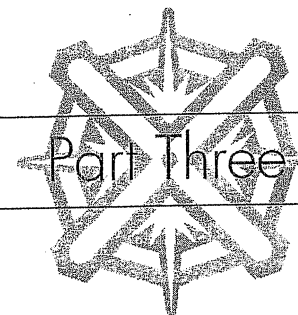
1. Jesus teaching is cast in forms that suggest the necessity for spontaneous and imaginative response.

The hearer is required to move from the truth of some familiar event to the disclosure of a higher truth with which it is compared.

2. The very form of Jesus teaching is strikingly appropriate to its content, for the heart of all his teaching is the truth of the inescapable and immediate presence of God whom men can know only in a spontaneous and freely chosen response of trust.

3. The originality and uniqueness of Jesus teaching derive from the intensity of his own awareness of God's active presence in human history. Where his teaching failed, it was not because of the teaching, but the blindness of his listener to the reality of the Kingdom of God, subject of all his teaching.

54. Job 42.5.  
55. Explicitly affirmed in chap. 29, esp. vv. 18–20.  
56. Job 42.6. English translations commonly read “I despise myself” instead of “I melt into nothingness.” But the latter phrase better expresses the meaning. The meaning of the final line, “I repent in dust and ashes,” is difficult to express. It does not mean that Job finally realized he was guilty of great sins after all; minimally, it means that the experience changed Job.



Part Three

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## THE NEW TESTAMENT



33 pages

## 8

# Reading the Gospels Again



We now move from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament. There is far more continuity between the two than the later division between Judaism and Christianity suggests. Not only is the Hebrew Bible part of the Christian Bible, but it was *the* sacred scripture for Jesus, his followers, the early Christian movement, and the authors of the New Testament.

For all of them—Jesus and those who followed and wrote about him—the Hebrew Bible provided the language of the sacred imagination, that place within the psyche in which images of God, the God-world relationship, and the God-human relationship reside. They referred to the Hebrew Bible frequently, sometimes by quoting it but more often by alluding to its stories and texts dealing with Israel's past. They grew up with the Hebrew Bible and throughout their lives lived within the symbolic universe constituted by its words, images, and stories. It shaped their identity and their vision, their sense of who they were and their way of seeing, as individuals and as a community.

Though I will follow common practice and use the phrases "early Christianity" and "the early Christian movement," it is not clear historically when we should begin using the words "Christian" and "Christianity," if we mean by that a religion distinct from Judaism. Jesus and his early followers were all Jewish and saw themselves as doing something within Judaism, not as founding a religion separate from Judaism. Paul did not regard himself as converting to a new religion, but saw himself as a Jew all of his life. Most (and perhaps all) of the authors of the New Testament were Jewish. The word "Christianity" does not occur in the New Testament.<sup>1/</sup>

Yet a "parting of the ways" began to become visible near the end of the first century.<sup>2</sup> Several factors accounted for the division: Gentile converts who did not become Jewish, a growing concern within Judaism to exclude Jews who saw Jesus as the messiah, and Roman perceptions of the Christian movement as a new religion separate from Judaism. But we should not see the emerging division as a complete divorce or imagine that Gentiles soon dominated the movement. A recent study suggests that the majority of Christians were still Jewish in origin as late as the middle of the third century.<sup>3/</sup>

Judaism and early Christianity were "Rebecca's children," twin offspring of Israel's ancestors Rebecca and Isaac, to use the Jewish scholar Alan Segal's apt phrase.<sup>4</sup> Though Rebecca's twins were fraternal and not identical, they did have the same mother. Thus we understand the New Testament best when we see it within the world of first-century Judaism, including the way that world was shaped by the Hebrew Bible. And we understand early Christianity best when we see it as a way of being Jewish.

## The Historical Transition

From Ecclesiastes, the latest of the wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible, we move forward in time about three centuries. The Jewish people regained their national independence in 164 BCE after a heroic war of revolt against the Hellenistic Empire of Antiochus

Epiphanes. The book of Daniel, the latest book in the Hebrew Bible, was written shortly before the revolt. The books of the Maccabees, Jewish documents in the Christian Apocrypha but not in the Hebrew Bible, tell the story of the revolt and its aftermath.

Independence lasted only a century, however. In 63 BCE, the Jewish homeland was incorporated into the Roman Empire. Roman imperial control was administered for a while by "client kings" appointed by Rome. The most famous of these was Herod the Great, who became king in 37 BCE. At his death in 4 BCE, his kingdom was divided into three parts ruled by his sons. In 6 CE, one part—Judea—came under direct Roman rule through prefects, or governors, sent from Rome. The most famous of these was Pontius Pilate, prefect from 26 to 36 CE.

During these centuries, the great majority of Jews did not live in the Jewish homeland itself, but in the "Diaspora," a term referring to Jewish communities outside of Palestine. Estimates vary, but perhaps as many as eighty percent or more lived in the Diaspora. The number of Jews living in the homeland at that time is commonly estimated at about one million, whereas four to six million lived in the Diaspora.<sup>5</sup> Some were descendants of Jews who had not returned from exile; others had emigrated more recently. Most Jews living in the Diaspora were urban, and they and their synagogues provided the primary network for Christian growth well into the third century.

In the Jewish homeland itself, the first century was a restive and violent time. The violence took several forms. There was the institutional and structural violence of Herodian and Roman rule, including economic and taxation policies that deprived more and more Jewish peasants of their ancestral landholdings and drove them into severe poverty, turning many into landless artisans, tenant farmers, or day-laborers and some into beggars. There was the violence of social bandits, groups of Jews who attacked and robbed Romans and the wealthy of their own people. (These social bandits were more than just *gangs* of bandits; the latter would have been simply outlaws, whereas the former were more like Robin Hood many centuries later.)



There was also the violence of armed revolutionary movements. In 4 BCE, when Herod the Great died, armed revolts broke out in most parts of his kingdom, including Galilee. Roman reprisal was quick and brutal. Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee (and only four miles from Nazareth), was burned to the ground, and many of the survivors were sold into slavery. Revolutionary violence simmered throughout much of the first century CE, culminating in the catastrophic war of revolt against Rome in 66. The Romans brutally reconquered the Jewish homeland and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70. With the destruction of the temple, Jewish sacrificial worship ceased. The temple was never rebuilt, and Judaism changed forever.

## An Introduction to the New Testament

Most of the twenty-seven documents that eventually became the New Testament were written between 50 CE and the end of the first century, although a few were written from the early to middle second century.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the Hebrew Bible was written over a period of around eight hundred years and is the literature of a nation, the New Testament was written in one hundred years or less and is the literature of a sectarian movement numbering only a few thousand people. A recent estimate suggests that there were only about two thousand Christians in the year 60, by which time Paul's genuine letters had been written. By the year 100, when most of the New Testament had been written, there were only 7,500 Christians.<sup>7</sup> It is an impressive literary production from such a small group.

It is common to refer to these documents as the twenty-seven "books" of the New Testament, and I will sometimes follow this convention. But to call them "books" is somewhat misleading. Many of them are very short. (Two are only a page long, for example, and the longest are only about forty pages in most English translations.)<sup>8</sup> Moreover, a "book" in the modern sense of the term is written for a general public not known personally to the author.<sup>9</sup> But all of the New Testament documents were

written to persons or communities personally known to the authors.

These documents fall into four categories. The largest category is letters or epistles (twenty-one, thirteen of them attributed to Paul). The next largest category is gospels (four). The last two categories are represented by one book each: an apocalypse (the Revelation or Apocalypse of John), and a history of the movement (the Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts).

## An Introduction to the Gospels<sup>10</sup>

Among these documents, the four gospels are foundational, even though they are not the earliest writings in the New Testament. All of the genuine letters of Paul were written earlier, and much of the rest of the New Testament was written about the same time as the gospels.

They are foundational because they tell the story of Jesus. Just as the story of the exodus is ancient Israel's primal narrative, so the gospels are the early Christian movement's primal narratives in both senses of the word: "foundational" and "of first importance."

Jesus lived in the first third of the first century. Born around 4 BCE, he was executed by the Romans around the year 30 CE. The gospels were written in the last third of the first century, between approximately 65 and 100 CE. The earliest is almost certainly Mark, and the latest is probably John. Though we call the gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we are not sure who wrote any of them. The author of Mark did not begin his gospel by writing "The Gospel according to Mark" at the top. Names were not assigned to these writings until sometime in the second century. For us they are anonymous documents, but presumably their authors were known in the communities for which they wrote.<sup>11</sup>

Although scholarly debate about their more particular literary form continues, the gospels are at a very general level "public biographies": accounts of the public life—the message and activity—of Jesus. They show little interest in his personal life before his public activity began. Two (Mark and John) do not even

mention Jesus' early years. The other two (Matthew and Luke) have birth stories, and Luke has a story about Jesus at age twelve, but that's all.<sup>12</sup>

Like the historical narratives of the Bible generally, the gospels are the product of a developing tradition, containing earlier and later layers of material and combining history remembered and history metaphorized. They preserve the Jesus movement's memory of Jesus and use the language of metaphor and metaphorical narrative to speak about what Jesus had become in their experience, thought, and devotion in the decades after his death.

As developing traditions combining historical memory and metaphorical narrative, they can be read in two different ways. On the one hand, as virtually our only source of information about the historical Jesus, they can be read for the sake of reconstructing a sketch of what Jesus of Nazareth was like as a figure of history. On the other hand, they can be read as late-first-century documents that tell us about Christian perceptions and convictions about Jesus some forty to seventy years after his death.

The first way of reading focuses on "the historical Jesus": the Jesus of the early layers of the developing tradition behind or beneath the surface level of the gospels. The second way focuses on "the canonical Jesus": the Jesus we encounter on the surface level of the gospels in their present form. We do not need to choose between these two ways of reading the gospels. Both are legitimate and useful.<sup>13</sup>

But we do need to be clear about when we are doing one and when we are doing the other. When we do not distinguish between the historical Jesus and the canonical Jesus, confusion results, and we risk losing both. When what the gospels say about the canonical Jesus is taken as historical reporting about Jesus of Nazareth, as both natural literalism and conscious literalism do, Jesus becomes an unreal human being, and we lose track of the utterly remarkable person he was. Anybody who can multiply loaves, walk on water, still storms, change water into wine, raise the dead (including someone who has been dead four days), and

call down twelve legions of angels from heaven is not a credible human being. He is not one of us.

Moreover, when what is said about the canonical Jesus is taken literally and historically, we lose track of the rich metaphorical meanings of the gospel texts. The gospels become factual reports about past happenings rather than metaphorical narratives of present significance. But when we are clear about the distinction between the historical Jesus and the canonical Jesus, we get both. And both matter.

Most of my previous books on Jesus have focused on the historical Jesus.<sup>14</sup> In radical shorthand, I see the pre-Easter Jesus as a Jewish mystic, healer, teacher of unconventional wisdom, social prophet, and renewal-movement initiator. Thus I see him as standing in continuity with the following strands of the Hebrew Bible:

- The experiential stream of the tradition that emphasizes the firsthand experience of the sacred
- The exodus and prophetic strands of the tradition, with their emphasis upon social justice and critique of and liberation from domination systems
- The critique of conventional wisdom in the subversive wisdom of Israel as represented by Ecclesiastes and Job
- The affirmation of an alternative social vision and vision of community that flows out of the above

I also see Jesus, in radical shorthand, as the Christian messiah. I think it most likely that the perception of him as messiah (and Son of God, and so forth) emerged among his followers after and because of Easter. By "Easter," I mean the experience among his followers of Jesus as a living reality after his death, and the conviction that God had exalted him to be both messiah and Lord. This Jesus—the canonical Jesus—is the Jesus we meet on the pages of the New Testament.

In this chapter I focus on the canonical Jesus. My purpose is to illustrate how to read the gospels in their present form as the primal narratives of the early Christian movement. I will introduce

each gospel and then comment more extensively on selected texts. I will emphasize reading the gospels as metaphorical narratives, incorporating a historical approach that adds to the metaphorical meanings of gospel texts in their late-first-century settings.

## The Gospels as Thematic Constructions

As documents written in the last third of the first century in different Christian communities, the gospels are thematic constructions, each with its own distinctive themes, purpose, and emphasis. As I introduce each, I will not seek to be comprehensive; rather, I will simply highlight its thematic construction.

As I do so, I will integrate the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity in each, to show how the author has constructed it to crystallize his vision of what Jesus was most centrally about. By "inaugural scene" I mean the first public words or public deed attributed to Jesus. In each case, the inaugural address or inaugural deed functions as a thematic introduction. Thus it is an aperture through which we are given an advance glimpse of the evangelist's perception of Jesus and his significance.

I begin with the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are known as "the synoptics" because they are similar enough to be seen together (as the root of the word "synoptic" suggests). The reason for their similarity: they have written sources in common. Matthew and Luke both used the gospel of Mark, incorporating most of Mark's material as well as his narrative structure of the public activity of Jesus: a period of teaching and healing in Galilee in the north of the country followed by a journey south to Jerusalem and death, all occurring within one year. Matthew and Luke also used an early collection of Jesus' teachings known as "Q." Their use of Mark and Q accounts for the family similarity of the synoptic gospels. The gospel of John, as we will see, is very different.

### Mark

The gospel of Mark was written around 70 CE, the year that Jerusalem and the temple were reconquered and destroyed by

the Roman Empire as the Jewish war of revolt led to its virtually inevitable climax. That event casts its shadow on the gospel, either because it had recently happened or because it was soon to happen; in fact, Mark has aptly been referred to as "a wartime gospel."<sup>15</sup>

*Apocalyptic Eschatology* We see the impact of the war and its climax especially in the thirteenth chapter of Mark, called "the little apocalypse." (An apocalypse commonly deals with "the end," and the "big apocalypse" is, of course, the book of Revelation.) The chapter begins with a warning of the temple's destruction. As the disciples look at the temple, one exclaims, "Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" The Jesus of Mark then says to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."<sup>16</sup>

The disciples ask when this will happen and what the sign will be that the time is near. As the little apocalypse continues, the Jesus of Mark speaks of false messiahs, wars and rumors of war, nation rising against nation, persecution and betrayal, and finally says, "When you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be—let the reader understand—then those in Judea must flee to the mountains." The phrase "desolating sacrilege" echoes the book of Daniel, where that wording refers to a previous foreign empire taking over the temple and there offering sacrifice to a foreign god.<sup>17</sup> In Mark, the phrase refers to what has just happened (or is soon to happen) to the temple, an event that Mark says will be followed by suffering "such as has not been from the beginning of creation."

Then, in language that Mark almost certainly understood to refer to the second coming of Jesus, the Jesus of Mark speaks of "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory":

But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out his angels to gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

When will all of this happen? Soon. A few verses later, the Jesus of Mark says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."<sup>18</sup> Thus Mark viewed the events of 70—the suffering of the final stages of the war, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple—as signs that "the end" was at hand.

In short, Mark's gospel has an apocalyptic eschatology.<sup>19</sup> Apocalyptic eschatology appears earlier in his gospel as well, in a "kingdom of God" saying. In the middle of Mark, immediately after a passage about the Son of Man coming in glory with his angels, the Jesus of Mark speaks of the imminence of the kingdom: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God coming with power."<sup>20</sup> In other words, some of those still alive will see this.

*Jesus' Inaugural Scene* The imminence of the kingdom of God is the theme of Jesus' brief inaugural address in Mark:

The time is fulfilled,  
and the kingdom of God is at hand.  
Repent and believe in the good news.

Though Jesus often spoke about the kingdom of God, this passage is Mark's thematic construction, announcing a major emphasis of his gospel. "The time is fulfilled"; the kingdom of which Jesus spoke is now "at hand."

Yet though the events of 70 account for Mark's emphasis on the imminence of the kingdom, they account for surprisingly little of his gospel's contents. The rest of Mark does not often use the phrase "the kingdom of God."<sup>21</sup> Instead, much of his gospel

is about another major theme: the way—that is, the "way" or "path" or "road" of following Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

In what is virtually the title of the gospel, Mark opens with a citation from Isaiah 40: "In the wilderness, prepare *the way* of the Lord."<sup>23</sup> The language takes us back to the exile: the gospel of Mark is about a way of return from exile. The way of return is the way of Jesus, as the pivotal central section of the gospel emphasizes. The story of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem is filled with teaching about the "way" of discipleship, which means "following" Jesus on his "way." That way leads to Jerusalem, the place of confrontation with the domination system, death, and resurrection. As Jesus journeys on his way, he solemnly speaks three times of his own impending death and resurrection and after each invites his disciples to follow him.<sup>24</sup> For Mark, the "way" of Jesus is the path of death and resurrection.

The emphasis on a way of return connects to the final element in Jesus' inaugural address in Mark: "Repent." Repentance here does not mean contrition for sin, as it often has in later Christian theology. Rather, its meaning is rooted in the exile story: to repent is to return from exile. To connect that concept back to kingdom of God language: to repent—to embark on the journey of return—is to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, for Mark, the canonical Jesus calls his followers to the way of the cross, the path of death and resurrection. The way of Jesus—the way of repentance and return from exile—involves dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being. Taken literally, it is the path of martyrdom, which may have been an issue when Mark was written.<sup>26</sup> Taken metaphorically, it refers to the internal process at the center of the way of Jesus and the life of discipleship.

### Matthew

Matthew's gospel is written about ten to twenty years later than Mark's. Its content points to a late-first-century community of Christian Jews in conflict with other Jews. Of the synoptic gospels, Matthew is both the most Jewish and the most hostile to Judaism.



*Hostility to Judaism* Jews are referred to as if separate from Matthew's community. Synagogues are "their" synagogues, for example.<sup>27</sup> Matthew intensifies Jesus' criticism of scribes and Pharisees by turning it into invective. In a lengthy chapter of condemnation, the formula "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" is used six times, and scribes and Pharisees are called "blind guides," "blind fools," "serpents," and "brood of vipers."<sup>28</sup>

To Mark's version of the parable of the wicked tenants, Matthew adds a verse addressed to the leaders of the Jewish people: "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation [or people] producing the fruits of it."<sup>29</sup> He adds to Mark's account of the trial of Jesus the scene of Pilate washing his hands of the blood of Jesus and thus declares Pilate to be innocent of Jesus' death. Instead, he assigns responsibility for Jesus' condemnation to the Jewish crowd and their descendants: "All the people answered, 'His blood be on us and our children.'"<sup>30</sup> Ever since Christianity became the dominant religion of Western culture, the words have been a text of terror for Jewish people.

The intensity of the conflict with Judaism in Matthew reflects the situation of his community. After the Roman reconquest of the Jewish homeland, the survivors sought to consolidate and preserve Jewish identity in spite of the loss of the temple. Along with the Torah, the temple had been one of the two centers of Jewish practice and identity. Soon after the temple's destruction, the Jewish community began to ostracize Jews who followed Jesus as the messiah, claiming that they were no longer true Jews. One of Matthew's central concerns is to claim the opposite: that his community of Christian Jews is faithful to the traditions of Israel.

*Continuity with Judaism* Matthew does this by emphasizing continuity with Jewish tradition. He quotes the Hebrew Bible more than any other gospel-writer. Not counting allusions or echoes, he quotes forty times with an explicit phrase such as "It is written" and another twenty-one times without such a phrase.<sup>31</sup>

He traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. He reports that Jesus during his lifetime restricted his mission to Jews and ordered his disciples to do the same: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."<sup>32</sup>

In a saying found in Matthew alone, Jesus is said to affirm the enduring validity of the Law and the Prophets, the two divisions of the Hebrew Bible regarded as sacred by Jews by the first century:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, Matthew uses a Moses typology to construct his gospel. Matthew uses ninety percent of Mark as he writes, and to Mark's narrative he adds the teachings of Jesus as collected in Q, as well as some material not found in either Mark or Q. But he does so in a distinctive way. Namely, he gathers the teaching of Jesus into five major blocks of material and concludes each with a similar formula: "When Jesus had finished saying these things. . . ."<sup>34</sup> The arrangement of Jesus' teaching into five blocks calls to mind the five books of the Pentateuch.

In presenting the story of Jesus' birth, Matthew echoes the story of Moses' birth. Just as the life of Moses was threatened by Pharaoh's command that all male Hebrew babies be killed, so Jesus' life as an infant is threatened by King Herod's command that all male infants in the area of Bethlehem are to be killed. Matthew's meaning is clear. Jesus is like Moses, Herod is like Pharaoh, and what is happening in and through Jesus is like a new exodus.

*Jesus' Inaugural Scene* The Moses typology is also reflected in Jesus' inaugural address. On a superficial level, Jesus' first public

words in Matthew are virtually the same as those in Mark. Matthew condenses and slightly changes Mark's advance summary of Jesus' message to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."<sup>35</sup>

But we encounter what is distinctive about Jesus' inaugural address in Matthew in the next scene: the famous "Sermon on the Mount." Three chapters long, it is the first of the five blocks of Jesus' teachings in Matthew. It begins with the beatitudes ("Blessed are the . . .") and concludes with a parable contrasting two ways: one way is the wisdom of building your house on rock; the other way is the folly of building your house on sand.<sup>36</sup> In between, the sermon describes the "way" of Matthew's community, sometimes contrasting it with "what was said to those of ancient times."<sup>37</sup> These three chapters contain some of the most striking and radical teachings of Jesus.

They are called "the Sermon on the Mount" because of Matthew's narrative introduction: "Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up *on the mountain* and taught them."<sup>38</sup> Matthew is responsible for locating this teaching on a mountain; some of it is also found in Luke, where it is spoken "on a level place" and commonly called "the Sermon on the Plain."<sup>39</sup> Why does Matthew set this teaching on a mountain? Doing so fits his Moses typology: just as Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, so Jesus now goes up on a mountain to deliver his teaching.

Thus Matthew constructs the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity to disclose one of the central themes in his portrait of Jesus: Jesus is one like Moses.<sup>40</sup> Together with Matthew's frequent quotation of the Hebrew Bible and his structuring of Jesus' teaching into five blocks like the five books of Moses, the inaugural scene suggests that his gospel functioned like the Pentateuch for his community. It was their foundational document, combining their primal narrative (the story of Jesus) with teachings about the way of life that flowed out of taking Jesus seriously. This is the way Matthew and his community told and understood the story of Jesus.

Yet though the gospel of Matthew functioned for that com-

munity like the Pentateuch, it did not replace the Pentateuch. As mentioned earlier, according to Matthew 5.17–20, every letter and stroke of the Law and the Prophets remained valid. Matthew was not a supercessionist.<sup>41</sup> Rather, by presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy and as one like Moses, Matthew claimed the traditions of Israel for his community. He did not set out to prove that Jesus was the messiah; he and his community already believed that. Instead, in a late-first-century setting of conflict with other Jews, he claimed that the traditions of Israel belonged to his Christian Jewish community, not to "the scribes and Pharisees." In Matthew, we see an early stage of "the parting of the ways" that ultimately led to Judaism and Christianity as separate religions. But for Matthew and his community, it was still an intra-Jewish struggle.

### Luke-Acts

Like Matthew, Luke was most likely written a decade or two after Mark and includes material from both Mark and Q. Unlike Matthew (and unlike any other gospel), the gospel of Luke is the first volume of a two-volume work, the second of which is the book of Acts. The two volumes together are an intricately integrated thematic construction.

Luke's gospel narrates Jesus' mission to the Jewish people in the Jewish homeland; Acts describes the spread of early Christianity into the Roman Empire beyond the Jewish homeland, beginning with Jews of the Diaspora and soon including a mission to Gentiles as well. The gospel begins and ends in Jerusalem; Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome.<sup>42</sup> The movement of Luke's two volumes is thus from Jerusalem to Rome.

*The Spirit: Promise and Fulfillment* Central to Luke's thematic construction is repeated emphasis on the Spirit of God. Though Matthew and Mark also frequently speak of the Spirit, Luke does so even more often. The first two chapters of Luke not only narrate Jesus' conception by the Spirit, but also report that Elizabeth and Zechariah (the parents of John the Baptizer) are

filled with the Holy Spirit, as is the aged Simeon, who praises God after he sees the infant Jesus in the temple.<sup>43</sup>

Like Matthew and Mark, Luke reports that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and led him into the wilderness. Then Luke adds another reference to the Spirit as Jesus begins his public activity: "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee."<sup>44</sup> Near the end of the gospel, the final words of the dying Jesus are, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."<sup>45</sup> The gospel ends with the risen Jesus promising to send the Spirit upon his followers: "I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city [Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high."<sup>46</sup>

Acts opens with a twofold repetition of Jesus' promise of the Spirit.<sup>47</sup> And that promise is soon fulfilled. In Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (the Jewish "Festival of Weeks," held fifty days after Passover), the Spirit descends on the community:

They were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.<sup>48</sup>

The gift of "other languages" enabled Jews from many nations and languages who were living in Jerusalem to understand the speakers.<sup>49</sup>

This text is full of rich symbolism. "Wind" and "fire" are classic images for the Spirit in the Hebrew Bible. The gift of universally intelligible language deliberately echoes the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, in which humanity was fragmented into language groups. The coming of the Spirit is the reversal of Babel, the beginning of the reunion of the human community. Then Peter speaks and interprets the descent of the Spirit as the

fulfillment of God's promise for "the last days": "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh."<sup>50</sup>

In the rest of Acts, the Spirit is so central that it is virtually the book's main character. Not only does the Spirit give birth to the community at Pentecost, but the Spirit directs significant advances in the community's mission: Philip's conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch, Paul's conversion, Peter's conversion of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, Paul and Barnabas's commissioning for their first missionary journey, the directive to Paul to take the gospel to Europe, and more.<sup>51</sup>

The Spirit also guides the decision of the Jerusalem council about whether to impose conditions on Gentiles who are joining the movement. In words that have been the envy of church committees ever since, the council concludes, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . . ."<sup>52</sup> In addition, Luke frequently writes about the community and individuals as filled with the Spirit.<sup>53</sup> Thus in Acts, the same Spirit that conceived, empowered, and guided Jesus now does the same within the Christian community as it spreads from Jerusalem (the center of the Jewish world) to Rome (the center of the Gentile world).

*Jesus' Inaugural Scene* The centrality of the Spirit and a foreshadowing of the Gentile mission are crystallized in the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity in Luke. Luke replaces Mark's inaugural text ("The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent . . .") with the story of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown.<sup>54</sup> The scene begins with Jesus reading a passage from the book of Isaiah, the first words of Jesus' public activity in Luke:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because God has anointed me to bring good news to the  
poor,  
and has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.<sup>55</sup>

This is a remarkably apt summary portrait of Luke's Jesus: in the rest of the gospel, he is a Spirit-anointed social prophet whose activity is directed especially to the poor and oppressed.

As the inaugural scene continues, Jesus speaks about two prophets from the Hebrew Bible who were sent to Gentiles: Elijah to a widow at Zarepath in Sidon, and Elisha to a Syrian leper named Naaman. The crowd in the synagogue who a few verses earlier had heard him gladly now turns on him and the people seek to kill him by hurling him off a cliff. But Jesus "passed through their midst and went on his way."

This is not history, of course. We are not to think that Jesus' mission began with his neighbors in Nazareth trying to kill him—an attempt that anticipates his eventual execution. Rather, like the inaugural addresses in Matthew and Mark, the whole scene is a thematic construction created by Luke.<sup>56</sup> It announces in advance the theme of Luke-Acts as a whole: the mission of Jesus to Israel in the gospel and the extension of that mission to Gentiles by the early Christian movement in Acts. All of this is the work of the Spirit: the same Spirit that anoints Jesus at the beginning of his mission goes on to anoint the Christian community at Pentecost at the beginning of its mission. For Luke, the Spirit active in Jesus continues in the mission of the community. By implication, then, the community is to continue Jesus' activity in the world.

## John

The awareness that John (also called "the Fourth Gospel") is very different from the synoptic gospels is a foundation of modern study of the gospels. But the awareness itself is not modern. Clement of Alexandria, an early Christian theologian writing around the year 200, distinguished John from the other gospels and called it "the spiritual gospel."

*John as Distinct from the Synoptics* The differences between John and the other gospels include the following:

- *Chronology.* In the synoptics, Jesus' public activity fits into a year; in John, three to four years. In the synoptics, overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple occurs in the last week of Jesus' life and is the cause of his arrest; in John, the event occurs at the beginning of Jesus' public activity.<sup>57</sup>
- *Geography.* In the synoptics, most of Jesus' public activity occurs in Galilee; in John, Jesus is more often in Judea and Jerusalem.
- *Jesus' message.* In the synoptics, Jesus' message is about the kingdom of God, not about himself; in John, much of it is about himself. Declarations such as "I and the Father are one" and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" are found in John, as are the familiar "I am" sayings: I am the light of the world, the bread of life, the resurrection and the life, the way and the truth and life, and so forth.
- *Style of Jesus' teaching.* In the synoptics, Jesus teaches in parables and short memorable sayings; in John, long and remarkably dense theological discourses. John is very "wordy," as my students say.

Yet alongside the dense wordiness of the discourses is the richest symbolic language about Jesus in the New Testament: Jesus as the Word made flesh, as the light of the world, as the Lamb of God, as the bread of life, as the true vine, as the door, as the good shepherd. John also uses a set of dualistic symbols to present the significance of Jesus and his work: darkness/light, below/above, flesh/spirit, death/life, falsehood/truth, earth/heaven. He also sometimes uses the term "the world" to refer not simply to the created order, but to a negative way of being, just as he often uses the phrase "the Jews" as a negative symbol (about which I will say more later in this chapter).<sup>58</sup>



Though both the synoptics and John are a mixture of history and symbol, in John metaphorical narrative dominates history remembered and historical memory. Of course Jesus of Nazareth as a historical figure lies behind John, but he is further removed than in the synoptics. Put positively, John is the most symbolic of the gospels.

*Jesus' Inaugural Scene* Thus it is not surprising that the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity in John is a richly symbolic narrative. Rather than an inaugural address as in the synoptics, it is an inaugural deed: Jesus changes water into wine at a wedding banquet.<sup>59</sup> The story is well known: Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are at a wedding in Cana, a village in Galilee; the wine runs out; Jesus changes a large amount of water into very good wine. Indeed, the steward, thinking that the groom has provided the wine, says to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first. . . . But you have kept the best wine until now." This, John says, was "the first of Jesus' signs" and "revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him."

The text reports a miracle, of course: the transformation of a large quantity of water (120 to 180 gallons) into wine. But if we focus on the event's "happenedness," we easily become distracted and miss the point. We then wonder if such a thing could really happen; and if we think it could and did, we then marvel about what Jesus did on a particular day in the past. But the meaning of this story does not depend upon its "happenedness." Instead, it is a "sign," as John puts it. Signs point beyond themselves; to use a play on words, they *sign*-ify something, and what they signify is their significance.

So what is the meaning of this story as a "sign"? What is its significance? A number of its details have caught the attention of scholars: the odd exchange between Jesus and his mother; the detail that the water was "for the Jewish rites of purification"; the anticipation of Jesus' death.<sup>60</sup> Though these details matter, they should not divert attention from the primary symbolic feature of the text: a wedding banquet.

Wedding banquets were the most festive occasions in the

world of first-century Palestine, especially in the peasant class (and Cana was a peasant village). Wedding banquets commonly lasted seven days. They featured dancing, wine, and vast quantities of food. The normal peasant diet was meager: grains, vegetables, fruit, olives, eggs, and an occasional fish. Meat and poultry were infrequently eaten, since people were reluctant to kill the few animals they had. But at a wedding banquet, there were copious amounts of food of all kinds.

Given the above, what is this text—which John places as the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity—saying? What is Jesus about? What is the gospel—the good news—of Jesus about? John's answer: it is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out and the best is saved for last.

To this metaphorical meaning of a wedding banquet can be added historical associations of banquet and wedding imagery in Jewish and early Christian traditions. In Judaism, a banquet was a frequent symbol for the messianic age. Marriage was also used as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel.<sup>61</sup> In the New Testament, Jesus is sometimes spoken of as the bridegroom and the community of his followers as the bride.<sup>62</sup> The book of Revelation refers to "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Jesus) and ends with a vision of the New Jerusalem descending from the sky "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."<sup>63</sup> A wedding could thus symbolize the intimacy of the divine-human relationship and the marriage between heaven and earth. It is a common mystical symbol, and John is the most mystical gospel.<sup>64</sup>

Did John intend to build all of these meanings into his inaugural scene? There is no way of knowing. But it is the nature of metaphorical language to convey more meanings than the author intended. In any case, it is clear what John is *saying*: the story of Jesus is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out.

### Selected Texts: Metaphorical Narratives

We move now from seeing the gospels as thematic constructions to reading individual texts as metaphorical narratives. As we do

so, we will attend to two levels or kinds of metaphor: *intrinsic metaphor* and *historical metaphor*.<sup>65</sup>

*Intrinsic metaphor* is shorthand for the metaphorical meanings intrinsic to the story itself—the meanings that occur to a reader sensitive to the language of metaphor prior to taking into account (or even knowing) the specific historical associations of the language. *Historical metaphor* is shorthand for the additional metaphorical meanings that flow out of the specific historical associations of the language.

I illustrate the distinction by returning briefly to the story of the wedding at Cana. The intrinsic metaphorical meaning of that story is that Jesus is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out. The historical metaphorical meanings are those additional meanings that flow out of knowing about the specific associations of banquet and marriage/wedding imagery in Judaism and early Christianity.

The texts I have selected for this section of the chapter are all, in my judgment, purely metaphorical narratives. I do not think a particular historical event in the life of Jesus lies behind any of them, even though I think all of them speak powerfully and truthfully about the significance of Jesus and his vision.

Using different language to make the same point, John Dominic Crossan calls stories like these “parables.” Jesus, he says, told parables about God. The early Christian movement likewise told parables about Jesus.<sup>66</sup> He suggests that we ask the following question about the stories in the gospels: “Whether you read the story as history or parable, what is its meaning—for then, for now, for always?”<sup>67</sup>

### Walking on Water

The story of Jesus walking on the water is one of only two miracle stories found in both John and the synoptics.<sup>68</sup> With small variations, the details are remarkably similar in Mark and John. It is night, and the disciples are rowing across the Sea of Galilee in a small boat by themselves. There is a strong wind, the sea is rough, and they make little headway. Then they see Jesus walk-

ing on the sea. Initially, they are terrified. But he says to them, “It is I—do not be afraid.” Then they are safe.

*Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings* What metaphorical meanings are intrinsic to the story and not dependent on either the “happenedness” of the story or the specific historical associations of the imagery? As with any good metaphorical story, the meanings of this one cannot be reduced to a single understanding. I provide a short list of possible meanings—a list whose purpose is not to be comprehensive but to illustrate metaphorical thinking. There is nothing special about my list; generating it required no scholarly expertise. You are invited to reflect on the story to see what other intrinsic meanings occur to you.

- Without Jesus, you don’t get anywhere.
- Without Jesus, you’re at sea and in the dark.
- Following Jesus may put you in difficult situations.
- Jesus takes away fear.
- Jesus comes to you in distress.
- Jesus stills storms.

I think I see some sermon possibilities here.

As Matthew narrates this story, he adds an episode: Peter walks on the water as well. After Jesus says, “It is I, have no fear,” Matthew tells us:

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” Jesus said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?”<sup>69</sup>

I strongly doubt that Matthew’s point is literal: if you have enough faith in Jesus, you can literally walk on water. Rather, his

point is metaphorical, and the intrinsic metaphorical meanings might include the following:

- Without faith in Jesus, fear takes over.
- Without faith in Jesus, you sink.
- With faith in Jesus, you can walk on water (metaphorically).
- When you're sinking, call out, "Lord, save me!"—and he will.

*Historical Metaphorical Meanings* Additional meanings can be added to the above if we factor in the specific historical associations of sea imagery in the Hebrew Bible. Those associations were ominous. The sea was a mysterious and threatening force opposed to God. Thus, when the ancient Hebrews wanted to stress God's power and authority, they spoke of God's mastery over the sea. The authors of the book of Psalms exclaimed, "You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them," and "The sea is God's, for God made it."<sup>70</sup> In the book of Job, the voice from the whirlwind declares that it was God who "shut in the sea with doors" and said to it, "Thus far you shall come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped."<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, the plight of the disciples echoes a psalm that may have been the model for the gospel story:

The stormy wind lifted up the waves of the sea.  
 They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths.  
 The courage of those in the boat melted away in their  
   calamity;  
   they reeled and staggered like drunkards,  
   and were at their wits' end.  
 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
   and God brought them out of their distress;  
 God made the storm be still,  
   and the waves of the sea were hushed.  
 Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
   And God brought them to their desired haven.<sup>72</sup>

So what more do we see and hear in the gospel story by being aware of the historical associations of the imagery? The primary additional meaning is christological. The story's portrait of Jesus walking on the water and calming the waves makes the claim that Jesus participates in the power and authority of God: that which was said about God in the Hebrew Bible is now said about Jesus.

Finally, the disciples of Jesus were sometimes a symbol for the Christian community, and a boat was an early Christian symbol for the church. This suggests that the story is also about the relationship between Jesus and the church.

The story thus witnesses to what the post-Easter Jesus had become in the life of early Christian communities: one with God. The canonical Jesus is one who stills storms, takes away our fear, rescues us—and does so because he participates in the power of God.

### Feeding the Multitude

The second miracle story found in both the synoptics and John is the feeding of five thousand people with five loaves and two fish.<sup>73</sup> In both, the story is remarkably similar, and its basic outline is familiar. Jesus, the disciples, and a crowd are in the countryside (the synoptics call it "a lonely place"), and the crowd has nothing to eat. The disciples cannot imagine that feeding them—as Jesus wants to do—is possible and ask, "Shall we go and buy 200 denarii worth of bread?"<sup>74</sup> Instead, five loaves and two fish are found. According to Mark, Jesus then took the food, "looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people." According to John, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks," he distributed them to the crowd himself. All ate and were satisfied. Afterward, twelve baskets of food were left over.<sup>75</sup>

Here the similarities between John and the synoptics end. Unlike the synoptics, John uses the story as a springboard for a long discourse by Jesus.<sup>76</sup> Its subject matter is one of the "I am" statements attributed by John to Jesus: "I am the bread of life." Because John's interpretation of the feeding story is significantly

different from that of the synoptics, I will treat the two interpretations separately.

*The Synoptic Story: Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings* Again I invite you to reflect on the metaphorical meanings intrinsic to the story. As I did so myself, the following occurred to me:

- Without Jesus, you go hungry.
- With Jesus, there is more than enough.
- Feeding the multitude matters to Jesus.
- Jesus commands his followers to feed the multitude.
- Jesus' followers resist feeding the multitude: How is it possible, they ask?<sup>77</sup>

Though the narrative is metaphorical, real food for real people mattered to Jesus.

*The Synoptic Story: Historical Metaphorical Meanings* The historical metaphorical associations with the Hebrew Bible are especially rich in this story. The principal association is with Israel's primal narrative, the exodus story. Just as God fed the Israelites with manna from heaven as they journeyed through the wilderness, so now Jesus provides bread in the wilderness. The exodus story is happening again. Just as Second Isaiah viewed what was happening in his time as a new exodus, so now the gospels view what is happening in Jesus as a new exodus.<sup>78</sup> And though the feeding part of the exodus story is emphasized, the fuller story is also called to mind: Jesus is like Moses, the leader of Israel who liberated his people from bondage and deprivation in imperial Egypt and brought them to the promised land.

*John's Story: Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings* In the long discourse and dialogue following the story of the feeding, the Jesus of John says, "I am the bread of life" and "the bread of God" that "comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."<sup>79</sup> Jesus himself is that bread; people are to eat him. The language in John becomes even more graphic:

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life. . . . For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.<sup>80</sup>

Obviously, John's story uses the language of metaphor. If taken literally, this passage would smack of cannibalism. So what are the intrinsic metaphorical meanings of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood?

The imagery of eating and drinking connects to a central religious metaphor for our deepest human yearning: hunger, and the closely related metaphor thirst. There are those who hunger and thirst for God, for justice, for meaning, for life. For John, Jesus is the answer to that hunger: Jesus himself is the bread of life who satisfies our hunger. Eat this bread and you will never be hungry: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never be hungry." The next line of the verse invokes the thirst metaphor: "And whoever believes in me will never thirst."<sup>81</sup>

The metaphors remind us of the Christian eucharist, of course. But one should not reduce their meaning to the bread and wine of the central Christian sacrament. Although John's language adds resonances of meaning to the eucharist, to see this language as conveying simply "Eat the bread and drink the wine of the eucharist" flattens the varied metaphors into a single prosaic meaning.

The metaphors also connect to the wisdom literature of Israel, especially to the banquet of Wisdom/Sophia in Proverbs: "Come, eat of the bread and drink of the wine I have mixed!"<sup>82</sup> For John, Jesus is the incarnation not only of the Word of God but also of the Wisdom of God. To take Jesus in, to digest Jesus, is to partake in Jesus as the Wisdom of God.

*John's Story: Historical Metaphorical Meanings* The metaphors also connect to the mysticism of John's gospel. Eating and drinking Jesus is the way of becoming one with Jesus: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."<sup>83</sup> By taking in and digesting the flesh and blood of Jesus, we live in Jesus and Jesus lives in us: we become one with Jesus.

Abiding or dwelling in Jesus is also the theme of another mystical metaphor in John: Jesus as the true vine and his followers as branches. The branches are joined to the vine and depend on the vine for their life. They are to bear fruit; and the fruit, John tells us, is love: just as Jesus abides in God's love, so Jesus' followers are to abide in his love. Thus the consequence of having Jesus within and being in Jesus is to "Love one another as I have loved you."<sup>84</sup> And part of loving one another is feeding the multitude.

The implicit connection between the feeding of the five thousand and the exodus story is made explicit in John. In his discourse, John explicitly refers to Israel's ancestors being fed with manna in the wilderness. But John's point is not simply *similarity* to the exodus; he also emphasizes contrast. While Jesus "gives life to the world" as "the bread of life," the manna of the exodus did not give life: "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died." What Moses gave them was not the true bread from heaven.<sup>85</sup> But Jesus is "the true bread" and "the living bread," and "whoever eats of this bread will live forever."<sup>86</sup>

Thus in John the point is not really that Jesus now feeds people in the wilderness as God did in the exodus story. The point, rather, is that Jesus provides that which was not provided in the time of the exodus: living bread.

### Sight to the Blind

I have already commented briefly about two synoptic "sight to the blind" stories as metaphorical narratives that also reflect history remembered.<sup>87</sup> Here I will focus on a story in John's gospel that deals with Jesus giving sight to a man blind from birth. I leave unaddressed the question of whether this particular healing happened. For a metaphorical reading, the question does not matter.

John devotes the whole of his ninth chapter to the story and its aftermath. The first part of the chapter narrates the healing itself. Jesus gives sight to the man "born blind" by making a paste of clay and spittle and spreading it on his eyes. The second part

concerns the interrogation of the once-blind man and his parents by "the Pharisees" and "the Jews." The response of the man's parents to the interrogation is cautious and careful, because, we are told, "they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." Then the formerly blind man is interrogated again, and when he unambiguously affirms that Jesus is from God, he is driven out of the synagogue.<sup>88</sup>

*Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings* The intrinsic metaphors in this story are "light" and "seeing." As John often does, he makes the intrinsic metaphors explicit. He does so in words attributed to Jesus and the blind man:

*Jesus:* "I am the light of the world."

*The blind man:* "Once I was blind, but now I see. . . . Jesus opened my eyes."<sup>89</sup>

The metaphors connect to a major theme of John's story of Jesus: Jesus is the light who brings enlightenment. One chapter before this blind-man-healed story, some of the same language is used: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."<sup>90</sup>

This theme is prominently announced in the elegant prologue to John's gospel. The Word (and Wisdom) of God that became incarnate in Jesus is the life and light of all people:<sup>91</sup>

The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it. . . .

The true light which enlightens everyone  
was coming into the world.<sup>92</sup>

Darkness and light, blindness and seeing, light and enlightenment—these are archetypal religious metaphors common to many traditions. Though the imagery is used in the Hebrew Bible, the archetypal associations are more important for our



purposes than the specifically historical associations.<sup>93</sup> "Being in the dark" and "blindness" are frequent cross-cultural images for the human condition, just as "light," "seeing," and "enlightenment" are images for the deliverance from that state of affairs.

Enlightenment as an archetypal religious metaphor belongs to a mystical way of being religious. Outside of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the best-known enlightenment experience is the Buddha's mystical experience. Such an experience leads to seeing everything differently. It is not simply an intellectual or mental "seeing," as when we say, "Oh, I see what you mean." Rather, enlightenment as a religious experience involves communion or union with what is, an immediate "knowing" of the sacred that transforms one's way of seeing.

So it is in John: enlightenment is a central metaphor for salvation. To have one's eyes opened, to be enlightened, is to move from the negative pole of John's contrasting symbols to the positive pole. To move from darkness to light is also to move from death to life, from falsehood to truth, from life in the flesh to life in the Spirit, from life "below" to life "from above."<sup>94</sup>

To be enlightened is to be born "from above" and "of the Spirit"—in other words, to be "born again." Thus the "born again" experience in John is an enlightenment experience.<sup>95</sup>

The language of enlightenment connects to John's emphasis upon knowing God. For John, such knowing is the primary meaning of "eternal life"—not a future state beyond death but an experience in the present. To know God is eternal life: "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God." Of course, for John, the true God is known in Jesus, and so the second half of the verse continues with "and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."<sup>96</sup> For John, the Christian enlightenment experience is knowing God in Jesus.

*Historical Metaphorical Meanings* In the judgment of most scholars, the interrogation in the second part of John 9, with its language of being "put out of the synagogue," points to the historical context in which the gospel was written: late in the first

century.<sup>97</sup> A synagogue, of course, was a local Jewish assembly of teaching and worship. In that world, being "put out" (expelled) from the synagogue was far more serious than being expelled from a Christian congregation or denomination is in our world. Whereas we can simply find and join another church, those who were expelled from the synagogue were no longer considered Jews (or at least not *acceptable* Jews). In a traditional society where most people lived their entire life in the same village or town, this was a powerful social sanction. Those who were expelled faced social ostracism: among other things, expulsion disrupted relationships within families and with neighbors and made marriage to "proper" Jews difficult or impossible.

Followers of Jesus were not threatened with expulsion from the synagogue during his lifetime. At the earliest, this happened a decade or two after the destruction of the temple in 70. John 9 thus not only suggests an approximate date for the gospel but also points to the historical situation with which John and his community were dealing: bitter conflict between Jews and Christian Jews. As it did in the gospel of Matthew, this conflict shapes John's story of Jesus. In particular, it accounts for John's use of "the Jews" as a negative symbol of disbelief. And worse: though "the Jews" claim to have Abraham and God for their father, they are neither Abraham's children nor God's children. Rather—and somewhat shockingly—the Jesus of John says, "You are from your father the devil."<sup>98</sup> The conflict situation helps us to understand this language, even as we must also regret and reject it.

### Jesus as "the Way"

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."<sup>99</sup>

The last text we shall explore is also from John. It is troubling to many mainline Christians in our time because of how it has commonly been heard and read through the Christian centuries: it has been the classic "proof text" for Christian exclusivism—the notion that salvation is possible only through Jesus, and thus only through Christianity.

*Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings* Although this text, like the others we have looked at, has specific historical relevance, it also has universal meanings. We gain access to those meanings by paying attention to the metaphor at the heart of the text: Jesus is "the way." A way is a path or a road or a journey, not a set of beliefs.<sup>100</sup>

So Jesus is "the way." But what does this metaphor, applied to a person, mean? More specifically, what is Jesus' "way" in John's gospel (or what is "the way" which Jesus is)? The answer is found in the movement or dynamic of the gospel as a whole as well as in a single verse:

- *In the gospel as a whole:* From the inaugural scene onward, Jesus' way leads to his death—which is also, for John, his glorification.<sup>101</sup> The way to life in the presence of God is through death.
- *In a single verse:* The Jesus of John says, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."<sup>102</sup>

In short, for John the way or path of Jesus is the path of death and resurrection understood as a metaphor for the religious life. That way—the path of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being—is the only way to God.

The same point is made in a story I once heard about a sermon preached by a Hindu professor in a Christian seminary several decades ago. The text for the day included the "one way" passage, and about it he said, "This verse is absolutely true—Jesus is the only way." But he went on to say, "And that way—of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being—is known in all of the religions of the world." The way of Jesus is a universal way, known to millions who have never heard of Jesus.

The way of Jesus is thus not a set of beliefs about Jesus. That we ever thought it was is strange, when one thinks about it—as if

one entered new life by believing certain things to be true, or as if the only people who can be saved are those who know the word "Jesus." Thinking that way virtually amounts to salvation by syllables. Rather, the way of Jesus is the way of death and resurrection—the path of transition and transformation from an old way of being to a new way of being.

Finally, the language of incarnation, so central to John, is crucial for understanding the threefold affirmation of this verse: Jesus is not only "the way," but also "the truth, and the life." Incarnation means embodiment. Jesus is the way—Jesus is what the way embodied in a person looks like. Jesus is the truth—Jesus is what the truth embodied in a person looks like. Jesus is the life—Jesus is what life (*real* life) embodied in a person looks like. Taking Jesus seriously is not about a set of beliefs but about a person in whom we see embodied the way, the truth, and the life.

*Historical Metaphorical Meanings* As in John's gospel generally, though "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" is attributed to Jesus, it does not go back to Jesus himself. Rather, it is the product of a later stage in the developing tradition and was perhaps created by the author of John himself.

One key to reading this text is to set it in the historical context of John's gospel: a situation of bitter conflict in which John's community of Christian Jews was experiencing sharp social ostracism from non-Christian Jews. As a result, some of John's community may have been tempted to return to their community of origin.

In that setting, John wrote these words. He was thinking not of all the religions of the world, but of the synagogue across the street. He was saying, in effect, Stay within the community of Jesus. Don't go back to the way you left behind. Jesus is the way; that way isn't.

Even as we understand the text this way, it is important not to turn it into a rejection of Judaism, as if other religions might be all right, but not Judaism. In short, reading the verse in historical context relativizes it. It is not an absolute pronouncement

about all other religions or about all other forms of Judaism for all time; rather, it is a pastoral exhortation in a particular historical setting.

## Conclusion

The gospel portraits of the canonical Jesus make extraordinary claims about him. He is one with God and shares in the power and authority of God. He is the revelation of God. He is also the revelation of "the way," not only in John but also in the synoptics. He is the bread of life who satisfies the deepest hunger of human beings and the light shining in the darkness who brings enlightenment. He lifts us out of death into life. He is the Word and Wisdom of God embodied in a human life. He is the disclosure of what a life full of God—a life filled with the Spirit—looks like.

This is who Jesus is for us as Christians. Some modern Christians have been uncomfortable with these claims because they seem to partake of Christian triumphalism. But for Christians, these claims should not be watered down. For us as Christians, Jesus is not less than this—he is *all* of this. And we can say "This is who Jesus is for us" without also saying "And God is known only in Jesus."

The gospels—as particular documents, as a collection of documents, and as individual stories within them—are Christianity's primal narratives. To say this means that these are the most important stories we know, and we know them to be decisively true.

## NOTES

1. The word "Christian" does occur, but only three times: I Pet. 4.16 and Acts 11.26 and 26.28. Formed from the Greek or Latin word for "messiah," in this early usage it meant a follower of Jesus as the Jewish messiah. Thus it did not yet mean a member of a new religion. See Michael J. Wilkins, "Christian," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 925–26.
2. The phrase "the parting of the ways" echoes the title of a fine book by James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Ju-*

- daism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).
3. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), chap. 3.
  4. Alan Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
  5. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 57.
  6. Typically dated to the early second century are I and II Timothy, Titus, and II Peter, with the last commonly seen as the latest book of the New Testament.
  7. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, chap. 1.
  8. The two shortest documents are Philemon and Jude.
  9. See the illuminating comments of Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: Knox, 1989), p. 6.
  10. Excellent accessible introductions to the gospels include Mark Allan Powell, *Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), and W. Barnes Tatum, *In Search of Jesus*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).
  11. We are virtually certain that none was written by any of the twelve disciples or other eyewitnesses. There is a strong scholarly consensus that Matthew and John were not written by disciples named Matthew and John. With Mark and Luke, a reasonable (though not decisive) case can be made that they were written by people named Mark and Luke, in part because there was no particularly good reason for second-century Christians to name the gospels after these men if they were not the authors. Neither Mark nor Luke was among the twelve disciples, nor was either an eyewitness to the public activity of Jesus.
  12. Moreover, most mainline scholars see the birth stories and the story of Jesus at age twelve as metaphorical narratives. Historically speaking, they are thus legendary, even though as metaphorical narratives they make significant affirmations about Jesus.
  13. Thus I reject the either-or choice that has marked a fair amount of Jesus and gospel scholarship: that only the historical Jesus matters or only the canonical Jesus matters. *Both* matter. For a vigorous presentation of the case for the primacy of the canonical Jesus, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995). For my summary of the two positions in the history of scholarship, see *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), chap. 9.
  14. My understanding of the historical Jesus is described most fully in the following books: *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998; first published in 1984); and, all published by HarperSanFrancisco: *Jesus: A New Vision* (1987), *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994), and, with N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (1998). The last one in particular also treats post-Easter perceptions of Jesus within the early Christian movement.
  15. Dating Mark to the late 60s or early 70s is widely accepted. I owe the phrase "wartime gospel" to Daryl Schmidt, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1990).



16. Mark 13.1–2. A historical comment: I think it is likely that the historical Jesus did address threats to Jerusalem and the temple as the center of the native domination system, just as many of the classical prophets of the Hebrew Bible warned of the destruction of the kingdoms that they addressed. Thus my position is not that Mark has created these warnings but that Mark has composed his thirteenth chapter with the events of the Jewish war in mind. In short, Mark may be using historical material here, even as he applies it to his own time.
17. Mark 13.4 and following. Quoted passage is 13.14, echoing Dan. 9.27, 11.31, and 12.11. In Daniel, the foreign empire is the Hellenistic Empire of Antiochus Epiphanes IV; his desecration of the temple around 165 BCE sparked the Maccabean revolt. Some scholars, including the well-known German scholar Gerd Theissen, have argued that elements of Mark 13 may have originated in connection with the crisis of 40 CE, when the Roman emperor Caligula planned to have a statue of himself erected in the temple in Jerusalem. See Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, trans. Linda Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 125–65. I regard this as possible (maybe even plausible), even as I also think it is clear that Mark is applying this language to the events of 70.
18. The first and longer quoted passage is Mark 13.24–27; the quoted phrase within it is taken from Dan. 7.13–14. The second quoted passage is Mark 13.30.
19. When speaking about “apocalyptic” and “eschatology,” terminological problems abound. Here I use “eschatology” as a fairly broad umbrella term to refer to “the end of things”; adding the adjective “apocalyptic” refers to an eschatology that sees “the end” as imminent, dramatic, and brought about by divine intervention.
20. Mark 9.1, immediately following the Son of Man saying in 8.38. Mark 9.1 occupies a strategic place in the gospel, either as the end of the first half or as the beginning of the second half. Note that it is followed immediately by the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, in which the same voice that declared Jesus to be God’s beloved Son at the beginning of the gospel in the story of Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1.11) is heard again: “This is my Son, the Beloved” (Mark 9.7, in the context of 9.2–8). Just as the first half of Mark begins with a declaration of Jesus’ identity at his baptism, so the second half begins with a declaration of his identity at his transfiguration.
21. In addition to Mark 1.15 and 9.1, only eleven more times in words attributed to Jesus in Mark: 4.10–12 (the “mystery” of the kingdom); 4.26–29, 30–32 (two brief parables of the Kingdom); six sayings in Mark 9 and 10 (9.47; 10.14, 15, 23, 24, 25); 12.34; and 14.25. Comparisons: Matthew has thirty-six “kingdom of God” sayings attributed to Jesus, and Luke has thirty-two.
22. Behind all three English words is the Greek word *hodos*, used frequently by Mark.
23. Mark 1.3.
24. The central section of Mark is 8.27–10.45 (or 8.22–10.52, if the two stories of blind men regaining their sight—stories that frame the section—are included). John Donahue, in *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco:

- Harper & Row, 1988), p. 984, highlights the section’s centrality by comparing the construction of Mark’s gospel to the design of a Roman triumphal arch: the side panels point to what is most central, the panel in the middle of the arch. Mark’s central section is the middle panel. The three predictions of Jesus’ death and resurrection are Mark 8.31, 9.31, and 10.33–34.
25. All of Mark’s sayings about entering or being in the kingdom of God are found in his central section: 9.47; 10.14, 15, 23, 24, 25.
26. Shortly before Mark was written, the first persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire occurred. Instigated by the emperor Nero in 64, it happened in Rome itself, and apparently not elsewhere. Though we do not have any specific evidence of persecution and martyrdom of Christians in connection with the Jewish war of revolt against Rome, it is plausible to think that it happened.
27. Matt. 4.23, 9.35. In 7.29, Matthew refers to “their” scribes. See also Matt. 6.2 and 6.5, where those in synagogues are called “hypocrites.”
28. Matt. 23. The formula occurs in vv. 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29. “Blind guides,” “blind fools,” “blind men,” and “blind Pharisee”: vv. 16, 17, 19, 24, 26. “Serpents” and “brood of vipers”: v. 33. “Child of hell”: v. 15. Luke 11.37–52 contains some of the same material, and thus Matt. 23 is based on Q; but in Luke (and Q), the criticisms are specific indictments and not broadside invective.
29. Matt. 21.43.
30. Matt. 27.24–25. These verses are a Matthean editorial addition to Mark’s account of the trial. So also is Pilate’s wife’s dream in 27.19, which declares Jesus to be a righteous man.
31. See the excellent excursus on Matthew as interpreter of scripture in Eugene Boring’s commentary on Matthew in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), vol. 8, pp. 151–54.
32. Matt. 10.5; see also 15.24. Matthew is not against a mission to the Gentiles, but he attributes the command for such a mission to a post-Easter setting: Matt. 28.18–20.
33. Matt. 5.17–18.
34. The five blocks of teaching material are Matt. 5.1–7.27, 10.5–42, 13.1–52, 18.1–35, and 24.3–25.46. The formula is found in 7.28, 11.1, 13.53, 19.1, and 26.1.
35. Matt. 4.17. Matthew’s use of “kingdom of *heaven*” instead of “kingdom of *God*” here and elsewhere in his gospel requires a brief comment. Whereas Mark and Luke consistently use the phrase “kingdom of God,” Matthew substitutes “heaven” for “God.” But Matthew does not mean a kingdom in another world after death, or heaven as afterlife. Rather, the substitution is another reflection of his continuity with Jewish tradition: out of reverence for God, he seeks to avoid using the name “God” and so substitutes “heaven” as an alternative (incidentally, he uses the plural: *kingdom of the heavens*). Matthew’s piety has unfortunately led centuries of Christians to think that the center of Jesus’ message was the kingdom of heaven understood as afterlife. But Jesus’ focus was on the kingdom of God, which is not at all the same as heaven.

36. Matthew's nine beatitudes are in 5.3–12; Luke has four in Luke 6.20–23. The parable of the wise and foolish builders at the end of the Sermon on the Mount is in Matt. 7.24–27.
37. The contrasts are called "the antitheses" of the Sermon on the Mount, and are in 5.21–48.
38. Matt. 5.1–2. The Sermon on the Mount as a whole is in Matt. 5–7.
39. Luke 6.17. The Sermon on the Plain is in Luke 6.20–47.
40. For Matthew, Jesus is more than this. He is also, for example, the messiah and Son of God. My concern here is not to present Matthew's christology as a whole, but simply to illustrate how Matthew's Moses typology is reflected in Jesus' inaugural address.
41. A *supercessionist* is one who thinks that Israel and the Jewish people *were* the people of God until the time of Jesus but no longer are, and that Christians are now the people of God (in other words, that Christians have superseded Jews as God's "chosen"). Much of conventional Christian belief throughout the centuries has been supercessionist, consciously or unconsciously, though most often without using that label. In our time, supercessionism has been explicitly rejected by the Catholic Church and by many mainline Christians, including most mainline Christian theologians.
42. A "roadmap" of the spread of early Christianity in Acts is programmatically stated in Acts 1.8: the risen Christ just before his ascension says to his followers, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
43. Luke 1.35, 41, 67; 2.25–27.
44. Luke 4.14. References to the Spirit descending at Jesus' baptism and leading him into the wilderness (both paralleled in Mark and Matthew) are found in 3.22 and 4.1.
45. Luke 23.46. It is unclear whether we should understand the words to mean that the Spirit that had guided and empowered Jesus during his life now returns to God, or whether the statement is simply a confession of trust in God as Jesus dies. Both meanings are possible.
46. Luke 24.49. Luke goes on to end his gospel with the story of Jesus' ascension, which he speaks of as having occurred the night after Easter. Then Luke begins Acts with another story of Jesus' ascension—this one some forty days later. The two ascension stories are a bit of a puzzle, especially since they are set forty days apart. Perhaps the contradiction suggests that Luke does not see the ascension story as reporting a literally factual event.
47. Acts 1.5, 8. The Spirit is also mentioned in v. 3.
48. Acts 2.1–4.
49. Thus this is quite different from "speaking in tongues" (*glossolalia*) as reported in the churches of Paul, where what is heard is unintelligible language. In Acts, the gift is universally intelligible language.
50. The story of the first Christian Pentecost continues through Acts 2.41. Quoted words are from 2.17, an approximate citation of Joel 2.28.
51. Acts 8.29, 9.17, 10.19, 13.2, 16.6–7.
52. Acts 15.28.
53. Examples in addition to those already cited: Acts 2.38, 4.8, 4.31, 6.3, 7.55, 8.15–17, 9.31, 10.44, 11.15, 11.24, 13.9, 19.2–6, 19.21, 20.22–23, 21.11.

54. Luke 4.16–30.
55. Luke 4.18–19, quoting Isa. 61.1–2 and 58.6.
56. To avoid a possible misunderstanding, let me add that to say that the inaugural addresses were constructed by the evangelists does not mean that the evangelists made them up out of nothing. Jesus really did proclaim the kingdom of God, and Jesus did say much of what is included in the Sermon on the Mount. But portraying "the kingdom of God is at hand" and the Sermon on the Mount as the inaugural addresses of Jesus is the product of Mark and Matthew. So also here in Luke: historically speaking, Jesus was a Spirit-anointed prophet who proclaimed good news to the poor, and so forth. But Luke 4.16–30 is a Lucan product.
57. John 2.13–22; Mark 11.1–10, with parallels in Matt 21.1–9 and Luke 19.28–38.
58. For an accessible and illuminating treatment of John's contrasting symbols, see Robert Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1993), pp. 58–77. For comments about John's treatment of "the Jews," see my section later in this chapter on John 9.
59. John 2.1–11. Immediately preceding it is the preparation for Jesus' public activity in the first chapter: the witness of John the Baptizer and Jesus' call of his first disciples.
60. John 2.3–4, 6. The "hour" in the phrase "My hour has not yet come" (v. 3) refers in John to the hour of Jesus' death.
61. In the Hebrew Bible, see Hos. 2.14–20, Isa. 54.5, Jer. 2.2. See also Song of Songs; its erotic love poetry has been understood from ancient times as a metaphor for the God-Israel and divine-human relationship.
62. See, for example, Mark 2.19–20, John 3.29, II Cor. 11.2, Eph. 5.21–32.
63. Rev. 19.7–9, 21.2.
64. The story of the wedding at Cana may also have metaphorical associations with the wine of the Christian eucharist. Just as later in the gospel Jesus provides bread when there is no bread, here he provides wine.
65. Because I am not aware of standard terminology for these two kinds of metaphorical meaning, these are my own terms.
66. John Dominic Crossan, *A Long Way from Tipperary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), pp. 136, 168. Crossan is thus using the word "parable" with a broader (but defensible) meaning than its normal meaning. Normally in gospel and Jesus scholarship, the word "parable" refers to an oral form of speech used by Jesus: a memorable short story that is not factually true whose purpose is to invite the hearer into the world of the story and then to see something in light of that story. In an important sense, parables are "fictions"; they do not report something that happened. But they are nonetheless "true" fictions. Crossan's point is that the more spectacular "miracle stories" might be thought of the same way.
67. From the published description of a lecture he gave on the feeding of the multitude at Trinity Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, in September of 2000.
68. Mark 6.45–52, Matt. 14.22–33, John 6.15–21. The 'synoptics' (but not John) also have a second "sea" story: the stilling of the storm in Mark 4.35–41 = Matt. 8.23–27 = Luke 8.22–25. In this story, Jesus is with the disciples in the boat, but asleep. When a storm comes up and the boat is in

- danger of sinking, they call out to him, "Do you not care if we are perishing?" He then stills the storm.
69. Matt. 14.28-31; the full story in Matthew is found in 14.22-33.
  70. Ps. 89.9, 95.5.
  71. Job. 38.8, 11.
  72. Ps. 107.25-29.
  73. John 6.1-14; Mark 6.30-44 = Matt. 14.13-21 = Luke 9.10-17. Mark and Matthew also narrate a second bread miracle, though Luke and John do not: feeding four thousand people in Mark 8.1-10 and Matt. 15.32-39.
  74. A denarius was a unit of money (a coin) commonly understood to be a day's wages. Hence the NRSV translates the phrase "six months' wages."
  75. Among the few variations: only John mentions that the five loaves and two fish are supplied by a boy. In John, Jesus himself distributes the food; in the synoptics, the disciples do. The striking similarities include the same numbers throughout: five loaves, two fish; five thousand people; two hundred denarii worth of bread; twelve baskets of food left over. Moreover, in both John and the synoptics, this story is followed immediately by the story of Jesus walking on water. These similarities have led some scholars to think that the author of John knew one of the synoptic gospels or, alternatively, that both John and the synoptics knew a common "signs source." It is also possible that a common oral tradition used by both John and Mark may account for the similar details.
  76. John 6.22-59.
  77. For Crossan's powerful exposition of this point, see *A Long Way from Tipperary*, pp. 167-68. I condense it to its essentials. Jesus tells the disciples, "You give them something to eat." But "they almost jeer at him." They virtually have to be forced "kicking and screaming, as it were," into the process. "It is the duty of the disciples, the Twelve, the Church to make sure that food is distributed fairly and equitably to all. And, the Church is very reluctant to accept that responsibility. . . . Reluctant then, reluctant now. This [the story of the feeding of the five thousand] is a parable not about charity, but about justice, about the just distribution of the material bases of life, about the sharing of that which is available equitably among all."
  78. See chap. 6 above, p. 136.
  79. John 6.35, 48, 33.
  80. John 6.53, 55.
  81. John 6.35. The thirst metaphor is also found in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.1-42. There Jesus speaks of "living water" (vv. 10-11) in contrast to the water from Jacob's well and says, "Everyone who drinks of this water [from Jacob's well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" (vv. 13-14).
  82. Prov. 9.5. See chap. 7 above, p. 150.
  83. John 6.56.
  84. John 15.1-12.
  85. John 6.49, 32; see also 6.58.

86. John 6.32, 51.
87. See chap. 3 above, p. 45-46.
88. John 9.22, 34-35.
89. John 9.5, 25, 30.
90. John 8.12.
91. Though John's prologue refers explicitly only to "the Word of God" and not to "the Wisdom of God," I use both here because, as many scholars have pointed out, the two phrases are close equivalents in John: what John says about the former is also said about the latter in the Jewish wisdom tradition.
92. John 1.5, 9.
93. Imagery of darkness and light is used in passages such as "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them has light shined" (Isa. 9.2); "Arise, shine for your light has come" (Isa. 60.1); "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119.105). Imagery of blindness and sight is used, for example, in these passages: "The eyes of the blind shall see" (Isa. 29.18); "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Isa. 35.5); "You that are blind, look up and see" (Isa. 42.18); "Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes" (Isa. 43.8). In all of these cases, blindness and seeing are used metaphorically, not literally.
94. See earlier in this chapter.
95. The "born again" or "born from above" text is the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3.1-10. It is interesting to note that the story begins with Nicodemus coming to Jesus "by night"—that is, he is in the dark.
96. John 17.3.
97. Persuasively argued about thirty years ago by J. Louis Martyn in *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), it is now widely accepted by Johannine scholars.
98. See John 8.31-59, esp. 39-44.
99. John 14.6.
100. "Way" or "path," as noted in the previous chapter, is a central image in the Jewish wisdom tradition. It is also a central image in Mark (as well as the other synoptics), as argued in this chapter: to follow Jesus is to follow him *on his way*.
101. The death of Jesus is anticipated already in John's inaugural scene, the wedding at Cana; "my hour" in v. 4 refers to Jesus' death.
102. John 12.24.

## CHAPTER 9. READING PAUL AGAIN

1. Next to Jesus, Paul is most important individual in birth of what became Chx. More of NT documents were written by him than by any other person. And, more than anybody else, he was responsible for the spread of the Jesus movt into the Gentile world.
2. Primary sources:  
Paul wrote 7 of the 13 letters attributed to him  
I Thessalonians, Galatians, I and II Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians and Romans  
  
not written by Paul: Colossians, Ephesians and II Thessalonians  
not by Paul: "Pastoral Epistles, I and II Timothy and Titus.

### ON THE DAMASCUS ROAD

The decisive event in Paul's life was his exp of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Before Damascus, he was a zealous persecutor of the Jesus movt; afterward, he became its foremost apostle.

His life-changing exp happened around the year 35, about five years after Jesus' execution.  
Find fuller account in Acts 9.

I have begun with story of Paul on Damascus Road in part because that exp was the turning point in his life, but also because I am convinced that we best understand Paul when we take his religious exp seriously as our starting point for understanding his message.

### THE PRE-DAMASCUS PAUL: HIS LIFE

1. He was brilliant  
Conversion changes the way one sees, but it does not make one brighter
2. He was also passionately committed to Judaism. Gal 1:14
2. At some time in his life, Paul learned a trade. He became a tentmaker, which involved making tents and awnings out of leather and cloth.

### THE POST-DAMASCUS PAUL: HIS LIFE

1. He was a Jewish Christ-Mystic  
A mystic is a particular type of religious personality. Mystics do not simply believe in God; they know God.  
The defining core of mysticism is thus experiential: mystics have direct, vivid, and typically frequent exps of the sacred.  
  
Here, he reflects the consciousness of a mystic. In Galatians, he uses classical mystical language that points to a mystical identity--the death of an old self and the birth of a new self spoken of as Christ living in him: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Gal 2:19-20  
  
Thus Paul was not just a Jewish mystic, but a Jewish Christ-mystic.

### AN APOSTLE AND MISSIONARY OF JESUS

1. Paul's life as a missionary of Jesus lasted about 25 years.  
Paul's life as an apostle was often arduous, filled with controversy, and marked by suffering. II Cor 11:23-28.

### PAUL'S LETTERS

1. Paul's letters were an integral part of his life as an apostle and community-founder.  
His letters are "conversations in context"--conversations with communities he founded in the context of his life as an apostle of Jesus.

Content of his letters has little to do with what he thinks most important and more to do with specific issues arising within his communities.

The agenda for Paul's letters is set not by him but by them. e.g. whether women should be veiled in Christian gatherings  
whether one may eat food that has been sacrificed to idols

#### THE POST-DAMASCUS PAUL: HIS MESSAGE

1. I do not think that Paul replaced the message of Jesus with his own. Rather, I think that he added to the message of Jesus his own post-Easter and post-Damascus convictions and conclusions.  
Likewise, major figures in the biblical tradition, he conveys a message that has both religious and political meanings, both spiritual and social dimensions.

#### CENTRAL THEMES OF PAUL'S POST EASTER MESSAGE

First: for Paul, the central meaning of his experience of the risen Christ was "Jesus is Lord"

Both affirmations—Jesus lives and Jesus is Lord.

Jesus as Lord (Greek, *kyrios*, pronounced "ku-rios")

For Paul, "Jesus is Lord" is the primary confession of Jesus' significance and status. Phil 2:9-11

In the first century, "Lord" *kyrios* had a range of meanings along a "spectrum of dignity" Borg lists 4 such meanings.

By saying Jesus is Lord—has other meaning: Caesar is not Lord.

Recent scholarship shows an anti-imperial theology at the center of Paul's understanding of the lordship of Christ.

Religion and politics are combined for Paul. Thus affirmation claims both our religious and our political loyalties.

#### SECOND: "IN CHRIST"

1. The short phrase "in Christ" is one of the two most important metaphors Paul uses for his vision of the Christian life.  
The other is "justification by grace" (will come to it later)

Dialectical side of Paul:

Contrast between: life in Adam; and Life in Christ.

#### Life in Adam

1. Life in Adam is one of Paul's primary metaphors for the human condition. Life in Adam is the life of separation or estrangement from God.
2. It is also the life of sin and death, which Paul says came into the world through Adam. Life in Adam is life under the dominion of sin. Sin controls us, we are not free.

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

We do wrong things because sin rules over life in Adam. Life in Adam thus combines central images for the human condition in the Hebrew Bible: sin, death, exile, and bondage.

#### Life in Christ

This is life: to be free, no longer enslaved to the dominion of sin and death. "Freedom" is for Paul one of the most central characteristics of the Christian life. It means being reconciled with God and thus brings the end of exile.

To be "inChrist" is to be anew creation:

"Whoever is in Christ is a newe creation. Everytng old has passed away; see, everytng has become new. IICor 5:17-18

#### THE WAY FROM LIFE "IN ADAM" to LIFE "IN CHRIST"

1. For Paul, the new way of life is created by God thru Christ.  
And teh way one parrticipatres in thta new way of life is by dying wth Christ and being raised with Christ.  
  
"I have been crufcified with Christ." Thsu the old Paul has died, and a new reality lives within Paul; "It is no lgoner I who live, but Christ who lives in me." GAL 2:19-20.
- 2 In Roamsn, paul develops Jesus death and resurrectrion as a metaphor for the way transiton form Adamic existnece ot life in Christ.  
All this leads to te ritual of baptism.  
  
Tob e bapized symbolzies and ritaully emboides dying to an old way of life and being resurrected into a new wya of life: Rom 6:3-4
3. The metapor of ding to an old way of bieng is also central to Paul's ethics of trnasformatin. "preesnt your selves as a lving sacrifice, holy and acdeptable to God. Rom 12:1-2
4. In Philippians, Paul writes, "Let the same midn be in you that was in Christ Jeus." He ten speaks of Jesus death on the corss as involving self-emptying, humlbing and obedience utno death, followed by Jesus exaltation.  
  
This ist he pattern Paul commends to his community for thier own lives. Phil 2:5-11
5. Becoing "in Christ" invovles a new idetnty, a new say of seeing, and a new way of living.

#### THE SOCIAL IVISON OF LIFE "IN CHRIST"

1. Life inChrist also has concreete social implciatons.  
The klnew humanity in Christ subverts and negates the social boudnaires that mark conventional human existence.  
Those are "in Christ" are all "one body. ICor 12:12-13  
In Chriest is a new social reality.

Thus life "in Christ " is a remrkably cmprehensive metaphor in Paul. Irt speka,s of hte new way of life in both its persnl and social dimeniosns, as well as the path to the new lfie.  
Irt is also the subject ofn oe Paul's most eloquently lyrixcal passages. IN Christ, we are indissolubly united with the love of God. Rom 8:38-39 "Who will separet us form the love of Christ?etc etc.  
Rom 8:35, 38-39

#### JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE

Paul's toehr central metaphor for speaking of the Christian life is drawn from the legal world.  
PUL USES JSUITFICAITON AS A METAPHOR TO SPEAK ABOUT THE DIVNE HUMAN relationship. His most improrantt expositon of it are in Galatins and Romans, esp the frist four chapters.

Dialedcital: justifcaiton by works of the law and jsurtificaton by grace thru faith.  
Grace, not law; faith, not wroks. Jusitficaiton is a free gift, not a reward for achivevement.

1. Justification by grace is radical.

"God justifies the ungodly " "Christ died for the ungodly"

What is justification by grace about?

Very simply, it is about the basis of our relationship to God in the present.  
Something we do or believe; or is it a gift.

For Paul, it is a gift of God, not a human accomplishment.

Within the framework of justification by grace the Christian life is about becoming conscious of and entering more deeply into an already existing relationship with God as known in Jesus.

An living by grace produces the same qualities as life "in Christ":  
freedom, joy, peace and love.

"CHRIST CRUCIFIED"

1. For Paul, the death of Jesus was utterly central.

We proclaim Christ crucified" I Cor 2:2

Means two things:

-a historical fact: Jesus was crucified

-on other hand, Paul invests this historical fact with a wide range of symbolic meanings—multiple resonances of meaning.  
they are political as well as theological and they sum up much of Paul's message

2. For Paul, "Christ crucified" is an indictment of the imperial system of domination that executed Jesus. "The rulers of this age ...crucified the Lord of glory." For Paul, the resurrection was God's yes to Jesus and God's no to the domination system. The consequence : the rulers of this world are "doomed to perish" The domination system itself must end. I Cor 2:6-8.

3. Christ crucified also discloses the wisdom of God and counters the wisdom of this world. "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. I Cor 1:24

4. Finally, Christ crucified is also for Paul a symbol of the path of transformation. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Borg reflects:

Christ is the only major religion whose two most formative figures were executed by established authority.

Accident? Plan of God? Or is there in Jesus and Paul a vision and a program, a message and a mission, that should cause systems of domination, ancient and modern, to tremble?"

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ESSENCE OF PAUL'S GOSPEL in Romans 3:21-26

1. God has taken initiative in restoring man to his proper relation to God and to man.

What is this initiative?

what God had performed in Jesus Christ.

What God had done:

Death of Jesus was the means for freeing men from subjection to the evil powers. Colossians 2:13-15

In Jesus cross, man's bondage to law was broken and the powers that oppress man in this age were decisively defeated.

What Jesus did

Jesus offered up his life to God, obedient unto death.

The barrier of guilt that separated man from God has been removed. Romans 5:19  
and reaffirmed in Philipians 2:8

How can a believer accept all this?

What believer can accept:

-that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ

-that God has taken initiative in removing the barrier that separates man from God

-but man needs something more..the more is the love of God that love of God is experienced in Christ. II Cor 5:14, 15

This Christ's love demonstrated by his willingness to die in order that all men might be reconciled to God.

The force then, which compels believer to do God's will comes from an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for what God has done for man in Christ.

WHAT WAS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JESUS AND GOD?

Paul never defines this relationship..what he has done, he tells us what God has done thru Jesus.

PAUL'S CLASSIC STATEMENT FOR WHAT God did thru Christ found in II Corinthians 5:19

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself"

The meaning of these words is developed more fully in the 5th chapter of Romans

where Paul describes the whole human race as alienated from God and actually at enmity with him.

1. Man, conscious of his disobedience and burden with a sense of guilt, had fled from God's presence as Adam had in Genesis story.
2. In his estranged state, man's resentment against God had mounted to the point where man became an enemy of his Creator.

It was in this spiritually helpless condition that man had languished prior to the coming of Christ.

In the obedient life of Jesus, man could see in concrete form what complete dedication to the will of God meant.

Even though Jesus' life had ended in seeing defeat, God had vindicated him by raising him for the dead and exalting him at his right hand.

There could be no doubt that God in Christ was victor over both sin and death.



THE ESSENCE OF Paul's gospel (page 272)

As stated succinctly in Romans 3:21-26.

is that God has acted decisively thru Jesus Christ

-to free men from bondage to sin and the evil forces that held them captive (redemption)

-to remove the barrier of guilt that kept men from God's presence (expiation)

-and to restore men to a right relationship with God in spite of their sins (justification)

The meaning of the words above:

1. God has taken the initiative in restoring man to his proper relation to God and man.

Being set right in relation to God is not a condition that man is called on to strive for, but that right relationship results from an action that God has performed in Jesus Christ, the benefits of which are offered as a gift, to be received by faith. Rom. 3:24

~~Xjxxhtpifxxpxkicdagxxvxxpm~~

The Ground of Justification by faith page 274

. God's justifying activity is focused in the death of Jesus on the cross. that death is looked upon by Paul as a ransom.

The ransom was thought of as a means of release for one in bondage, not as a price to buy off the captor.

Death of Jesus was the means for freeing men from subjection to the evil powers is elaborated in Letter to the Colossians 2:13-15 There in Colossians, Paul declares that in the cross man's bondage to law was broken and the powers that oppress man in this age were decisively defeated.

Paul's thought:

Thru Jesus offering up his life to God, obedient unto death, the barrier of guilt that separated man from God has been removed. see Romans 5:19 and reaffirmed in Philipians 2:8

How can a believer accept all this?

What the believer can accept:

-that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ

-and that God has taken the initiative in removing the barrier that separates man from God

-but man needs something more...the that <sup>more</sup> is the love of God.

the love of God as the believer has experienced it in Christ (II Cor 5:14, 15)

Man is free either to respond to God's love or go ignore it.

But when he does respond in faith, he feels himself overmastered by Christ's love, which was demonstrated by his willingness to die in order that all men might be reconciled to God.

The force, then, which compels the believer to do the will of God is not a sense of obligation, but an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for what God has done for man in Christ.

## "GOD WAS IN CHRIST" (II Cor 5:19)

What was the relationship between Jesus and God?

Paul never defines this relationship...what he has done: he tells us what God has done through Jesus.

Keep in mind: the Hebrew mind does not express itself in abstract concept, but in terms of action and concrete events..

for example, when Jesus was asked to define "neighbor", he told story of Good Samaritan.

Before attempting to trace out what it was that Paul believed God had done in Jesus.

Let us look briefly at the titles that Paul gives to Jesus in his redemptive role.

### 1. JESUS AS LORD

a) This title for God, which is kurios in Greek, was the one used by the translators of the Septuagint when they found in the Hebrew text YHWH, the unpronounceable name of God. It was Jewish practice to read this YHWH as though it were the Hebrew word adonai, which means "Lord". The Greek translators translated the substitute word, adonai, rather than the original Hebrew, YHWH, the meaning of which was no longer known. Any reader of the Septuagint was familiar with it--kurios as the most common name for God.

The earliest Christians affirmed that God had made Jesus Lord Acts 2:36. The affirmation Jesus is Lord is the earliest form of Christian confession (cf Rom 1);9, 10)

Paul echoes this conviction in his words to the Philippians 2:9-11

### 2. Jesus as Son of God

Another of Paul's favorite designations for Christ is "Son of God"

In the usage of ancient Israel, the phrase was applied to the ideal king, who because he had been designated by God to reign over God's people, was called the Son of God. (Psalm 2:7)

The belief in Jesus as the one anointed to bring in God's reign was clearly in the back of Paul's mind when he applied the title to Jesus.

But Paul added to this traditional meaning for "Son of God" the conviction that there was an intimate relationship between Jesus and God which gave Jesus a unique claim to the title (Col 1:13)

Paul rarely referred to Jesus as simply "Jesus". He preferred such expression as "Jesus Christ" or Christ Jesus, or the Lord Jesus.

When Paul called Jesus "Christ" Messiah, he meant that Jesus was the one through whom God was working to defeat the forces of evil and to restore man to a right relationship with God.

### 3. Jesus as Redeemer

In later centuries, after the church had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, theologians devoted a great deal of discussion to questions about the relation to the human of the divine elements in person of Jesus.

e.g. did Jesus have a divine will and a human will? a divine nature and a human nature? when Jesus was one person was he subject to human limitations of hunger, thirst, etc.?

Paul had no such interest in theorizing, for the important fact was that God had acted decisively in Christ for the redemption of his creation. Paul himself expresses this deliverance.

Paul's task in his letters was to inform the members of the community about what God has done thru Christ, and what the implications of this work of redemption were for the life and faith of the community.

Paul's classic statement of what God did thru Christ is found in the Second Letter to the Corinthians 5:19.

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself"

The meaning of these words is developed more fully in the fifth chapter of ~~Romans~~ <sup>Rom</sup> where Paul describes the whole human race as alienated from God and actually at enemy with him.

Man, conscious of his disobedience and burdened with a sense of guilt, had fled from God's presence as Adam had in the Genesis story.

In his estranged state, man's resentment against God had mounted to the point where man became an enemy of his Creator.

It was in this spiritually helpless condition that man had languished prior to the coming of Christ. In the obedient life of Jesus, man could see in concrete form what complete dedication to the will of God meant.

Even though Jesus' life had ended in seeing defeat, God had vindicated him by raising him for the dead and exalting him at his right hand.

There could be no doubt that God in Christ was victor over both sin and death. But in the extremity to which God went to achieve his redemptive purpose, the depth of God's love was made known.

There was no other way but the grace of God's love which was working it forward (Rom 3:25) his son to die in order that men might understand his love and be reconciled to him. page 279

When men responded in faith to God's redeeming act in Jesus, they realized that Jesus, by his "obedience unto death" (Phil 2:8) had removed the barrier of guilt that separated man from God, and had defeated the powers of evil who had sought to destroy him.

The new relationship with God that results from his work of reconciliation in Christ is contrasted in detail with the results in Adam's disobedience (Rom 5:12-21)

#### What is this transformation?

What God did in Christ was to remove the barriers that stood between man and himself, but until man responds in faith to God's offer of reconciliation the work of redemption will have no effect on him.

When man comes to a realization of what God has done, and responds in grateful trust, God's Spirit will begin to work in his heart, transforming and shaping his desires and aspirations in order to conform them to God's will.

#### Another Title of Jesus JESUS AS PRE-EXISTENT

Paul believed that Jesus had existed before his birth and that he was God's agent in creating the world.

Furthermore, the program of redemption would not be complete until all creation was restored to the condition that God had intended for it when he brought it into being.

The idea of pre-existence was a common one in the Judaism of Paul's day. In book of Psalms (139:13-16) the belief is expressed that a man's form and whole pattern of his life are in existence in the plan of God before man is born.

In barest outline, these are the chief meanings behind Paul's phrase,  
"Bod was in Christ"

1. Although Paul refrained from saying that Jesus was God, he comes within a hair's breadth of doing so.  
He speaks of Jesus as "in the form of God"  
He ascribes to him the qualities and functions of God  
He turns with ease from speaking of the grace of God to mention  
"the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ"

"IF ANY MAN BE IN CHRIST" (II Cor 5:17)

The man who by faith in Jesus had experienced reconciliation to God... was new creation.  
he "in Christ" Rom 6.

Paul states the concept of the new creation succinctly in: Corinthians I Cor 15:22

"WE WERE ALL BAPTIZED INTO ONE BODY" (I Cor 12:14)

Paul's favorite metaphor to describe the community is "the body".

1. The unity of the body.  
Unity of church was not merely a feeling of togetherness but a belief in a mystical oneness "in Christ"
2. Diversity within the body  
In Romans 12, Paul speaks of need for the church to recognize the diversity that must exist within the unity of the body.

"WALK ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT" (Rom 8:4)

The Spirit as Power

In thinking of Gentiles, the existence of spirits and their power over human life were accepted facts of life.

The phenomenon of demonic possession was a commonplace: the spirit that took control of a man might be beneficent or ruinous.

The Greek word pneuma, like Hebrew word Ruach meant "breath" or "wind" as well as spirit. so the evanescent, intangible quality of spirit was emphasized in the word itself.

When Paul spoke of "the Spirit", however, he did not mean a generalized, immaterial force.

In the thinking of the Stoic philosophers of Paul's day, even pneuma was a material substance, though a highly refined one.

For Paul, the Spirit was the pervasive power of God through which his purpose were fulfilled.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in Paul's letters the person of Jesus and the Holy Spirit are very closely related.

Occasionally, Paul will shift from one to the other without warning, as eg in Romans 8:10, 11, where he speaks of "Christ...in you" and, in next breath, of "the spirit...in you."

In keeping with this relation between Christ and the Spirit, Paul describes the life "in Christ" as a life lived according to the Spirit."

The Flesh against the Spirit page 285

1. Paul felt morally impotent so long as he tried to please God by keeping the Law.

The injunctions of Torah had proved to be a stimulus to disobedience rather than a means of moral achievement. Rom 7:5-25.

Now that he found himself liberated from the Law, and free to serve God thru the new power that Spirit had brought into his life, he characterizes the life of defeat that he had previously experienced as life in "the flesh".

By "flesh" Paul does not mean simply "the material body". Rather, flesh is the quality of being human, with such inevitable limitations as transitoriness, apprehension, weakness.

The flesh relies on insecure foundations in its misguided effort to stabilize life. It judges by appearances and fails to understand the nature of reality. It mistakes the worldly standards of wealth, force and social approval for the real values in life. It was thru these susceptibilities in man that the tempter in Eden was able to lead man to disobey God, by arousing his pride and by promising power that was supposed to come thru increased knowledge.

It is these ethical and religious considerations that Paul has in mind when he contrasts the life "in the flesh" with the life in the Spirit.

All humanity (all flesh) Rom 3:20, stood under condemnation and moral helplessness because of the inability of man to do the will of God even with the aid of Torah, the classic statement of God's purpose for his people.

Undeterred by the ineffectiveness of Torah to bring man into right relationship with God, God sent his son, who was identified with humanity in every way, except that he was wholly obedient.

Thus the hold which sin maintained upon humanity, thru the weakness of the flesh, was broken; or, as Paul phrases it (Christ) condemned sin in the flesh (Rom 8:3). Now, those who are in Christ measure up to the requirements of the Law, but they do so, not by moral striving, but thru the power of the Spirit at work, with their lives. Men of faith, therefore, "walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. (Rom 8:1-11)

In life according to the Spirit, Paul testifies that he found peace and a sense of kinship with God that striving to obey the Law had never brought.

That feeling of intimacy with God is epitomized in terms of address that Paul uses in prayer. "Abba" (Rom 8:15), a word commonly used by Aramaic-speaking people when talking to their fathers. For Paul, then, Spirit was an intimate experience of closeness to God that his former life in Judaism had never made possible.

Life "in the Spirit" was not, however, free from difficulty or conflict.

Paul was able to endure the difficulties that overtook him because he was convinced that they were the prelude to a new age of righteousness that was to come. Here, too, the role of the Spirit was an important one: the presence of the Spirit was an anticipation of the new situation that would obtain throughout creation when the will of God triumphed over all opposition (Rom 8:23). As he phrased it in writing to the Corinthians (II Cor 1:22), the Spirit that dwelt within him was at hand to give guidance to the man of faith in praying to God

(Rom 8:26-27). In the midst of trials, men of faith could look forward to the day when God's purpose for creation would be fulfilled, confident that God was even now at work shaping events to his ends. (Rom 8:28ff). But until the time of total victory came, the man of faith might live his life free from guilt and fear, conscious that nothing could separate him from God's love (Rom 8:31-39)

### The Commands of the Spirit

It was not enough to tell a man that he should obey God; some specific indications of attitudes and actions were needed.

As real as Paul felt the power of the Spirit to be, he was careful in his letters to include a set of detailed, practical instructions by which the communities could regulate their corporate and personal lives.

"What is good had to be acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2) had to be spelled out in unmistakable terms.

see Romans 12, 13 and 15--concrete ethical injunctions given.

Paul's language parallels that of the Greek ethical systems of his day, but the whole orientation of Paul's ethics is much more Hebraic than Greek. His appeal rests on love and gratitude to God, rather than on essential logic of his ethic.

He does not discuss the abstract principle of "the good" nor does he even ask what the duty of man is. Rather, the life of service and dedication to which man is called is simply a response to the "mercies of God" that believers have experienced in Jesus Christ.

The nearest that Paul comes to a formal set of ethical precepts is the list of instructions in the Letter to the Colossians.

There (Col 3:5-4:6) Paul gives advice to the various members of the Christian families to guide them in their mutual relations. A similar, though longer, list is found in the Letter to the Ephesians (4:25-6:20). Remember, Paul is not telling people to be better. The whole appeal is set in the context of the forgiveness of God in Christ

- the operation of the Spirit in the lives of the faithful

- the love of Christ for the Church

- the need of the Church for maintaining the respect of those who are not members.

For Paul, the ideal was not conformity to a standard of virtue, but the dedication of oneself to God --that is, sanctification.

Man's nature led him away from the will of God, but the Spirit of God at work within him both aroused the urge to do right and gave man the moral strength to achieve the right.

To express this inner transformation was to "walk according to the Spirit."

### "WE SHALL ALL BE CHANGED" (1 Cor 15:51)

1. Chx has sometimes been described as the religion of individualism, and Protestant Chx has stressed individual freedom throughout its history.
2. But from the beginning, the Christian faith affirmed that God's purpose was to create a community of the obedient, not merely to snatch isolated individuals from destruction.

Paul was concerned with the establishment of the new people of God, a group that he believed to be already in the process of formation but that would come to its fullness at some time in the future.

### Has God Turned from the Jews?

This conviction raised for Paul an acute problem, which he dealt with at length in the Letter to the Romans (Rom 9-11), namely, the relation of the former people, Israel, to the new people, the Church.

HAS GOD TURNED FROM THE JEWS? 287

Acute problem for Paul: what is relation of former people, Israel, to the new people, the Church?

Issues in Romans chapter 9 thru 11.

1. Acknowledges the place of peculiar favor that Israel enjoyed because the earlier covenant was established with her  
-the prophets who spoke thru her  
-promises of future blessings for creation given to her.

2. Just as God acted in sovereign choice among various descendants of Abraham, so God has now chosen to pass Israel by temporarily in order to have his message of redemption proclaimed to the Gentiles.  
Since God is the sovereign creator of his universe, man is in no position to dispute the wisdom or justice of his actions. (Rom 9:14-24)

3. Israel will share ultimately in the blessings that are now being enjoyed by faith among those who, whether Jew or Gentile, respond in faith to the gospel.

The tragic mistake of Israel has been her effort to gain standing before God by her own efforts in obedience to Torah (Rom 9:24-10:4)

4. At this point (Rom 10:5ff), Paul uses a method of interpreting the O.T. that seems strange to modern readers, but that was an accepted practice among the rabbis of his day.

He takes a few phrases from the book of Deuteronomy (30:12-14) which declare in a vivid way how the word of God has been made readily accessible to man in Torah, he then interprets these phrases as referring to the word of the gospel, which has now been proclaimed to all men, whether Jew or Gentile.

The one response demanded of man is that he confess "Jesus is Lord". His lips and his heart are to give outward expression to his inner trust.

5. If men are to be brought into the fellowship of the people of God by response to the kerygma, someone will have to serve as a proclaimer of the good news.

Faith can arise only when men have heard (Rom 10:14f). Israel has heard and has not responded in faith, however, because God's purpose is that the Gentiles should be saved as a result of Israel's failure.

Israel's rejection of the Messiah made redemption possible, her rejection of the message about the Messiah had let the Christian preachers to turn to the Gentiles with it (Rom 10:11:12)

6. But Paul is convinced that Israel will not persist in her unbelief indefinitely; she will return to God.  
And when she does, the blessings that will follow for all the world will be immeasurably greater than before she turned away in disobedience.

Paul develops an extended allegory of the grafting of branches onto an olive tree.

The allegory is difficult from the standpoint of logic as well as of horticulture (Rom 11:13-24).

But the point is clear:

that God still will have a purpose for Israel when his work of summoning the Gentiles to obedient trust has been completed. A divinely determined number of Gentiles must come into the fellowship of God's people and the new age will not come into its fullness until that number has been reached (Rom 11:25ff)

Passage ends in a majestic hymn of praise to God.

Bout Jews in God's plan, Paul was certain of two things:

- taht he had reason to be preoud offh is heritate of jeiwsh faith and piety
- and that God had claied him to turn form the jew to the Getileas the major target of his evangelizing.

The arguments found in Romans 9, 10, and 11.

1. He was convinced that "in Christ" thre was no place for racial distinction (I Cor 12:13) and het he bleived that the promises made by God to Israel were not simply abrogated by Israel's unbelief.
2. The Jewish hope of the comign kingdom of God was a straong element in Paul's think (I Cor 15:24ff) and, as a resutl, he made no attempt to legislate for a Christian society or to give isntucitons for the establsihement of a new social order.
3. At the end", God wuld restore Israel to favor and to faith, and wuld defeat his enemeis, therey, establishing his rule over creation. It was not his task to bring in the kingdom; he was charged with the mission of preahcing the Good News, and thus reparing menfor the kingdom that God wass about to establish.

#### WHAT WILL ETERNAL LIFE BE LIKE? page 289

He did have words of comfort and admoniton about the future for individuals as well, and community.

Impossible to reconstruct a neat systemout of Paul's thguhts on theme of future life.

Attieims he wites as thoug he expected tob e transported immedialey to the presnece of Chrst when he died (Phil.1:23). Other tme, he spekas of those who have died as being asleep, awaiting trumpet call at the day of reusrrrection (I Cor 15:51; I Thess 4:130

Paul basic conviction:

- Jesus wopuld again appear but this time in triumph
- tatt the resurrection would take palce
- and taht the da of consumamtionwould thus arrive.

Man's hope, then, ws that God wuld change his people so that theri present bodies of humiliation ( Phil 3:21) wuld become glorious bodies.

The "Body of Christ" would transform into teh fulness of the community of the New Covenant.

END OF CHAPTER



31 pages

## 9

### Reading Paul Again



As I begin this chapter, I sit at a sidewalk café on a busy street in the city of Thessaloniki in northern Greece. Around the year 50, Paul wrote a letter to a small community of Christians in this city. Now called I Thessalonians, that letter is the earliest document of what eventually became the New Testament. Nothing remains of the city that Paul knew; the centuries have covered it over. And as I sit here, I wonder again: What was he like?

Next to Jesus, Paul is the most important individual in the birth of what became Christianity. More of the New Testament documents were written by him than by any other person. And, more than anybody else, he was responsible for the spread of the Jesus movement into the Gentile world.

But despite his importance, Paul has a very mixed press today, even among Christians. Some love and admire him, others keep their distance, and still others despise him. Though all Christians have heard of him, many do not know much about him.

I encountered this mixture of attitudes while teaching a seminary course on the New Testament. During the first part of the

course on Jesus and the gospels, the students were attentive, engaged and excited. Then we got to Paul, and the mood of the class changed. Whereas everybody had felt positive about Jesus, most were wary of Paul. Though some had a definite (and sometimes favorable) interest, the majority were indifferent or grumpy or even hostile.

A number of factors feed the negativity regarding Paul. Some people (including some historians) see Paul as the perverter of the gospel of Jesus, someone who turned Jesus of Nazareth into a divine being and distorted Jesus' message into a complex and convoluted abstract mythological-theological belief system. In the view of these particular critics, Jesus is good, Paul is bad. Certain other critics see Paul as a puritanical moralist preoccupied with sin and guilt, sacrifice and atonement. Still others are put off particularly by passages about gender and sex. The most negative statement about women in the New Testament is found in a letter attributed to Paul, and other passages commonly attributed to Paul speak about the duty of wives to submit themselves to their husbands.<sup>1</sup> Paul is frequently quoted negatively about homosexuality and even about sexuality in general.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Paul's letters are often difficult and obscure, opaque rather than luminous.

I grant that Paul is flawed (though no more so than the rest of us) and often difficult to understand. He has often been used in ways that are injurious. Yet I acknowledge that I am an admirer of Paul. My appreciation flows in part out of my Protestant and Lutheran heritage, though I hope that more than my early conditioning is involved. When we separate the genuine letters of Paul from those attributed to him, some of the more disturbing passages disappear. Moreover, when we take seriously Paul's own religious experience, the historical context of his letters, and the central metaphors that shaped his message, we find an apostle whose teaching and passion stand in considerable continuity with Jesus.

Our primary sources for glimpsing Paul are seven of the thirteen letters attributed to him. About these seven there is a strong

consensus that he was the author. They are, in approximate chronological order, I Thessalonians, Galatians, I and II Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans. Most likely all of these were written in the decade of the 50s. The authorship of another three letters is disputed, though a majority of scholars maintain that they were written not by Paul but in his name after his death: Colossians, Ephesians, and II Thessalonians. Finally, there is a near-consensus that the remaining three are definitely not by Paul. Called the "Pastoral Epistles," they are I and II Timothy and Titus.

The book of Acts serves as a secondary source. More than half of that document is about Paul, though there is a wide range of scholarly opinion about the historical accuracy of its account. Acts reports much that Paul's letters do not, for example. This is not surprising or particularly significant, given the different literary genres. However, when there is overlap between Acts and the letters, Acts is sometimes consistent with the letters and sometimes not, making it difficult to assess the historical accuracy of Acts when there is *no* overlap. Some scholars think that the author of Acts was a companion of Paul and therefore an eyewitness to some of what he reports, whereas other scholars think that the story of Paul in Acts is dominated by literary and not historical concerns. Thus, for Paul's teaching, I will use only his genuine letters, though I will occasionally use Acts for other matters.

## On the Damascus Road

The decisive event in Paul's life was his experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. That experience transformed Paul. Before Damascus, he was a zealous persecutor of the Jesus movement; afterward, he became its foremost apostle.

This life-changing experience happened around the year 35, about five years after Jesus' execution. The author of Acts tells the story three times with minor differences of detail—once as part of his narration and twice in speeches attributed to Paul.<sup>3</sup>

According to the first and fullest account in Acts 9, Paul was on his way to Damascus in Syria, authorized by Jewish authorities to seek out followers of Jesus (those who belonged to a fledgling movement called "the Way") and bring them bound to Jerusalem. Then he experienced a brilliant light and heard a voice:

Now as Paul was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."<sup>4</sup>

Paul had a vision—a vivid subjective sense of momentarily seeing and hearing another reality. The men traveling with Paul did not experience exactly what he did. In Acts 9, we are told that they heard the voice but saw no one; in Acts 22, we are told that they saw the light but heard nothing.<sup>5</sup>

The vision blinded Paul. The voice commanded him to go into Damascus, where he would be told what to do. In that city, Jesus appeared in another vision to a disciple named Ananias, directed him to find Paul, and disclosed to him that Paul had been chosen as an instrument to bring Jesus' name "before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel."

Ananias did as he was told and found Paul, who had now been blind for three days. Laying his hands on Paul, he said, "The Lord Jesus has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." The result: "Something like scales fell from Paul's eyes, and his sight was restored."<sup>6</sup> Whether Ananias's restoration of sight to Paul is history remembered or metaphorical narrative, its metaphorical meaning is provocatively appropriate: filled with the Spirit, Paul saw anew as the scales fell from his eyes. Then he was baptized, and his life as an apostle of Jesus began.

Paul's experience on the Damascus Road is one of the most famous in religious history. Even in the secular culture, people

speak of dramatic, life-changing experiences as "Damascus Road experiences." It included features reported in other visions in the history of religions: a "photism" and an "audition," technical terms for an experience of brilliant light and a voice.

Commonly called Paul's conversion experience, it is and is not, depending upon what we mean by "conversion." In a religious context, the word has three meanings. The first is conversion from being nonreligious to being religious, the second is conversion from one religion to another, and the third is conversion within a religious tradition. Paul's experience is neither of the first two. Clearly, he was deeply religious before Damascus. Moreover, he did not convert from one religion to another. Not only was Christianity not yet seen as a separate religion, but Paul continued to regard himself as a Jew after his conversion and for the rest of his life. But it was a conversion within a tradition: from one way of being Jewish to another way of being Jewish.

In an important sense, his conversion was his "call story" to the rest of his life-work. All three accounts in Acts report Paul's commissioning to his vocation as an apostle to the Gentiles. In his own words from Galatians:

God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through divine grace, was pleased to reveal God's Son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.<sup>7</sup>

This dramatic experience changed not only Paul, but eventually the world.

I have begun with the story of Paul on the Damascus Road in part because that experience was the turning point in his life, but also because I am convinced that we best understand Paul when we take his religious experience seriously as our starting point for understanding his message. Moreover, because he also refers to dramatic religious experiences in his own letters, he is one of only two first-century followers of Jesus (and perhaps the only one) from whom we have firsthand reports of such experiences.<sup>8</sup> Unless we ground Paul's theology in his conversion experience,

it easily becomes an abstract and unpersuasive intellectual construction.

Before we turn to Paul's message, let us take a closer look at his life. Because of the importance of the Damascus Road experience—its life-changing impact—I will speak of the pre-Damascus Paul and the post-Damascus Paul as we review his life.

## The Pre-Damascus Paul: His Life

Paul's life before Damascus equipped him exceptionally well for his vocation as a Jewish apostle to the Gentile world.<sup>9</sup> Born to Jewish parents, he grew up in a Hellenistic city in the Diaspora. Well-educated in both the Jewish tradition and Hellenistic rhetoric, he was fluent in Greek and at least bilingual (and probably more). Urban and cosmopolitan, he was also a Roman citizen by birth, a relatively uncommon status.

Though we do not know when Paul was born, it was probably in the first decade of the first century.<sup>10</sup> He was born and grew up in Tarsus, a city on the south coast of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, was located on the major north-south trade route leading from the Middle East to Asia Minor and the Aegean Sea.<sup>11</sup> Paul refers to it as "no mean city," and writers from the time support his judgment. Tarsus flourished in the age of Augustus (emperor of Rome from 31 BCE to 14 CE) and was well known as a center of Hellenistic culture. One ancient author referred to its reputation for philosophy and learning, claiming that it surpassed both Athens and Alexandria, though another criticized its frivolous and luxury-loving atmosphere.<sup>12</sup>

Paul received his early education in Tarsus, and he seems to have been well taught. As his letters written many decades later attest, he was brilliant. According to a well-known twentieth-century scholar:

The intellectual range of his gospel . . . soared to incomparable heights, today still unconquered. Small wonder that many readers are left gasping at his letters, loaded to the line with a

heavy cargo of thought; and that not a few who yield themselves to his gospel are left feeling like a traveler overcome by vertigo in an Alpine region surrounded by steep cloud-covered peaks, who often does not know how to follow on and how he is going to last the journey.<sup>13</sup>

*Gertrude Bonkamm, Paul*

A scholar of ancient Greek refers to his "writing as a classic of Hellenism."<sup>14</sup> Though both are referring to the post-Damascus Paul, the pre-Damascus Paul must also have been intellectually gifted. Conversion changes the way one *sees*, but it does not make one brighter.

According to Acts, as a young man Paul went to Jerusalem to study and spent a significant amount of time there. Acts reports that he studied under the famous Jewish teacher Gamaliel, that he was present at the martyrdom of Stephen before his Damascus experience, and that he had a sister living in Jerusalem. But Paul's letters say nothing about any of this, so some uncertainty must remain.<sup>15</sup>

But his letters do make it clear that he was thoroughly educated in the Jewish tradition. He quotes and alludes to the Hebrew Bible (in Greek translation) over and over again, and his use of that text indicates that he was familiar with Jewish methods of interpretation. He was also passionately committed to Judaism. In his own words:

You have heard no doubt of my earlier life. . . . I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.<sup>16</sup>

*Gal 1:14*

In another passage about his life before Damascus, he describes himself with obvious pride as "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews." He then refers to himself as a Pharisee: "as to the law a Pharisee." The Pharisees were a Jewish

sectarian movement committed to an intensified form of Torah observance, especially the extension of priestly standards of purity to everyday life. We do not know when Paul became a Pharisee, but if he did spend time in Jerusalem, it probably happened there. The fact that he chose Pharisaism points to the earnestness of his religious quest and the depth of his conviction. After once again mentioning the zeal with which he persecuted the church, he concludes the passage with the words, "as to righteousness under the law, blameless."<sup>17</sup> Though Paul's claim to be "blameless" under the law sounds strange to many Protestant Christians, there is no reason to doubt it, just as there is no reason to think that Paul found his pre-Damascus life as a Pharisee either oppressive or unsatisfying.

At some time in his life, Paul learned a trade. He became a tentmaker, which involved making tents and awnings out of leather and cloth. The trade gave him great mobility, requiring only a few lightweight tools (a knife, an awl, and curved needles) that could be carried anywhere. He was thus able to support himself everywhere, as he did in his life as a missionary.

## The Post-Damascus Paul: His Life

Now we turn to Paul's life and activity as a follower of Jesus and apostle to the Gentiles.

### A Jewish Christ-Mystic

A mystic is a particular type of religious personality. Mystics do not simply *believe* in God; they *know* God. The defining core of mysticism is thus experiential: mystics have direct, vivid, and typically frequent experiences of the sacred. Sometimes the sacred is experienced in another level of reality beyond the visible world; other times it is experienced as a luminous reality shining through the visible world. Mysticism intrinsically involves a nonordinary state of consciousness—nonordinary in the sense that such experience is radically different from ordinary everyday consciousness. Mystical consciousness is *ecstatic* in the root sense

of the word: in Greek, *ek* means "out of" and *stasis* means "state of being." To be ecstatic in this sense does not mean to be thrilled or happy or jubilant (as in the term's common usage today), but to be out of one's ordinary state of being. Thus, to use an approximate synonym, a mystic is a religious ecstatic.

Paul was clearly a mystic—a Jewish mystic. His experience on the Damascus Road (as well as subsequent experiences) put him in this category. Mystical experience in the Jewish tradition is ancient, going back well beyond the first century. Reflected in several books in the Hebrew Bible, it continued into the post-biblical period and has endured through the centuries ever since. But in the history of Jewish mysticism, Paul occupies a special place: he is the first Jewish mystic from whom we have a firsthand account, and the only one prior to about 1000 CE.<sup>18</sup>

We do not know how frequently Paul had such experiences. The Damascus Road experience was certainly one. Another one is reported in Second Corinthians. Defending his credentials as an apostle, he says, "I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord," and then uses third-person language to refer to himself:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.<sup>19</sup>

It is a classic description of a particular kind of mystical experience: a journey into another level of reality ("the third heaven") named as Paradise (the place of God's presence), a sense of being out of one's body, and an inability (or prohibition?) to disclose what was experienced there.<sup>20</sup>

Does this passage suggest that Paul had many such experiences? As he introduces it, he uses the plural *visions* and *revelations* and concludes by using the plural again as he refers to "the



exceptional character of the *revelations*.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps not much weight should be given to this, but the language suggests that the experience was one of several.

Strikingly, Paul regarded his mystical experience of Jesus as a resurrection experience—an appearance of the risen Christ/similar to those experienced by the original followers of Jesus. In I Corinthians 15, in the earliest passage in the New Testament referring to those to whom the risen Christ appeared, Paul includes himself. Similarity is also suggested by the use of the same verb throughout:

Jesus *appeared* to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he *appeared* to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he *appeared* to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he *appeared* also to me.<sup>22</sup>

When and how did the risen Christ first appear to Paul? The answer, of course, is in his mystical vision on the Damascus Road.

In addition to these reports of mystical experience, there are passages in Paul that reflect the consciousness of a mystic. In Galatians, he uses classical mystical language that points to a mystical identity—the death of an old self and the birth of a new self spoken of as Christ living in him: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”<sup>23</sup> Of the many passages in Paul whose language makes best sense within a mystical framework, I cite one more. In a dense but luminous passage, Paul uses phrases characteristic of one who has had mystical experiences: “unveiled faces” and “beholding the glory of the Lord” (“glory” means “radiant presence”). He also speaks of the transforming effect of such experience:

And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree

of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Paul was not just a Jewish mystic, but a Jewish *Christ-mystic*. In my judgment, his mystical experience was the source of everything he became as a follower of Jesus. It was the ground of his conviction that Jesus was not a dangerously misleading and cursed figure of the past but a living reality of the present who had been raised by God; it was the basis of his identity and of his call to be an apostle; and, as we will see, it was the foundation of his message.

### [An Apostle and Missionary of Jesus

Paul's life as a missionary of Jesus lasted about twenty-five years. Most of it was spent in Asia Minor and Greece. On the road much of the time, he established Christ communities in urban areas and then stayed in touch with them by writing letters.

*Paul's Travels* Paul's travels as an apostle may have totaled about ten thousand miles—miles that he covered mostly by foot and occasionally by boat.<sup>25</sup> As an itinerant, he supported himself as a tentmaker, though he occasionally received some additional support from the communities he founded.

After his experience on the Damascus Road, he spent three years in “Arabia,” which in those days meant Nabatea (in present-day Jordan; its ancient capital was Petra). He spent the 40s of the first century as a missionary in Asia Minor, including the area of Galatia. Around the year 50, he left Asia Minor for Europe. In Greece, beginning in the north, he established Christ communities in Philippi, Thessaloniki, and Beroea. In the south, he apparently had no success in Athens, though he did in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth, where he spent a couple of years and to whose Christians much of his correspondence was directed.<sup>26</sup> During the 50s, he crossed back and forth between Greece and Asia Minor, where he spent considerable time in the important city of Ephesus. During this decade, he wrote most or all of his letters.

Paul's life as an apostle was often arduous, filled with controversy, and marked by suffering. He describes it in a well-known passage in which he defends himself against Christian opponents:

Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold, and naked. And besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.<sup>27</sup> *II Cor 11:23-28*

Paul wrote the above before his final imprisonment, which was to last at least four years. Near the end of the 50s, he returned to Jerusalem with a collection of money for "the poor," gathered from his largely Gentile communities. There, according to Acts, he was arrested on the charge of bringing a Gentile into the part of the temple forbidden to Gentiles. Imprisoned in Caesarea on the coast for about two years, he was then transported as a prisoner to Rome around the year 60 (and shipwrecked again). In Rome he was under house arrest for another two years, though people were able to come to him to hear the gospel. There the book of Acts ends, and we learn nothing more about what happened to Paul next.<sup>28</sup>

*The Christ Communities of Paul* The common image of Paul as a street-corner preacher proclaiming the gospel to all and sundry is probably not an accurate reflection of the way he did things. According to Acts, Paul followed a consistent missionary strat-

egy. When he arrived in a new city, he began by going to the Jewish synagogue. There he would address Jews, of course, but also Gentiles who were loosely associated with the synagogue. Commonly called "God-fearers," these were Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism and worshiped in the synagogue but did not fully convert to Judaism.<sup>29</sup> (We might call them "seekers.") Paul sought them out, most likely engaging them in one-on-one or small-group conversation. Most of Paul's Gentile converts seem to have come from this category.

Paul's converts would begin a community life of their own, gathering regularly for worship and instruction and life together. Later in this chapter I will say more about the life of these communities. For now, I note that they were small, for two reasons. The first was the relatively small number of Christians. According to a recent estimate of early Christian growth, there were only about two thousand Christians in the whole of the Roman Empire by the year 60, by which time Paul's missionary activity was basically over.<sup>30</sup> Assuming that half of these were in the Jewish homeland, about a thousand were spread out over the rest of the empire. Thus in any given locality, with perhaps an exception or two, the number of Christians would have been well under a hundred (and perhaps more like ten to thirty).

The second reason for the small size of Paul's communities was space limitation. These communities were "house churches" whose members met in private dwellings of two kinds: tenements (often with shops on the ground floor) or villas. A tenement or shop house church might meet in a space as small as ten-by-ten feet or as large as ten-by-twenty feet and thus could accommodate only a small group of people. A villa house church (possible only if one of the converts was wealthy enough to own a villa) would meet in the courtyard of a villa, which might accommodate as many as a hundred people.<sup>31</sup>

Paul's strategy also included moving on. Though he remained in Corinth and Ephesus for a couple years each, he generally moved on to a new city soon after a local community had been established. He also used a teamwork approach, not only traveling



with other missionaries but also incorporating any Christians who already lived in a city into his efforts.

*[Paul's Letters]* Paul's letters were an integral part of his life as an apostle and community-founder. Through them he kept in touch with his communities after he had moved on.<sup>32</sup> They represented him in his absence, and they were read aloud in the gathering of the community. They were not intended for the silent reading of individuals but were addressed to the community, which heard them together.

Paul's letters are "conversations in context"—conversations with communities he founded in the context of his life as an apostle of Jesus.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, they are only one-half of a conversation, for in them Paul is most often responding to a letter he has received from a community or to news of that community he has heard by other means.

This recognition is essential to reading the letters, and it has more than one implication. It means that we should not see Paul's letters as a summary of his message. With one exception (Romans), Paul does not use his letters for that purpose, since he is writing to people who have already heard his message in person. Thus the content of his letters has little to do with what he thinks most important and more to do with specific issues arising within his communities. The agenda for Paul's letters is set not by him but by them. This helps us to understand why his letters often treat issues that seem obscure or relatively unimportant to us—why, for example, he spends more time writing about whether women should be veiled in Christian gatherings, or whether one may eat food that has been sacrificed to idols, than he does writing about the teaching of Jesus.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, as Paul responds to a letter he has received, he sometimes quotes or echoes words from it. When we do not realize this, serious misunderstanding can result. A classic example occurs in I Corinthians:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of

temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.<sup>35</sup>

How much of this is Paul's point of view? In particular, does the second sentence—"It is well for a man not to touch a woman"—express Paul's position, or is it a point of view expressed in the letter to which he is responding? Ancient Greek does not use quotation marks, so the text does not tell us.

If we see it as Paul's point of view, then it follows that Paul sees sexuality as less desirable than abstinence and his acceptance of sexual behavior as a concession to human weakness. Through most of the Christian centuries, the passage has been read this way (no wonder, then, that Paul has been thought of as anti-sex and that Christians have often struggled with sexuality). But if Paul is quoting from a letter sent to him, then he is countering the statement rather than affirming it. (Try it; note the difference it makes to put quotation marks around the second sentence.) Modern scholars are virtually unanimous that this is the correct way to read it.<sup>36</sup>

## The Post-Damascus Paul: His Message

Now I am sitting beside a small stream just outside the city wall of ancient Philippi in northern Greece. It is very quiet here. Though Philippi was an important city in antiquity, it is now a magnificent ruin, and few people are here on this day in May. The meadows around the ruins are full of red-orange poppies. According to the book of Acts, it was next to this stream that Paul made his first convert in Europe. Her name was Lydia, and she was a businesswoman and a dealer in purple cloth, much prized in the ancient world. She was, Acts tells us, a "worshiper of God," a God-fearer, one of those Gentiles attracted to Judaism and the God of Israel.

And as I sit here, I wonder, What did Paul say to Lydia? Acts does not tell us. It compresses the story into a few verses:

On the sabbath day we [referring to Paul and his missionary companions Silas and Timothy, and possibly the narrator as a fourth] went outside the gate [of Philippi] by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. Then she and her household were baptized.<sup>37</sup>

So what *did* Paul say to her? My question may seem fruitless to some, because we do not know the answer and have no way of learning it. But to me the question seems useful, for it raises the more general question of what Paul's message was. What was it that appealed to a Gentile God-fearer like Lydia to such an extent that she became part of a new form of Judaism?

I assume that Paul talked to her more than once. It is hard to believe that Lydia made such a momentous decision after one conversation. As a God-fearer, Lydia would have known something about the practices, beliefs, and hopes of Judaism, including the notion of a messiah. Her familiarity with Judaism would have been the framework for their conversations.

As I try to imagine what Paul most likely said, three things occur to me. First, Paul would have told her that Jesus was the messiah. But for this to mean anything to her, he would also have had to tell her about the kind of person Jesus was. Otherwise, the claim that Jesus was the messiah would have been a cipher, a claim without content. Thus I assume that what Jesus was like—his subversive wisdom, his healings, his passion for social justice for the poor and marginalized, his indictment of the domination system, his goodness—mattered to Paul and would have been central to his message.<sup>38</sup>

Second, after telling her about Jesus, Paul would have said, "And then the rulers crucified him." As Paul emphasized in his writings, and I will emphasize later, "Christ crucified" was utterly central to Paul. And third, I imagine Paul would have told

her his own conversion story: that he had been hostile to Jesus and the Jesus movement; that Jesus had then appeared to him in a vision, just as he had appeared to others; and that this meant that God had vindicated Jesus as messiah and Lord.

There would be more, of course, especially that the community of Jesus was open to both Jew and Gentile: that one could become part of this Jewish community without observing the sharp boundaries that separated Jews from Gentiles. This was certainly part of the appeal of Paul's message.

Paul may also have told her that the end of the age was at hand. He believed that Jesus would return soon, though the heart of his message does not seem to have been, "Repent, for the last judgment is coming soon."<sup>39</sup> He does not sound like an "end of the world" evangelist as we think of such people today. His emphasis seems to have been that God through Jesus had inaugurated a new age and that the rule of "the powers" (including the reign of the Roman empire) would soon be over.

I have begun by trying to imagine Paul's conversation with Lydia because, as already mentioned, I do not think that Paul's letters contain the whole of his message. Nor do I think that he replaced the message of Jesus with his own. Rather, I think that he added to the message of Jesus his own post-Easter and post-Damascus convictions and conclusions. Like other major figures in the biblical tradition, he conveys a message that has both religious and political meanings, both spiritual and social dimensions. To some of the [central themes of Paul's post-Easter understanding and message] I now turn.

### 1. "Jesus is Lord"

[For Paul, the central meaning of his experience of the risen Christ was "Jesus is Lord." Both affirmations—Jesus lives, and Jesus is Lord—were immediate inferences from his Damascus Road experience; indeed, perhaps one should say that they were *given* with the experience. Thus for Paul the resurrection of Jesus was not primarily about an afterlife through the defeat of death. Nor was its central meaning that we also will be raised someday; as a Pharisee,

the *pre*-Damascus Paul had already believed that. Rather, Easter meant, in an affirmation that Paul shared with the Jesus movement as a whole, "Jesus is Lord."

Paul refers to Jesus as "Lord" (Greek: *kyrios*, pronounced "ku-rios") with great frequency. He uses that designation more often than "Son" or "Son of God," for example; indeed, he uses it more often than any other affirmation about Jesus other than "Christ" (meaning "messiah"), which for Paul is virtually Jesus' second name. For Paul, "Jesus is Lord" is the primary confession of Jesus' significance and status.<sup>40</sup>

The connection between Jesus' resurrection, his status as Lord, and the cosmic extent of his lordship is magnificently made in a passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians that is probably based on a pre-Pauline hymn of praise. Immediately after it speaks of the death of Jesus, it affirms that God "exalted" Jesus, which means "raised up"; and it then speaks of Jesus' dominion as Lord as extending through all three levels of the three-story universe of the ancient worldview:

Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.<sup>41</sup>

*Phil 2:9-11*

In the first century, "Lord"/*kyrios* had a range of meanings along a "spectrum of dignity."<sup>42</sup> Four of these meanings are the most relevant:

- It was a term of respect—one that could, for example, be used to address a teacher. This use is reflected in the synoptic gospels when Jesus is occasionally addressed as Lord.
- It was a term used by slaves to address their master.
- It was used as a term for gods, including the God of Israel.

In particular, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, *kyrios* was used as the name of God.

- It was also one of the titles of the Roman emperor: Caesar is Lord.

Thus, in Paul's world, calling Jesus "Lord" had both religious and sociopolitical meanings (and the two were connected in ways that we often separate in the modern world).

Though I think Paul would agree that Jesus as teacher may properly be addressed as "Lord," as the first meaning suggests, this use does not play much (if any) role in Paul's message. But the rest of the meanings are present.

If Jesus is Lord, masters of slaves are not. In a passage to which I will return, Paul affirmed the second meaning of "Lord"/*kyrios*, saying that in Christ Jesus "there is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer *slave or free*, there is no longer male and female."<sup>43</sup> In calling Jesus "Lord," Paul also affirmed that the risen Christ participated in the power and authority of God and that the other gods were not lords—the third meaning of "Lord"/*kyrios*.<sup>44</sup>

This affirmation and negation also countered the imperial ideology in which "Lord"/*kyrios* (in its fourth meaning) referred to the Roman emperor. When applied to the emperor, the term not only highlighted his political role but also suggested divine status. Thus to say "Jesus is Lord" meant "Caesar is *not* Lord"; the statement affirmed the status of Jesus even as it challenged the imperial domination system. There is, as recent scholarship shows, an anti-imperial theology at the center of Paul's understanding of the lordship of Christ.<sup>45</sup> Religion and politics are combined for Paul, as for Moses, the prophets, and Jesus: the domination system is not lord. Rather, Jesus, whom God has vindicated and exalted as the disclosure of God, is Lord. Thus the affirmation claims both our religious and our political loyalties.

## 2. In Christ

The short phrase "in Christ" is one of the two most important metaphors Paul uses for his vision of the Christian life. (The

other is "justification by grace," which we will consider next.) In his letters, Paul uses "in Christ" (including the phrase "in the Lord") 165 times and the roughly synonymous phrase "in the Spirit" about twenty times. As a metaphor for the Christian life, "in Christ" has several dimensions of meaning. I begin with its opposite. ✓

A) Life "in Adam" Paul is a dialectical thinker; he often thinks in contrasts or oppositions. The opposite of life "in Christ" is life "in Adam." The two metaphors refer to different and sharply contrasting ways of life: humanity "in Adam" is nothing like humanity "in Christ." ✓

[Life "in Adam" is one of Paul's primary metaphors for the human condition.] Within the sacred imagination of the Hebrew Bible, Adam is the first human, the being whose primal act in the Garden of Eden began the human story of grasping, exile, sin, and death. Adam sought to seize or grasp equality with God.<sup>46</sup> The result was exile from paradise and lost intimacy with God. Life "in Adam" is thus the life of separation or estrangement from God. ✓

[It is also the life of sin and death, which Paul says came into the world through Adam.] What does he mean by this? Does he mean simply that, beginning with Adam, people started sinning and dying, and they have been sinning and dying ever since? No, his language is too strong for that: he calls sin and death "powers" that have "dominion" over us. What does he have in mind? Is sin a "power"? Do we experience it as a "power"? ✓

I do not know if everybody does, but I strongly suspect that Paul did—and that's why he uses this language.<sup>47</sup> To explain by contrast, there is a "free will" understanding of sin: we are free in each situation to choose right or wrong. When we choose the wrong, we have sinned. But this is not how Paul understood matters. Rather, life "in Adam" is life under the *dominion* of sin. Sin controls us; we are not free. ✓

Paul describes the lordship of sin over life "in Adam" in an extended and powerful passage. Though sometimes interpreted autobiographically, the "I" of the passage is best understood as

referring to what life "in Adam" is like for anybody. It is a life of bondage and internal conflict.<sup>48</sup>

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. The good that I would do, I do not do; but the evil that I would not do, that I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Life "in Adam" is "captive to the law of sin"; it is not free. For Paul, we are not sinners because we do wrong things; rather, we do wrong things because sin rules over life "in Adam."<sup>49</sup> Paul concludes this impassioned passage with the words, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"<sup>50</sup> Paul's metaphor of life "in Adam" thus combines central images for the human condition in the Hebrew Bible: sin, death, exile, and bondage. ✓

B) Life "in Christ" Life "in Christ" is the opposite of the above. It is the new way of being that Paul knew in his own experience and that he sought to incarnate in the life of his communities. To be "in Christ" is to be free, no longer enslaved to the dominion of sin and death.<sup>51</sup> Strikingly, "freedom" is for Paul one of the most central characteristics of the Christian life. It means being reconciled with God and thus brings the end of exile.<sup>52</sup> To be "in Christ" is to live in the presence of God as Christ lives in the presence of God. In language that continues to echo the theme of creation and Adam, to be "in Christ" is to be a new creation: ✓

Whoever is in Christ is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to God through Christ.<sup>53</sup>

II Cor  
5:17-18

The contrast between life "in Adam" and life "in Christ" is the same as Paul's contrast between "life according to the flesh" and

"life according to the Spirit."<sup>54</sup> The contrast is not between physical life and spiritual life, as if the former were bad and the latter good. "Flesh" here does not mean our physical bodies, as if there were something wrong with physical existence or enjoying our bodies. Rather, "life according to the flesh" and "life according to the Spirit" refer to "life in Adam" and "life in Christ" as two ways of living our embodied existence. Paul's list describing the former does include what are often thought of as bodily sins: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness, and carousing." But it also includes traits that cannot be reduced to indulging our bodies: "idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy."<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, the characteristics of life according to the Spirit—life "in Christ"—are "freedom" and "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." They are not achievements of the will but "the fruit of the Spirit."<sup>56</sup> Even more compactly, in the familiar language of Paul's great love poem in I Corinthians 13 set in the context of spiritual gifts, life in the Spirit is marked by "faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love."<sup>57</sup>

[*The Way from Life "in Adam" to Life "in Christ"*] Paul's description of life "in Adam" strikes me as disturbingly (but accurately) dark, while his description of life "in Christ" is enormously attractive. Who would not want a life marked by freedom, love, joy, and peace? And thus the question becomes imperative: How does one move from life "in Adam" to life "in Christ"? [For Paul, the new way of life is created by God through Christ. And the way one participates in that new way of life is by dying with Christ and being raised with Christ.]

In Galatians, Paul writes about his own internal death and the birth of a new self within him: "I died to the law, so that I might live to God." He then makes the connection to the language of crucifixion: "I have been crucified with Christ." Thus the old Paul has died, and a new reality lives within Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."<sup>58</sup>

*Gal 2:19-20*

[In Romans, Paul develops Jesus' death and resurrection as a metaphor for the way of transition from Adamic existence to life in Christ at greater length and connects death and resurrection to the ritual of baptism. To be baptized symbolizes and ritually embodies dying to an old way of life and being resurrected into a new way of life:]

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.<sup>59</sup> *Rom 6:3-4*

The metaphor of dying to an old way of being is also central to Paul's ethic of transformation. We are to become "sacrifices," an obvious image for death. The result is to be no longer conformed to this age, but to be transformed:

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your selves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.<sup>60</sup> *Rom 12:1-2*

In Philippians, Paul writes, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." He then speaks of Jesus' death on the cross as involving self-emptying, humbling (roughly synonymous with self-emptying), and obedience unto death, followed by Jesus' exaltation. This is the pattern Paul commends to his community *for their own lives*.<sup>61</sup> This kind of self-emptying and humbling should not be confused with the kind that goes with an Adamic way of being, where it can mean simply giving in to the will of others. Paul is advocating neither autonomy (centering in one's self) nor heteronomy (centering in others), but theonomy (centering in God as known in Christ)



In short, the way we become "in Christ" is by dying and rising with Christ, by participating in the path of death and resurrection—the same path that we saw in the synoptic gospels and John, and in the Hebrew Bible (with different metaphors), especially in the subversive wisdom of Ecclesiastes and Job. Becoming "in Christ" involves a new identity, a new way of seeing, and a new way of living.

How did this transformation happen in practice in Paul's communities? A variety of instrumental means were involved, including Paul's teaching and the radical perceptual shift it sought to bring about. The transformation was also embodied and enacted in baptism. Finally, it was mediated through life together in community: not only were the communities of Paul Spirit-filled, but they also functioned as communities of resocialization in which the new identity and way of seeing and living were internalized.

*The Social Vision of Life "in Christ"* Life "in Christ" also has concrete social implications. The new humanity in Christ subverts and negates the social boundaries that mark conventional human existence. Those who are "in Christ" are all "one body."<sup>62</sup> The solidarity in Christ overcomes the primary divisions that Paul knew in his world, including especially (but not only) the sharp social boundary between Jew and Gentile:

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>63</sup>

Of course, people continued to be Jew or Gentile by birth, and slave or free, and male or female, but within the community these distinctions were not to matter.<sup>64</sup> Life "in Christ" involved an egalitarian social vision. In the context of Paul's world, it was a new social reality.

In I Corinthians, the challenge to social distinctions extended

to rich and poor. The context is the celebration of "the Lord's supper," which involved a real meal within which the ritual remembrance of the final meal of Jesus occurred. The Christ community in Corinth, which included some wealthy people, was a villa house church that met in the home of a wealthy patron. Paul learned that the rich had been eating their own meal separate from the poor (or before the poor could arrive from work). His indictment in I Corinthians is harsh:

When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. . . . When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

Then he warns them of eating the Lord's supper in an unworthy manner—that is, "without discerning the body" (meaning the community).<sup>65</sup> The issue is not the centuries' later Christian concern with discerning the "real presence" of Jesus in the elements of the eucharist, but the betrayal of "the body"—namely, the egalitarian social reality of life "in Christ."

Thus life "in Christ" is a remarkably comprehensive metaphor in Paul. It speaks of the new way of life in both its personal and social dimensions, as well as the path to the new life. It is also the subject of one of Paul's most eloquently lyrical passages. In Christ, we are indissolubly united with the love of God:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?

. . . I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>66</sup>

Rom 8:35, 38-39

### ["Justification by Grace"]

Paul's other central metaphor for speaking of the Christian life is drawn from the legal world. The literal meaning of "justification" is found in a court of law: to be "justified" is a legal verdict that means "to be found in the right" or "to be acquitted." It is the verdict one would want to hear if one were on trial.

Paul uses justification as a metaphor to speak about the divine-human relationship. His most important expositions of it are in Galatians and Romans (especially the first four chapters). The dialectical character of his thought is again apparent. Just as life "in Adam" and life "in Christ" and life according to the flesh and life according to the Spirit are sharply contrasted, here "justification by works of the law" and "justification by grace through faith" are placed in sharp opposition to each other. What is the basis for being found in the right by God? Paul's answer: grace, not law; faith, not works. Justification is a free gift, not a reward for achievement.

In Galatians, the issue is particular. Paul had founded a Christ community in Galatia. After his departure, Christian Jewish opponents of Paul insisted that Gentiles who wished to be part of the Christ community had to be circumcised. The issue was therefore this: On what basis could Gentiles become part of this new Jewish movement? Paul's opponents had a reasonable case. After all, this was a Jewish movement, and God's law as disclosed in the Torah clearly required circumcision.

Paul stridently opposed his Christian Jewish opponents. Insisting that Gentiles were justified by their faith in Christ, he saw the issue as one of grace versus law, faith versus works:

A person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus. . . . No one will be justified by the works of the law. . . . All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. . . . Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith." . . . I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.<sup>67</sup>

As his letter nears its close, Paul cuttingly contrasts the demand for circumcision with grace: "You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." A few verses later, he goes further: "I wish those who unsettle you [by demanding circumcision] would castrate themselves."<sup>68</sup> In Galatians, justification by grace through faith is the basis for Gentiles becoming part of the community without becoming Jewish through circumcision.

In Romans, the issue is more general. Much of the first three chapters is an indictment of all humanity—Jews and Gentiles alike—as sinners:

All, both Jews and Gentiles, are under the power of sin. . . . So that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For "no human being will be justified in God's sight" by works of the law . . . since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.<sup>69</sup>

Instead, all "are now justified by God's grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," made "effective through faith."<sup>70</sup>

Then Paul invokes Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, as a paradigm of faith, not works: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." And, Paul emphasizes, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness" before he was circumcised and apart from works of the law.<sup>71</sup>

Justification by grace is radical. Though the language has been domesticated by familiarity, it is extraordinary: "God justifies the ungodly," Paul says. A few verses later: "Christ died for the ungodly." Then: "While we were yet sinners" and "enemies" of God, "Christ died for us."<sup>72</sup> God's love for us is prior to our worthiness. It need not be earned—indeed, cannot be earned.

Justification by grace has been more important in some periods of Christian history (and among some Christian groups) than others. It became particularly important in the Protestant Reformation. Though the understanding of it by Luther and Calvin



has been criticized by many modern scholars as a misunderstanding of Paul and a projection upon Paul of the introspective conscience of early modern Western culture, it seems to me that there is insight in the radical Protestant understanding of grace.

Though I am not at all sure that I have understood Paul's message of justification adequately, and am quite sure that there is *more* to understand, I want to clarify it here by identifying some important misunderstandings.

First, justification by grace in opposition to justification by works of the law is not about the inadequacy of the Jewish law or Judaism. When Paul indicts life under the law, he is not attacking the Torah in particular. On the contrary, he saw the Torah as "holy, just and good."<sup>73</sup> The failure to recognize this has erroneously led Christians to think of Judaism as a religion of law, works, and judgment and Christianity as a religion of grace, faith, and love. But the way of being that Paul indicts—life under the law—is as present in Christianity as it is in Judaism. So also, grace is as present within the Jewish tradition as it is within the Christian tradition.

Rather, Paul's attack on "the law" subverts a more universal way of being, found not only within Christianity and Judaism but also within secular culture. Life under the law is the life of "measuring up" in which our well-being depends upon how well we do. If we are religious, we see our standing before God as dependent upon the earnestness of our religious life. Do we have enough faith? Are we good enough? If we are not religious, life under the law means seeing our identity and self-esteem (whether in positive or negative terms) as dependent upon our measuring up to cultural standards of achievement or appearance or worth. Life under the law is, as one contemporary scholar puts it, living according to the "performance principle."<sup>74</sup>

Second, justification by grace is not about forgiveness; it is not simply an affirmation that God will forgive those who repent. Forgiveness was a given for Paul even *before* his Damascus Road experience. The Judaism he knew did not teach that one had to observe the law perfectly; rather, it taught that God for-

gives repentant sinners, and it provided means for mediating forgiveness.

Third, justification by grace is not about who goes to heaven, or how. The notion that it *is* flows out of conventional Christianity's preoccupation with the afterlife throughout the centuries, as if that were most central to the message of Jesus and Paul and the New Testament. When justification by grace is thought about in this context, it leads to questions such as: Does this mean that everybody goes to heaven, regardless of what they believe or how they have lived (which strikes most people as unfair)? And if it *doesn't* mean that, what distinguishes those who do go to heaven from those who don't? If it's something we do, then we are back to works. But if going to heaven *doesn't* depend on something we do, then God must *arbitrarily* decide who goes to heaven—and then notions of predestination emerge. Here, as in much else, preoccupation with the afterlife has profoundly distorted Christianity.

Fourth, Paul's understanding of justification is not about the replacement of one requirement with another. This frequently happens in Christianity when "faith" replaces "good works" as what God requires of us. The system of requirements remains; only the content has changed. Of course, faith in God and Jesus was central for Paul. But it was not a new requirement; rather, faith in God's grace—in the God who justifies the ungodly—is the abolition of the whole system of requirements. It is thus a radically new way of seeing.

So what, then, is justification by grace about? Very simply, it is about the basis of our relationship to God in the present. Is it constituted by something we do or believe? Or is it a gift, a given? For Paul, of course, the answer is by now obvious. Justification is a gift of God, not a human accomplishment. Within the framework of justification by grace, the Christian life is about becoming conscious of and entering more deeply into an already existing relationship with God as known in Jesus. It is not about meeting requirements for salvation later but about newness of life in the present. And living by grace produces the same qualities as life "in Christ": freedom, joy, peace, and love.)

Thus far I have spoken primarily about the personal meaning of justification by grace, perhaps because of my Protestant conditioning. But it also has a radically egalitarian social meaning. It did for Paul, for whom it was the basis for including Jews and Gentiles as equals within his communities. Along with his metaphor of "in Christ," it was the theological foundation of a new social reality. The logic is impeccable: within the framework of grace, there are no privileged few, no elites, no favored ones. Grace means that we are all equal before God. Indeed, even Paul's emphasis in Romans that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" is a radically egalitarian notion.

### "Christ Crucified"

For Paul, the death of Jesus was utterly central. When he wrote to the community in Corinth and reminded its members of what he had preached to them, he said, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified," and, even more compactly, "We proclaim Christ crucified."<sup>75</sup> *1 Cor 2:2*

Paul's crystallization of his message as "Christ crucified" illustrates the combination of history and metaphor that characterizes so much of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. On the one hand, "Christ crucified" is a straightforward historical fact: Jesus, whom we as Christians confess to be the messiah, was crucified. On the other hand, Paul invests this historical fact with a wide range of symbolic meanings that go far beyond a historical assertion. As a symbol or metaphor, "Christ crucified" has multiple resonances of meaning. They are political as well as theological, and they sum up much of Paul's message.

For Paul, "Christ crucified" is an indictment of the imperial system of domination that executed Jesus. "The rulers of this age . . . crucified the Lord of glory." And for Paul, the resurrection was God's yes to Jesus and God's no to the domination system. The consequence: the rulers of this world are "doomed to perish." It is not simply that emperors and kings will die. Rather, the domination system itself must end.<sup>76</sup> *1 Cor 2:6-8*

"Christ crucified" also discloses the wisdom of God and coun-

ters the wisdom of this world. How does the cross expose the wisdom of this world? Through paradox: the notion of a crucified messiah is an oxymoron, a Christian koan that shatters conventional ways of thinking and expectations. In Paul's words, it is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."<sup>77</sup> *1 Cor 1:24*

For Paul, "Christ crucified" is also the revelation of God's love for us. The death of God's son on the cross discloses the depth of God's love for us: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>78</sup> For Paul, the cross of Jesus is the sacrifice provided by God.<sup>79</sup> It is thus both the fulfillment of the law and the end of the law as a system of requirements.<sup>80</sup> *Rom 5:8*

Finally, as we have seen, "Christ crucified" is also for Paul a symbol of the path of transformation. At the center of Paul's life was not only the proclamation of "Christ crucified," but also his own experience of dying and rising with Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Paul's metaphorical dying with Christ was to become actual. And his death, like his message and mission, brought together the spiritual and the political. The New Testament does not tell us about Paul's death, but according to early and reliable church tradition, he was executed in Rome in the 60s during the reign of the emperor Nero. The empire of which he was a citizen, and to which he had carried his message of a crucified messiah now exalted as Lord, put him to death. As a citizen, he was exempt from crucifixion, and so, perhaps observing the fine points of Roman law, imperial Rome beheaded him.

Thus Paul, in his death, embodied the path of dying that he had taught. The metaphor of "dying with Christ" became flesh. Like Jesus before and martyrs since, he became an incarnation of "the way" that lies at the center of the Christian life.

Paul's execution by Rome merits pondering. Was Rome simply mistaken in killing him? Was the execution based on a misunderstanding? Was it due to the decree of a crazed and callous emperor? Were Paul and his message actually harmless to the empire that killed him? Was it all about words—about calling

Jesus "Lord" and refusing to give Caesar the same honor? *Or was it about something much deeper and much more important?*

Certainly Paul and his small communities scattered through Greece and Asia Minor posed no immediate political threat to Rome. But did Paul's proclamation of a rival Lord and a rival social vision genuinely and ultimately threaten the imperial vision of life?

We who live after centuries of Christian accommodation with imperial systems are inclined to think that Rome simply made a mistake—that Rome failed to recognize that Christianity is harmless to empire (and maybe even helpful). But what happened to Jesus and Paul should give us pause. Christianity is the only major religion whose two most formative figures were executed by established authority. Accident? Plan of God? Or is there in Jesus and Paul a vision and a program, a message and a mission, that should cause systems of domination, ancient and modern, to tremble? /

## NOTES

1. I Tim. 2.8–15. Passages about wives submitting to husbands: Eph. 5.22–24, Col. 3.18–19. As I will soon note, these letters are among those that scholars think were probably written not by him but in his name sometime after his death.
2. These charges against Paul are, at most, only partially fair. Many of the offensive passages come from letters written by others in his name, and at least some of the rest can be read more than one way.
3. Acts 9.1–19, 22.3–21, 26.4–18. In his letters, Paul does not provide a detailed description of this experience, though he does allude to it, most clearly in Gal. 1.13–17. He also speaks of having "seen the Lord" in I Cor. 9.1 and includes himself in the list of those to whom the risen Christ "appeared" in I Cor. 15.3–8. Whether these two texts refer specifically to his Damascus experience or also to additional experiences of the risen Christ is impossible to know.
4. Acts 9.3–5.
5. These differences need not suggest either carelessness or historical inaccuracy on the part of Luke; rather, they may reflect the nature of such experiences: they are on the edge of the ineffable, and thus language about them is necessarily imprecise.
6. Acts 9.10–18.
7. Acts 9.15, 22.15, 26.17–19; Gal. 1.16.
8. The other candidate is the author of Revelation. As I will say in the next chapter, he seems to have had visions. But whether some of the accounts of

visions in Revelation are "vision reports" or whether they are all literary creations is a difficult question. Though I think it likely that other New Testament authors had dramatic religious experiences, and though they report the experiences of other people, they do not write about their own religious experiences.

9. In what follows, I will report what is generally accepted by scholars without reporting the arguments. When a point is quite uncertain, I will indicate that.
10. The New Testament provides no indication of when Paul was born or his age at his conversion (or at any other point in his life). The basis for the guess: he was vigorously active into the 60s of the first century, suggesting that he was probably not born before the beginning of the current era. If he was born in the first decade, his conversion experience would have happened when he was twenty-five or thirty years old.
11. On Tarsus, see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 33–35.
12. Strabo and Philostratus, cited by Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul*, pp. 34–35.
13. Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), trans. by D.M.G. Stalker, p. xxvi.
14. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, cited by Bornkamm and described as "the great Greek scholar," pp. 9–10.
15. My impression is that at least a slight majority of Pauline scholars accept the tradition that Paul studied in Jerusalem.
16. Gal. 1.14, 13.
17. Phil. 3.5–6.
18. Emphasized by Alan Segal, a Jewish scholar, in his *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), chap. 2.
19. II Cor. 12.2–4.
20. It is difficult to know whether Paul's language refers to the ineffability of mystical experience or to the Jewish prohibition against talking about such experience to all but a very few mature people.
21. II Cor. 12.7.
22. I Cor. 15.5–8.
23. Gal. 2.19–20.
24. II Cor. 3.18. A few verses later we find another passage reflecting mystical consciousness: II Cor. 4.6.
25. See the interesting article by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "On the Road and On the Sea with St. Paul," *Bible Review* 1 (1985), pp. 38–47.
26. I and II Corinthians are two of his longest letters; together, they are longer than Romans, his longest letter. Moreover, he clearly wrote a letter (two?) to Corinth that we no longer have, and II Corinthians is a combination of two letters. Thus he wrote at least four and maybe five letters to Corinth.
27. II Cor. 11.23–28.
28. As I will mention at the end of this chapter, early and probably reliable tradition reports that Paul was executed in Rome in the 60s. Because Acts ends without reporting his death, readers have often thought that Acts must have

- been written before his death: If the author knew about it, how could he omit it? However, most scholars think that the purpose of the author of Acts was not to write a biography of Paul but to report the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. For this purpose, the end of Acts is perfect. Indeed, the author's purpose would have been poorly served if, after reporting Paul's preaching in Rome, he had then written, "And then they killed him."
29. There is no uniform term in the New Testament for Gentiles associated with the synagogue. Acts refers to such Gentiles as people who "feared God" (10.2, 13.16, 13.26), "devout persons" (17.4, 17), and "worshippers of God" (16.14, 18.7).
  30. This estimate comes from Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997). Stark's estimates are based on a growth rate of forty percent per decade, matching the most rapid rate of growth known for a new religious movement in the modern period (the Mormons).
  31. For the distinction between "villa house churches" in the home of a wealthy patron and "shop or tenement house churches," and the distinction between "patronal share-meals" and "communal share-meals," see John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 424–30. See also Robert Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3.10," *Biblical Research* 38 (1993), pp. 23–43, cited by Crossan.
  32. It is illuminating to see the typical form of an ancient letter reflected in Paul's letters. To illustrate, I use I Thessalonians. Letters began by identifying the sender (1.1a) and the recipient (1.1b), then moved on to a greeting (1.1c), a thanksgiving (1.2–10), the body (2.1–5.22), and a closing. The latter was typically made up of greetings, a close, an exhortation, and a benediction (5.23–28).
  33. I owe the phrase to the subtitle of Calvin Roetzel's helpful introduction to Paul's letters, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1998; first edition published 1974).
  34. I Cor. 11.2–16 and I Cor. 8. Much of the meat for sale in butcher shops in Corinth was left over from sacrifices to the gods. Thus the question was a very practical one: Is it all right to eat such meat?
  35. I Cor. 7.1–3.
  36. And thus the NRSV puts the sentence in quotation marks.
  37. The brief story is found in Acts 16.13–15. Paul and his companions Timothy and Silas then stay at her house, which apparently became the location of the "house church" in Philippi. See also 16.40.
  38. This is not taken for granted by New Testament scholars. Some (perhaps even a slight majority) assume, simply because Paul says little about Jesus in his letters, that the historical Jesus did not matter very much to him. This strikes me as incredible.
  39. That Paul expected the return of Jesus soon is mentioned often in his letters, most clearly in I Thess. 4.13–18 and I Cor. 15.51–52.
  40. See the comment of Joseph Fitzmyer in Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Engle-

- wood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), p. 1394: "Lord" is "perhaps an even more important Pauline title for Jesus" than "Christ," which Paul clearly uses in a "titular sense" only once. See also, among others, James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 50: Jesus is Lord "is undoubtedly *the principal confession of faith for Paul and his churches*" (italics in original).
41. Phil. 2.9–11. The passage begins in v. 5.
  42. The quoted phrase is from Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, p. 50.
  43. Gal. 3.28.
  44. Even as Paul refers to Jesus as "Lord," he remains a Jewish monotheist. The notion of the Trinity was still in the future, and it is best understood as the Christian way of affirming the divinity of the risen Christ within the framework of monotheism.
  45. See, for example, Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994); and Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).
  46. Phil. 2.6, where Paul contrasts Christ with Adam; Adam did regard equality with God as something to be grasped or seized, building on the serpent's temptation in Gen. 3.5: "You shall be like God."
  47. Rom. 5.12–21. Note the language of death exercising "dominion" in vv. 14 and 17 and sin exercising "dominion" in v. 21. This passage is sometimes associated with the doctrine of original sin, but that doctrine was not developed until centuries later. Paul is referring here to a universal way of being.
  48. The whole passage is found in Rom. 7.7–24; quoted verses are 15–17. A formerly common interpretation of this powerful passage (especially among Protestants) saw it as Paul's description of his pre-Damascus life under the (Jewish) law. But other passages in Paul (esp. Phil. 3.6) suggest that Paul did not experience life under the Torah this way. Rather, the passage describes life in "the Adamic epoch," to quote a footnote in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 2125.
  49. See Virginia Wiles, *Making Sense of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), p. 57: "The problem is not that people are sinners because they do wrong things. Rather, people do wrong things because they are sinners." In my judgment, Wiles's book is one of the two or three best contemporary introductions to Paul.
  50. The entire passage is found in Rom. 7.7–24. Quoted words are from vv. 15, 18–20, 23, 24.
  51. See, for example, Rom. 6.6–7, 18, 22; 8.2; Gal. 5.1.
  52. II Cor. 5.18–19. See also Rom. 8.35–39, whose theme is that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.
  53. II Cor. 5.17–18. See also Gal. 6.15. New-creation imagery connects not only to Genesis but also to Second Isaiah and the return from exile. See also Rom. 6.4, 7.6.
  54. For the contrast, see Gal. 5.16–26 and Rom. 8.4–17.

55. Gal. 5.19–21.
56. "Freedom" is emphasized earlier in Gal. 5 (vv. 1, 13–14); the list is found in 5.22–23.
57. I Cor. 13.13. The extended context of 12.1–14.40 is important, for it puts Paul's oft-quoted and romanticized tribute to love in the framework of spiritual gifts, thus making it clear that Paul is talking not *simply* about ethics and not *at all* about romantic love. Love as Paul writes about it cannot be willed but flows out of a new way of being.
58. Gal. 2.19–20.
59. Rom. 6.3–4. The whole of 6.1–14 is relevant.
60. Rom. 12.1–2.
61. Phil. 2.5–11.
62. I Cor. 12.12–13; Rom. 12.4–5.
63. Gal. 3.26–28.
64. Passages speaking of the subordination of women and wives are all found in letters most likely not written by Paul. The possible exceptions are I Cor. 14.34–35 and I Cor. 11.2–16. The first text says that women should not speak in church but should ask their husbands about matters after they get home; many scholars think that these verses are a later, non-Pauline addition to the letter. In the second text, Paul says that women should not pray or prophesy in church with their heads unveiled and their hair therefore exposed. Whether this text speaks of subordination depends upon the translation of the Greek word *kephale* (pronounced "kefalay") in v. 3: the husband/man is the *kephale* of the wife/woman. Often translated "head," here it almost certainly means "source"; if so, it echoes the Genesis creation story in which the man (*adham*) is the source of the woman (who is made from his rib) and does not mean subordination. Strikingly, v. 12 affirms the equality of man and woman: "just as woman came from man [in the creation story], so man comes through woman [in birth]." But whatever the judgment about the correct translation of *kephale*, it is important to underline that Paul does not say that women should not pray or prophesy in church; only that they should be veiled when doing so. Finally, it is interesting to note that Paul grew up in a city (Tarsus) in which women wore the complete *chador* in public, completely covering them from head to foot (including their faces). Thus it is possible that Paul found unveiled women rather shocking.
65. I Cor. 11.17–34. Quoted words are from vv. 17, 20–22, 27, 29. The "words of institution" of the Lord's supper are in vv. 23–26. Because Paul reminds the Corinthian church of them in this context, it is tempting to think that he is also calling to mind the egalitarian quality of Jesus' open meal practice. If not, why mention these words here?
66. Rom. 8.35, 38–39.
67. Gal. 2.16, 3.10–11, 2.21.
68. Gal. 5.4, 12. Paul's language could get hot. Earlier in the letter, he accuses his Christian opponents of "perverting the gospel" and pronounces a curse on them (1.7–9), addressing his audience as "you foolish Galatians!" (3.1, 3).

69. Rom. 3.9, 19–20, 23. The argument begins in 1.16 and continues through 5.11.
70. Rom. 3.24–25.
71. Abraham is the topic of Rom. 4; quoted verses are 4.3 and 9.
72. Rom. 4.5; 5.8, 10.
73. Rom. 7.12.
74. Robin Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), p. 10. Along with the book by Virginia Wiles mentioned in note 49, it is one of the most accessible introductions to this aspect of Paul's message.
75. I Cor. 2.2, 1.23.
76. I Cor. 2.6–8.
77. I Cor. 1.24 in the context of 1.18–31. Because the wisdom of God is the opposite of the wisdom of the world, Paul can also refer to the wisdom of God as "the foolishness of God."
78. Rom. 5.8.
79. Rom. 3.25. Because a literal interpretation of this notion leads to unacceptable and indeed incredible implications, I stress that it must be read metaphorically. As a metaphor, its meaning is clear: if God has provided the atoning sacrifice, then nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.
80. Echoing Rom. 10.4: "Christ is the end of the law." There is a scholarly debate about the meaning of "end" in this verse. Does it mean "end" as in "finished," or "end" as in *telos* (meaning "goal" or "fulfillment")? And does "law" here mean Torah (the Jewish law) or law as a system of requirements? The debate is difficult to resolve. My use of it reads "law" not as Torah but as "system of requirements," and "end" can thus mean both "fulfilled" and "finished."



Chapter 1. John's inaugural vision

illustrates several features of REvelation:

- emphasix upon visions and "seeing"
- use of luxuriatn imagery; allusion to Hebrew Bible
- and frequent use of symbolic nubmrs.

Chapter 2 and 3

contain the letters to the seven churches.

They include an evaluaiton of each community, threats and/or encouragement a and a promise.

Chapter 4 through 22

contian the long series of visons that fills virtually the rest of the book.

Chapter 4 begins with a vison of God enthroned in heaen, surrounded by 24 elders clothed in white with crowns of gold on thier heads. Four beasts arearond the throne, each with six wings and eyes in the wings --starng creatures form another world. From the throne itself come lightning and thunder and voices.

It continues with a vison of the Lamb that was slain but that now lives and is worhty to 9pen the seven seals of the scroll of jdugment. etc, etc.

At the strt of chapter 12, we see a vison of awoman cltched with the sun, a crwon of 12 stars on her head and the moon undr her feet. She is giving birth to a child whom a great reddragon immediately tis to devour. etc, etc.

Chapter 13. A beast with seven heads and ten horns towom the dragon has given authority rises ou of the sea and takes control of the earth. The number of the beats, wea re told, is 666.

Then seven angels pour outuon the earth teh seven bowls of the wrath of God, etc etc etc.

Chapter 21 - comes the magnificent concluding vison. The New Jerusalem, adorned asa bride for her hsubamd, descends form the sky--a city in which there will be no more tears, no pain, no death. The city ahs no need of a temple, for its temle is teh Lrod God The Almighty and the Lamb. Through it flows the river of the waer of life, and init grows the tree of life whose elaves are for the haling of the nations. Ther, the servants of God will worship Go and the Lamb.

TWO WAYS OF READING REVEALITON

One: theFuturist Interpretaiton

Rev. tells us about what will happen some time inthe future.

It has 3 premises:

- waht revelaton doescribes has not yt happened
- as the inspired Word of god, the bbible cannot be wrong
- threofre, whatRevelaiton descirves msut still be future.

This way of reading the book sees it as a cryptogram, a messae encoded in syubols about the signs of the end that will precede the second coming of Christ

Borg uses, Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth, as illustation of this futurist intp.

Accoridng to Lindsey, the time of "the rapture" the final "tribulatiojn", the battle of ARmageddon, the second coming of Christ and the alst jdugment is near.

Rapture is notion that "true-beliveinv gChristians" will be taken up form earth ½to meet the Lrod i the air"

Futurist reading as it effects on meaning of Christian message.

There is "good news"—you can be saved from wrath of God by believing strongly in Jesus.

± If world is going to end soon, why worry about improving conditions here?

#### The other Approach: Past-historical Interpretation

We can understand the message of Revelation only by setting the text in the historical context in which it was written.

In this reading, Revelation tells us what the author believed would happen in his time. As such, the text is meant to be a message to them, not a message to people thousands of years later.

Author was writing about realities of his own day.

Chapter 13: the ten-horned beast from sea rules the world and demands worship, just as the Roman Empire ruled the world known to John. Its emperors were hailed as Lord and god in temples honoring them. At end of chapter 13, we are told that the "beast" is a person whose "number is 666" decodes into "Caesar Nero"

Borg gives other examples why John was writing about realities of his time.

#### THE LARGER THEMES

Revelation is more than mistaken prediction. The book has power. Its numinous language about God and Christ has been integrated into Christian worship, liturgy and art.

#### A TALE OF TWO SHIPS

John portrays central conflict of book of Revelation in a number of ways.

One of the most important is the conflict between competing ships: Christ's and Caesar's.

Caesar's as Lord. Emperors of Rome had been given divine titles.

Against this, John proclaims exclusive ship of God and "the Lamb"—that is, God as known in Jesus.

#### THE ANCIENT COSMIC COMBAT MYTH

John uses humankind's most widespread archetypal stories; the ancient cosmic combat myth.

Cosmic combat myth appears in many cultures, ancient and modern and it takes many forms.

The archetypal plot is a story of cosmic conflict between good and evil.

In ancient world, the conflict was between a god (or gods) of light, order and life against an evil power of darkness, disorder and death.

The Greco-Roman culture had its myth:

John's version:

Battle is between, on one side, God and the "Lamb" who was slain, and other side: the dragon, the ancient serpent, the beast from the abyss, who is also Satan and the devil. The battle climaxes with an army dressed in white defeating the armies of the beast and Satan cast into a bottomless pit and then into a lake of fire.

#### REVELATION AND EMPIRE

John's identification of dragon who gives to the Apocalypse a stunning political dimension. For John, the present incarnation of dragon is the Roman Empire.

Revelation 12: there is a woman about to give birth to a son who will rule the nations. A great dragon wants to devour the son, but the child is delivered by being taken up to throne of God. For John, the child is Jesus.



Then we are shown a scene in heaven in which Michael and his angels fight against the dragon and defeat him. Though the war occurs in heaven, the means of the dragon's defeat is an event that happened on earth: he has been conquered "by the blood of the Lamb"—that is, by death of Jesus. The result: the dragon is cast down to earth and gives him authority, power and throne to the seven-headed "beast from the sea" who appears at the beginning of Revelation 13.

#### WHAT'S WRONG WITH ROME?

What was wrong with Rome and made necessary its destruction?

One reason (though not true)

it was Rome persecution of Christians. There was major outbreak of persecution ordered by emperor Domitian.

Scholars do not hold to this story.

John called Rome "the beast" because of what it was doing to Christians. This was why Rome faced God's wrath and destruction. "Rome was giving us a hard time, so God's going to destroy her."

Not so much as Rome as persecutor but Rome as empire that accounts for John's indictment of Rome as the incarnation of the dragon.

All this fits into Borg's "domination system"

#### THE INDICTMENT OF EMPIRE

Earlier in this book, ancient domination system was described as a web of political oppression, economic exploitation and religious legitimization.

Elites of power and wealth controlled societies in their own interests and declared the order they imposed to be the will of God.

In his indictment of the Roman Empire, John names all of these features.

#### POLITICAL OPPRESSION

Rome controlled the world of the first century through a combination of seduction, intimidation and violence.

1. Roman Empire personified itself as a woman in the form of the goddess Roma. John personifies Rome as a woman, but as the "great whore" dressed in finery, appealing seductress. She practices not only seduction but sorcery.
2. Rome is also a ferocious beast ruling through intimidation and violence. When intimidation was not adequate, the empire used brutal violence. Rome execution of Christian martyrs, Peter and Paul; also prophets and countless others. Above all it killed Jesus "the Lamb"

#### ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

1. Wealth of Rome "She glorified herself and lived luxuriously...clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold with jewels and with pearls (chap 18).
2. John provides a vivid picture of cargo ships carrying the wealth of the world to Rome as the center of the domination system.  
But of this will end.

#### RELIGIOUS LEGITIMATION

Enough has been said, says Borg.

#### SUMMARY OF THE DOMINATION SYSTEM

1. This same system, in different incarnations, was known in Egypt in time of Moses; in Israel in time of prophets. Now Rome.
2. It designates all domination system organized around power, wealth, seduction, intimidation and violence.  
Everything that is opposite of the kingdom of God as disclosed in Jesus.

### A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The tale of two lrodships concludes with a tale of trwo cities.

The climax of the Apocalypse is a vison of ery diffeenrt kind of city.

He sees "a new heane and anew eath? and "the New Jeruslaem descednign ut of the sky.

The new Jeurslame is the city f God as wella s the kingdom of God.

Revelaitoon is thsu a tale of wo citeis: one city comes the abyss; the other from God.

John's vision of eh New Jerusalem is highly symbolic, with virtually every one of its detials based on imageryfrom the Hebrew Bible.

His symbolism echles the otsyr of creaotn and paradise.

1. John sessa "new heaven (sky) and new eeath." It is a new creaton and in new creaiton "teh seas was no more.
2. Then he sees the New Jerusalem descendg out of the sky "prepred as a brdie adonrd fo er hsuand" and he hears a loud voice proclaing that God now swells with humankind.
3. In the New Jerusalem, the acneitn afflictment of humankind are all gone: grief, pain, and death are no more. "God will wipe every tears from their eyes. Deat will be no more, mournign and crying and pain will be no more."
4. The size and constsruciton of New Jeruslam are fatstic: it is huge. A square, fifteneen hundredmiles on ech side. The city is amde of transparent gold; its sterets are "pure gold" There is no night. In this great city, enxto "ther river of the water of life" is "the tree of life" whose "ehaves are for the heaing of the nations."

Borg asks: waht do you make of this?

- He says many of he details JOhn mentions are specific to earlthly life.
- the new Jerusalem is "on earth", though it is a enw earth/heaven
- Kigs and natons remain in John's vison;f for they come streamign to the light off the New Jerusaelne
- thecity's tree of life is for the healing of the nations
- the gates of city are open to the world.

Thi is a vison of humans lving togehter-in-a-eity And it is teh oposoite of life other city, the world of empire.

Thus John's vsion has historial elements.

We need to rembmer that his is the lagnauge of apocalypitc.

As such, it is enigmatic, metaphorical, parabolic.

John's conclding vison is perhps bdst udrstood as "teh dream of God"-- God's dream for huammnknd. Throguhotu the Bible, God's dream is a dream for thie earth, and not for naotehr world. For JHohn, it is the onlydream wroth dreaming.

### CONCLDING REFLEICTONS

Book of Revelaiton is not without its flaws.

It suports a picutre of God as an angry typrat who plans to destory the earth and most of its people.

Nevertheless, in this final book of Christain Bible, we find the same twofold focus that marks so much of Bible as a hwole:

- radical affirmation of the sovereignty and jsutice of God
- and radical criticism of an oppressive dominaton system pretending to be the will of GOD.

John's vision of the New Jerusalem has both historical and trans-historical elements.

Indeed, its power as a trans-historical vision may be the primary reason that Revelation ultimately made it into the Bible.

It saw the way of the reunion of God with the mankind, thereby overcoming the exile that began in Eden.

There every tear shall be wiped away.

The river of life flows through it and the tree of life is in it.

There we will see God. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful  
wending to the Bible.

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- fearful conditions will arise on earth: war (6:2, white horse)
- civil strife (6:3-4; red-horse)
- famine (6:5-6; black horse)
- and plagues (6:9, pale horse)

## THE VANQUISEHED

### SEVEN XEEN ANGELS

New pictures of struggles with evil powers are presented under figure of seven angels with trumpets (Rev. 8:1-2)

1. Angels announce scourges tahat are to come upon earth and release fearful, fantastic creatures that spread death and destrton on idolaters of world.  
-As numersu as locusts, and more horrible than dragons, these creatures torture with thier scorpion-like stings, and kill with sulphurous fumes and fire (Rev. 8 and 9)
2. The holy city itself is to be ivisted with judgment, and the prophets of God rbring drought upon surrounding land (rev. 11)

The wicked try in vain to destroy the witnesses, just as the dragon(Satan) tries to destroy child who is destined to rule over the earth (Rev. 12)

3. In cunning fashion, the dragon gives supernatural powers to "the beast" (Rev. 13), who is a symbol of the emperor, with his demands for divine honors.
4. The prophet reveals the beast's identity by a cryptic number, 666.  
The figure must have had meaning for John's orignal readers, but now we can only guess at what it meant.

Probably the number was arrived at by adding the numerical values of the letters in emperor's name.

In Greek and Hebrew the letters of alphabet also served as numbers (alpha was 1; beta was 2; iota was 10, etc)

Since number of cmbinations to give sum of 666 is almost infinite, impossible to determine with certainty which emperor the atuhor had in mind.

One likely conjecture is Nero: the letters of Nero Caesar add up to 666, if spelled in Hebrew.

Though Domitian was probabably empepr at time of John's writing. (A.D. 81-96)

666 is a veiled allusion to an emperor clailing divine honnrs-- in all probabilty Domitian.

### SEVEN-FOLD PICTURE OF CHRIST

In contrast to all these demonic figures, John now turns to a sevenfold pictre of Christ.

1. He is portrayed as the Lamb in its purity  
-as herald of doom for emperor-worshipers  
-as Son of Man who both announces judgment and exectes it.
2. In vivid imagery based on Isaiah 63, he is pictured as trampig out the grapes of God's wrath just as ancients pressed out the wine from grapes with their feet in winepresses.

## NEW SERIES OF SEVEN WOES

One series is to fall on all the earth, in a vain effort to bring it to repentance (Rev. 15-16)

the other is to fall on Babylon--that is, Rome--the scourge of God's people in John's day as Babylon was in the days of the ancient prophets (Rev 17).

The proud splendor and moral corruption of Rome are described under unforgettable figure of a harlot, gorgeously clad in scarlet, trying to entice all world to engage in emperor worship.

John, like Hebrew prophets, looks upon idolatry as closely related to adultery.

The harlot was seated on seven hills (Rev 17:9), which are the seven hills of Rome.

The seven heads of beasts are almost certainly seven emperors.

The completeness of destruction of city of seven hills is celebrated in an awesome dirge (Rev 18)

THE FINAL VICTORY

Final chapters of Revelation portray in majestic fashion the finale of present age and opening of the new.

1. Conflict and judgment are at an end;  
the adversary and his demonic aides are banished and enchained forever  
-the hostile nations are destroyed in the great battle of Armageddon, after which the birds of prey swarm over the field of the fallen warriors to gorge themselves on their flesh (Rev 19).
2. Then begins period of one thousand years (Rev 20) which is an initial stage of re-creation of God over his ~~creation~~ creation.
3. The period ends in a final judgment of men, the destruction of death itself, and the renewal of entire creation (Rev 21)
4. Book closes with description of serenity and plenty that come upon God's creation when, at last, it is subject to his will.

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## 10

### Reading Revelation Again



“Revelation is widely popular for the wrong reasons,” says biblical scholar Raymond Brown, “for a great number of people read it as a guide to how the world will end, assuming that the author was given by Christ detailed knowledge of the future that he communicated in coded symbols.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a substantial percentage of fundamentalist and conservative-evangelical Christians read Revelation as forecasting the imminent “end of the world” and second coming of Christ.

The conviction that Jesus is coming soon, or at least that he *may* be, is widespread. According to one national public-opinion poll, sixty-two percent of Americans (not just American *Christians*, mind you) have “no doubts” that Jesus will come again.<sup>2</sup> Another poll reports that one-third believe the world will end soon.<sup>3</sup>

I call a reading of Revelation that emphasizes the imminent second coming of Christ a “millennialist” interpretation. That view has flourished in the last half-century. During the last thirty years, books by Hal Lindsey, beginning with *The Late Great*

*Planet Earth*, have sold over forty million copies. During the decade of the 1970s, Lindsey was the best-selling nonfiction(?) author in the English-speaking world. In the last several years, a series of novels on "the rapture" by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins have been on the best-seller lists. A millennialist reading of Revelation is a frequent theme of television and radio evangelists and "prophecy conferences" throughout the world. Recently, as I surfed through my viewing options on TV, I saw one of the best-known television evangelists standing in front of a chalkboard displaying biblical "signs of the end" and suggesting that 2007 may be the year of the second coming. Speaking in the context of a fund-raising drive, he sent this message: "You don't want to be burdened when Jesus comes again."

The millennialist interpretation is not universally accepted, however. In fact, the interpretation of Revelation divides the contemporary church. But those Christians who reject the millennialist view often lack an alternate interpretation, choosing instead to ignore Revelation. The majority of mainline Christians have little familiarity with this troubling text; they avoid it in personal devotions and seldom hear it preached about (for there are few texts from Revelation in the lectionary, which sets out the portions of the Bible assigned for reading in public worship). Readers are puzzled by Revelation's difficult and bizarre imagery, perplexed by its scenes of destruction and divine violence, and put off by the message, "Jesus is coming soon and you'd better be ready, or you'll be in big trouble." To them, the God of Revelation and the message of Revelation seem to have little to do with the gospel of Jesus. They are willing (even if not happy) to leave Revelation to others.

## Introduction

Revelation stands at the end of the New Testament and thus at the end of the Christian Bible. However, it was not the last document of the New Testament to be written, nor did its author know that it would someday conclude the Christian Bible. Its placement at the end of the New Testament canon is due to

its subject matter: "the end"—judgment upon the world, the second coming of Christ, the destruction of Satan, and the advent of the New Jerusalem, described in language that echoes the portrait of Eden at the beginning of Genesis. With Revelation at its end, the Bible moves from "paradise lost" to "paradise restored."

Revelation has been controversial from Christian antiquity to the present. In fact, it almost failed to make it into the Bible. Though generally accepted in the Latin-speaking church of the West from the second century onward, Revelation took much longer to be accepted as scripture in the Greek-speaking Eastern church. In the fourth century, the Christian historian Eusebius listed it as one of the disputed books. At about the same time, the early church father Cyril of Jerusalem not only omitted it from his list of canonical books, but forbade its public or private use.<sup>4</sup> Though gradually accepted in the East, as late as 810 CE a Byzantine (Eastern) list of canonical writings did not include it. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, it began to be routinely included in Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

Much later, leaders of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century had doubts about Revelation. Martin Luther included it in the New Testament only reluctantly and gave it secondary stature (even as he wished it would be thrown into the Elbe River); Ulrich Zwingli denied it scriptural status; and John Calvin largely ignored it (writing commentaries on the other twenty-six books of the New Testament but not on Revelation).

Thus what to do with Revelation has been an issue for Christians for a very long time. In this chapter I will describe two very different ways of reading the book and look at the larger issues it raises. First, though, I will introduce it and provide a compact summary of its content.

## A Christian Apocalypse

The book of Revelation is an apocalypse. Indeed, the two words—"Revelation" and "apocalypse"—are synonyms, for both translate the same Greek word, *apokalypsis*. Thus Revelation in



some Christian circles is called "The Apocalypse." Because Revelation was written by a person named John, the book is often known more fully as "The Revelation of John" or "The Apocalypse of John." (Note that the singular is used, not the plural; the name of the book is not "Revelations.")

The word "apocalypse" means an "unveiling" or a "disclosure" or a "revelation." It also names a type of literature. As a literary genre, an apocalypse is defined by both content and style. Its subject matter is one or more visions disclosing or unveiling either the future or the heavenly world or both. Commonly, the present age is seen to be under the rule of evil powers who will soon be overthrown and destroyed by God, ushering in an age of blessedness for the faithful. The coming of the new age is typically marked by intense suffering and cosmic catastrophes. The stylistic features of apocalyptic literature include luxuriant imagery, fabulous beasts, and symbolic numbers.<sup>6</sup> Apocalyptic writings flourished in Judaism from about 200 BCE to 100 CE. In the Hebrew Bible, the second half of the book of Daniel, written around 165 BCE, is the most sustained example.<sup>7</sup>

Revelation was written late in the first century by a man named John living on the island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor. Some have thought that John of Patmos was the disciple John, who also wrote the Fourth Gospel and the three letters of John, though virtually all modern scholars reject this identification.<sup>8</sup> A few scholars have argued that Revelation was written in the time of the Roman emperor Nero in the 60s of the first century, though most affirm a date around the year 95, near the end of the rule of the emperor Domitian.

Though Revelation is an apocalypse, it is also a letter addressed to seven Christian communities in seven cities in Asia Minor. John of Patmos was apparently known in these communities and may have been an itinerant Christian prophet and charismatic authority figure. He knew the Hebrew Bible very well. Though he never formally quotes a single verse, as many as sixty-five percent of the verses in Revelation echo or allude to passages from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>9</sup> John's frequent use of the He-

brew Bible led one scholar to speak of the book as "a rebirth of images."<sup>10</sup>

Like the letters of Paul, Revelation would have been read aloud to its recipients at a community gathering, most likely in the context of worship. It was thus *heard* by its original audience (not read silently by individuals), and the listeners would have heard it all at once at a single sitting.<sup>11</sup> This in itself has implications for interpretation: *hearing* Revelation *all at once* would convey the cumulative effect of John's visions in a way that the private reading of individual texts in isolation from the broad sweep of the book does not.

## Summary of Content

After a brief introduction, John of Patmos speaks of the visionary experience in which he is commanded to write the book. Because the vision illustrates a number of characteristics of Revelation, I quote it at length:

I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

John then turns to see who is speaking to him. In his visionary state, he sees the risen Christ:

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held

seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

John then "fell at his feet as though dead." But the figure "placed his right hand on me, saying 'Do not be afraid,'" and then identified himself: "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades." The vision then concludes with the command of the risen Christ:

Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.<sup>12</sup>

John's inaugural vision illustrates several features of Revelation: emphasis upon visions and "seeing," use of luxuriant imagery, allusion to the Hebrew Bible, and frequent use of symbolic numbers. Most of the book is narrated as a series of visions; in the book as a whole, "I saw" is used about fifty-five times. The luxuriant imagery in John's initial vision speaks for itself, much of it drawn from the Hebrew Bible; there are no fewer than twelve allusions to that older document in this passage. The number seven recurs frequently throughout the book. Here, there are seven stars, seven lampstands, and seven churches; in subsequent chapters, there will be seven letters, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Even when the number seven is not explicitly used, there are series of sevens: seven beatitudes, seven hymns of praise, seven categories of people, seven references to the altar, and seven prophetic affirmations of the second coming of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

Chapters two and three contain the letters to the seven churches. They include an evaluation of each community, threats and/or encouragement, and a promise. Nothing bad is said about Smyrna and Philadelphia; nothing good is said about

Sardis and Laodicea; Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira receive mixed verdicts.<sup>14</sup> The issues facing the communities are persecution, false teaching, and accommodation to the larger culture.

Chapters four through twenty-two contain the long series of visions that fills virtually the rest of the book.<sup>15</sup> As chapter four begins, John exclaims, "I looked, and behold, in heaven, an open door!" He then looks through that door into another level of reality. There is no substitute for reading these chapters themselves, preferably at a single sitting. Nevertheless, I provide a summary.

The section begins with a vision of God enthroned in heaven, surrounded by twenty-four elders clothed in white with crowns of gold on their heads. Four beasts are around the throne, each with six wings and eyes in the wings—strange creatures from another world. From the throne itself come lightning and thunder and voices.

It continues with a vision of the Lamb that was slain but that now lives and is worthy to open the seven seals of the scroll of judgment. As the seven seals are opened, we see the four horsemen of the apocalypse riding forth upon the earth, bringing war, famine, pestilence, and death. Then there is a great earthquake, the sky blackens, the stars fall from the heavens, and the sky rolls up like a scroll. The seventh seal is opened, and it introduces another series of seven judgments: seven angels begin to blow seven trumpets in succession. The blowing of the trumpets unleashes another series of plagues and catastrophes on the earth, including giant locusts that look like horses equipped for battle (bearing tails like scorpions and making a noise like many chariots) and an immense army of two hundred million invading from the east.

At the start of chapter twelve, we see a vision of a woman clothed with the sun, a crown of twelve stars on her head and the moon under her feet. She is giving birth to a child whom a great red dragon immediately tries to devour. At the same time, war breaks out in heaven: the archangel Michael and his angels battle against the great dragon, who loses and is cast down to earth. In

chapter thirteen, a beast with seven heads and ten horns to whom the dragon has given authority rises out of the sea and takes control of the earth. The number of the beast, we are told, is 666.

Then seven angels pour out upon the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God, and we are shown the judgment and destruction of the "great harlot" or "great whore" who rides upon the beast and whose name is "Babylon the Great." This is soon followed by the battle of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ on a white horse. Christ leads an army clad in white robes against the armies of the beast and destroys them, their bodies becoming food for carrion birds that gorge themselves with their flesh. The dragon, now named "the devil" and "Satan," is cast into a bottomless pit for a thousand years, during which Christ and the saints rule. After a thousand years, Satan is released, and with Gog and Magog he fights a final battle and is again defeated. Then the last judgment occurs: all the dead, great and small, are raised, the book of life is opened, and all whose names are not in it are cast into the lake of fire, along with the devil, the beast, death, and Hades.

After all of this, at the beginning of chapter twenty-one, comes the magnificent concluding vision. The New Jerusalem, adorned as a bride for her husband, descends from the sky—a city in which there will be no more tears, no pain, no death. The city has no need of a temple, for its temple is the Lord God The Almighty and the Lamb. Nor does the city have need of sun or moon, for the glory of God will be its light, and its lamp the Lamb of God. Through it flows the river of the water of life, and in it grows the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. There, the servants of God will worship God and the Lamb:

They will see God's face, and God's name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.<sup>16</sup>

## Two Ways of Reading Revelation

How are we to read all this? How are we to interpret the visions and images of this strange, violent, unsettling, and yet magnificent book? In this section, I will describe two very different ways of reading the Apocalypse of John in our time.

### The Futurist Interpretation

The central claim of a futurist reading is simple: Revelation tells us about what will happen some time in the future. It has three premises:

- What Revelation describes has not yet happened.
- As the inspired Word of God, the Bible cannot be wrong.
- Therefore, what Revelation describes must still be future.

These premises are the foundation of the millennialist reading of Revelation mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. This way of reading the book sees it as a cryptogram, a message encoded in symbols about the signs of the end that will precede the second coming of Christ.

To illustrate this way of reading Revelation, I will use the work of the popular millennialist author Hal Lindsey. In his book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey argues that the events foretold by Revelation are unfolding in our time. For him (as well as for other contemporary millennialists), the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 is a key sign that the end may be near. The reason is that some biblical passages speak of Israel as a nation living in her own land in the time of the end. Only since 1948 has this been true.

Lindsey then "decodes" much of the language of Revelation to refer to phenomena of our time. For example, he speculates that the opening of the sixth seal in Revelation 6.12–17 refers to a thermonuclear exchange. The "stars of the sky falling to earth" are orbiting nuclear bombs reentering the atmosphere. The sky

vanishing "like a scroll rolling itself up" refers to what happens to the atmosphere in a nuclear explosion.

When the sixth angel blows the sixth trumpet in Revelation 9.13–16 and unleashes an army from the east that numbers two hundred million, Lindsey deduces that the reference is to Communist China. Only China, he says, has a large enough population to put so huge an army in the field. So also he speculates that the giant locusts with tails like scorpions and wings that make a noise like many chariots (Rev. 9.7–10) may be a particular kind of attack helicopter.

The ten-horned beast from the sea in Revelation 13 is central to Lindsey's interpretation. Recognizing that it has some connection to Rome, he suggests that it refers to a revived Roman Empire composed of a ten-nation confederacy. This confederacy, he suggests, is the European Economic Community, whose membership was nearing ten nations when he wrote, and which was formed by the Treaty of Rome. The horn that received a mortal wound but recovered refers to a future ruler of the ten-nation confederacy who will also become the ruler of the world. Lindsey speaks of this person as "the future Führer" and claims that he is already alive, even though we do not yet know who he is.

Thus, according to Lindsey, the time of "the rapture," the final "tribulation," the battle of Armageddon, the second coming of Christ, and the last judgment is near. The rapture is the notion that "true-believing Christians" will be taken up from the earth "to meet the Lord in the air" and thus be spared the intense suffering that will precede the end.<sup>17</sup> That period of suffering is known as the "tribulation" and is signified in Revelation by the opening of the seven seals, the blowing of the seven trumpets, the pouring out of the seven bowls, all of them unleashing the destructive wrath of God upon the world. The tribulation comes to an end with the battle of Armageddon and the defeat of the armies of the beast by the returning warrior Christ.

The futurist reading in its millennialist form has striking effects on the meaning of the Christian message. The gospel (if it can be called that in this context) becomes "the good news" that

you can be saved from the soon-to-come wrath of God by believing strongly in Jesus. The focus is on saving yourself and those whom you love (and as many others as you can get to listen to you) from the fate that awaits most of humankind. The message also has striking effects on our attitude toward life on earth, including issues of social justice and the environment. If the world is going to end soon, why worry about improving conditions here? Why worry about preserving the environment? It's all going to end soon anyway.

Though Lindsey's approach has attracted millions of Christians, many other Christians (and, I suspect, most readers of this book) find his reading of Revelation to be bizarre and perhaps even amusing. But the central claim of a futurist reading—that Revelation speaks about what will happen some time in the future—is shared by a broad spectrum of Christians, including many who reject a millennialist reading. The latter group of Christians are doubtful, however, that the images of Revelation can be decoded in a highly specific way. They see the book as speaking in vague, general terms about the end of the world and regard attempts to figure out whether we are living in the last days as misguided interpretations or even as manifestations of human pride. They are content to leave the future up to God, even as they affirm with varying degrees of conviction and in a general way that God will bring history to a conclusion consistent with the overall message of Revelation. Indeed, this has probably been the conventional and commonsense way of reading Revelation throughout most of Christian history: it tells us about the future, but we should not become too fascinated with it or too confident that we have discerned the meanings of its symbolic language.

But if we think that Lindsey's approach is farfetched at best, what is wrong with it? Is it simply that Lindsey has got the details wrong? That, in his enthusiasm, he has become too specific? Or does he perhaps simply have the timing wrong? Is it the case that Revelation does describe what will happen sometime, in however general a way, even if that time is hundreds or thousands or even millions of years in the future? Or is the futurist

approach itself—not just Lindsey's version of it—mistaken? These questions lead us to a second way of reading Revelation.

### The Past-Historical Interpretation

The past-historical reading, which grows out of the belief that we understand the message of Revelation only by setting the text in the *historical context* in which it was written, emphasizes what Revelation would have meant *in the past*.<sup>18</sup> In this reading, Revelation tells us what the author believed would happen in his time. This approach takes seriously that the visions of Revelation are found in a letter addressed to specific Christian communities in Asia Minor late in the first century. As such, the text was meant to be a message to *them*, not a message to people thousands of years later.

The book itself indicates that John was thinking of his own time. Seven times in his prologue and epilogue, he tells his audience that he is writing about the near future. His first sentence begins, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants *what must soon take place*." Two verses later, he says, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; *for the time is near*." In his epilogue, the emphasis upon nearness occurs five times. The italicized phrases above are repeated once each, and three times the author attributes to the risen Christ the words, "I am coming *soon*."<sup>19</sup>

Christians in subsequent centuries have often sought to avoid the implications of "soon" and "near" by saying that God's time is not our time. As the latest book in the New Testament puts it, "With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day."<sup>20</sup> But the original hearers of Revelation would not have thought of hearing the language of "soon" with this qualification. It would not have occurred to them to think, "Maybe soon, maybe thousands of years from now."

In addition to John's prologue and epilogue, there is also compelling evidence in the main body of the book that the author was writing about realities of his own day. This evidence is

most visible in chapters thirteen and seventeen. In chapter thirteen, the ten-horned beast from the sea rules the world and demands worship, just as the Roman Empire ruled the world known to John. Its emperors were hailed as lord and god in temples honoring them throughout the empire. At the end of chapter thirteen, we are told that the "the beast" is a person whose "number is 666." In antiquity, letters of the alphabet had numerical values, and the technique for encoding and decoding a name into a number was called *gematria*. Using the rules of *gematria*, the number 666 decodes into "Caesar Nero."<sup>21</sup>

That John intended to identify the beast of chapter thirteen with the Roman Empire of his day is confirmed in the vision of "the great whore" in chapter seventeen. This woman, dressed in royal attire, rides upon the beast of chapter thirteen, and her name is "Babylon the Great." The Babylonian Empire had vanished some six hundred years earlier, so why would John name this creature Babylon? Historical context provides the answer: just as Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BCE, so Rome had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE. In some Jewish and Christian circles, Babylon had become a symbolic name for Rome.<sup>22</sup>

The identification of this woman whose name is Babylon with the Roman Empire is made complete by two more details in chapter seventeen. The woman is seated on "seven mountains"; from antiquity, Rome has been known as the city built on seven hills or mountains. The identification becomes explicit in the last verse of the chapter: "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."<sup>23</sup> In the first century, this could only have meant Rome. For John, the beast and the person whose number was 666 were not figures of the future, but realities of his present.

In addition to this evidence in the book, there is a further reason why the past-historical reading supplants the futurist reading. If John was in fact writing about events thousands of years in the future, then the communities to which he wrote had no chance whatsoever of understanding his letter. If the ten-horned



and peace by slaying Python, the mythical power of disorder, darkness, and death.

John echoes the story of Apollo's birth and reverses the imperial version of it in the vision found in Revelation 12. There a woman is about to give birth to a son who will rule the nations. A great dragon waits to devour the son, but the child is delivered by being taken up to the throne of God. For John, the child is Jesus, of course. Then we are shown a scene in heaven in which Michael and his angels fight against the dragon and defeat him. Though the war occurs in heaven, the means of the dragon's defeat is an event that happened on earth: he has been conquered "by the blood of the Lamb"—that is, by the death of Jesus. The result: the dragon is cast down to earth and gives his authority, power, and throne to the seven-headed "beast from the sea" who appears at the beginning of Revelation 13.

This is a remarkable subversion of the Roman story of Apollo's birth. Jesus, not Caesar, is Apollo, the light of the world who brings in the true golden age of peace on earth. Caesar and the Roman Empire are not Apollo, slaying the beast; they are the incarnation of the dragon, the beast, the ancient serpent. Rome is the opposite of what it claimed to be: the empire that claimed to bring peace on earth, and whose emperors were spoken of as lord, savior, son of god, and even god, was in fact the incarnation of disorder, violence, and death.

### What's Wrong with Rome?

That the book of Revelation indicts the Roman Empire in the strongest terms is thus clear. But why? What was wrong with Rome? Why did John call it "the beast"?

An earlier generation of scholars identified the reason as Roman persecution of Christians. In particular, these scholars thought that John's communities were facing a major outbreak of persecution ordered by the emperor Domitian around the year 95. According to this earlier view, Domitian demanded that he be acknowledged as "lord" and "god" in temples to the emperor. Refusal to do so meant possible arrest and even execution.

More recently, however, scholars have concluded that there is little historical evidence to support the claim that there was major persecution in the time of Domitian. While some scholars argue that there was no persecution and others argue that there was only minor, limited persecution, most agree that there was no massive persecution of Christians at that time.<sup>36</sup>

What John says in his letters to the seven churches is consistent with minor rather than massive persecution. He mentions only one martyr in the communities to which he writes—a person named Antipas; and though he does warn of persecutions and trials to come, it is not clear that these have begun.<sup>37</sup> In the body of the book, he mentions martyrs several times, but these may well be martyrs from the time of Nero some thirty years earlier.

Why does the level of persecution matter? It affects our perception of why John called Rome "the beast." If there was massive Roman persecution of Christians in John's day, then Rome was "the beast" because of what it was doing to Christians. *This* was why Rome faced God's wrath and destruction. John's message would be, in effect, "Rome has been giving us a hard time, so God's going to destroy her."

Seeing the issue this way has an important corollary. It implies that if Caesar had not called himself "lord" and "god," if he had not demanded worship in imperial shrines, if he had left Christians alone, then Caesar would have been okay and imperial Rome would have been okay. In short, this reading makes the issue narrowly religious, domesticating John's indictment of Rome. It suggests that if Rome had allowed "religious freedom" to Christians, then Christians would have had no issue with Rome.

The persecution of Christians cannot be eliminated from the passion that drives the Apocalypse. Nevertheless, there are clear indications that it is not simply Rome-as-persecutor but Rome-as-*empire* that accounts for John's indictment of Rome as the incarnation of the dragon, the ancient seven-headed monster that plunges the world into chaos.

beast is really the European Economic Community (or some other future empire), if the giant locusts are really attack helicopters (or symbolize some other future death-dealing machines), and if the army of two hundred million refers to some future army, then the message of Revelation had no significance for the people to whom it was addressed. Though John wrote the letter and apocalypse to a specific audience, its message could not have been intended for them.

For all of these reasons, the past-historical reading of Revelation affirms that John was writing about realities of his time. Of course, John was also writing about the future, but it was a future that he expected to happen soon, not a future that is still future from our point in time. His message to the communities to which he was writing was a mixture of warning (especially in the letters in chapters two and three) and encouragement. About his message, I will soon say more. For now, I summarize it very compactly as threefold:

- Despite appearances to the contrary, Christ is Lord; Caesar and the beast are not.
- God will soon act to overthrow the rule of the beast and its incarnation in Caesar.
- Therefore, persevere, endure, be confident, take heart, have faith.

The past-historical reading of Revelation has an important implication. To make the implication explicit: to the extent that Revelation is seen as foretelling the future, as prediction, it is mistaken prediction. What the author expected to happen soon did not happen. The Roman Empire continued for another three hundred years, more or less; and when it did fall, the events leading up to its collapse were not like those spoken of in John's visions. Furthermore, Jesus did not return soon.

In other words, the past-historical interpretation takes seriously that the Bible is a human product, not a divine product with a divine guarantee. It acknowledges that the Bible can be mistaken.

This realization raises the question of what it means to take

the Apocalypse of John seriously. Do we take it seriously if we project John's symbols, visions, and end-times scenario from the first century to our time or some still-future time? Do we honor the message of the book by affirming that what it says will still come to pass? Which reading of the book—the futurist or the past-historical—takes the text more seriously? Ironically, though the millennialist reading claims to take Revelation very seriously indeed, it does not, because it ignores what John was saying to the people to whom he was writing.<sup>24</sup>

The past-historical reading of Revelation also raises the question of what to think about the second coming of Jesus. Not just John of Patmos, but other early Christians as well, believed that it would be soon. The authors of Mark and Matthew, for example, refer to the imminent coming of "the Son of Man," presumably referring to the second coming of Jesus. The gospel of John also refers to the imminent second coming, though it is not clear that the author accepts the notion literally. Passages in Paul point to the same expectation.

Obviously, these early Christians were wrong. What are we to do with this? Do we say that they got the expectation right and that Jesus really will come again, but their timing was off? For a variety of reasons, I do not think that it makes sense to expect a visible future second coming of Christ. The belief can be understood metaphorically, however, as an affirmation that Jesus comes again and again in the lives of Christians: in the eucharist, in the celebration of Christmas each year, in the experience of the Spirit as the presence of Christ, and perhaps in other ways as well.<sup>25</sup>

## The Larger Themes

But Revelation is more than mistaken prediction. The book has power.<sup>26</sup> Its numinous language about God and Christ has been integrated into Christian worship, liturgy, and art. Its affirmation of another reality that transcends the visible world has been a source of inspiration, hope, and courage. Its archetypal imagery speaks to both the political and spiritual realms of life; indeed, it integrates rather than separates those realms.



### A Tale of Two Lordships

John portrays the central conflict of the book of Revelation in a number of ways. One of the most important is the conflict between competing lordships: Christ's and Caesar's. Is Caesar lord, or is God as known in Jesus lord? John's answer, of course, is clear. But to appreciate it fully, we must know the claims being made for Caesar.

Ever since the emperor Augustus had brought the devastating civil wars that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar to an end, ushering in the Pax Romana (the peace of Rome) and a "golden age," the emperors of Rome had been given divine titles. They were known as *filius deus* (son of god), *dominus* (lord), and even *deus* (god). Augustus was heralded as the savior who had brought peace on earth. As an inscription from 9 BCE in Asia Minor puts it:

The most divine Caesar . . . we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things. . . . Whereas the Providence which has regulated our whole existence . . . has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us the emperor Augustus . . . who being sent to us as a Savior, has put an end to war. . . . The birthday of the god Augustus has been for the whole world the beginning of good news (the Greek word is *euangelion*, commonly translated "gospel").<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the empire, in temples of the imperial cult, worship was offered to the emperors. Such worship did not preclude the inhabitants from following their own religion as well. But it did have the effect of providing religious legitimation to the rule of Caesar and empire.

Against this, John proclaims the exclusive lordship of God and "the Lamb"—that is, God as known in Jesus. John's first description of Jesus speaks of him as "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth."<sup>28</sup> As "the faithful witness," he is the Lamb that was slain, executed by the power of Rome. As "the firstborn of the dead," he has been

vindicated and exalted by God, disclosing Rome as a false pretender lord. Now he rules upon the throne with God and has become "*the ruler of the kings of the earth.*"

Throughout the book, the honor and praise demanded by Caesar is offered to God and Jesus instead. Much of Revelation is doxology, and its hymns of praise have been a fountainhead for Christian hymn-writers ever since:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom  
and might and honor and glory and blessing.

Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever.

The kingdom of the world has  
become the kingdom of our Lord  
and of his Christ,  
and he will reign forever and ever.

Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.<sup>29</sup>

Jesus is Lord; Caesar is not. John shares this affirmation in common with the whole of the New Testament.

### The Ancient Cosmic Combat Myth

Among the reasons for the power of the Apocalypse is John's use of one of humankind's most widespread archetypal stories: the ancient cosmic combat myth. John draws on that myth to continue the theme of two lordships and to deepen and amplify his indictment of empire.

The cosmic combat myth appears in many cultures, ancient and modern, and it takes many forms.<sup>30</sup> The archetypal plot is a story of cosmic conflict between good and evil. In the ancient world, the conflict was between a god (or gods) of light, order, and life against an evil power of darkness, disorder, and death. Commonly the evil power was imaged as a dragon or sea monster or primeval serpent.

In the ancient Near East, the cosmic combat myth is found in one of the world's oldest creation stories, the *Enuma Elish*. In that story, the god Marduk creates the world by slaying Tiamat, a seven-headed monster of chaos associated with the sea. In Babylon, that primordial battle was ritually reenacted each year.

Traces of the ancient cosmic combat myth are found in the Hebrew Bible. According to Psalm 74, God "broke the heads of the dragons in the waters and crushed the heads of Leviathan."<sup>31</sup> Passages in Isaiah echo the myth: "On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and will kill the dragon that is in the sea."<sup>32</sup> The book of Job refers several times to the dragon or sea monster, naming it Rahab and Leviathan.<sup>33</sup>

In the New Testament, the cosmic combat myth lies behind one of the most central interpretations of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Often called the "Christus Victor" understanding of Good Friday and Easter, it portrays Jesus' death and resurrection as the means whereby God defeated the principalities and powers that hold humankind in bondage.<sup>34</sup> In the postbiblical Christian tradition, the cosmic combat myth is reflected in two of the most popular Christian icons: St. George slaying the dragon, and the archangel Michael warring with the dragon.

In our own time, this ancient myth is the central plot element of the *Star Wars* movies: the battle between good and evil symbolized in the conflict between Jedi knights wielding light-sabers against an empire of darkness whose most vivid representative is Lord Darth Vader, commander of the "Death Star." The popularity of the *Star Wars* saga is due not simply to the stunning special effects, but also to the re-presentation of this ancient story.

The series taps into something deep within human memory and consciousness: the awareness of conflict between good and evil and the yearning that good will triumph. Thus Revelation and *Star Wars* are powerful for the same reason.

The myth was also well known in Greco-Roman culture. Its most common form in that context was the story of the god Apollo (son of Zeus and thus son of god) and Python, the ancient monster. When Apollo's mother, Leto, was about to give birth to her child, Python looked for his chance to devour the infant. Apollo was delivered safely, however; and after he had grown up, he battled and killed Python. It is the same story, appearing again and again.

John of Patmos obviously knew this version of the ancient myth, and it shapes much of the Apocalypse.<sup>35</sup> Now the battle is between, on one side, God and "the Lamb that was slain," and, on the other, the dragon, the ancient serpent, the beast from the abyss, who is also Satan and the devil. Like ancient Tiamat and Leviathan, the beast of Revelation 13 has seven heads. The battle climaxes with an army dressed in white defeating the armies of the beast and Satan cast into a bottomless pit and then into a lake of fire. John is telling one of the most powerful stories known.

### Revelation and Empire

But it is John's identification of the dragon that gives to the Apocalypse a stunning political dimension. John is not simply speaking about a mythological battle between gods in primordial time; he is also talking about a conflict going on in his own time. For John, the present incarnation of the dragon is the Roman Empire. As already noted, the identification of the beast with the Roman Empire is most clearly made in chapters thirteen and seventeen.

Moreover, John pointedly reverses the Roman Empire's version of the story of Apollo and Python. Both Caesar Augustus and Nero styled themselves as Apollo, the son of a god and himself the god of light, who had brought in a golden age of order

Recent scholarship has moved in this direction. It sees the book of Revelation as a powerful indictment of the Roman Empire not simply because of its persecution of Christians, but also because that empire was the then-contemporary incarnation of the "domination system" that has marked so much of human history.<sup>38</sup>

### The Indictment of Empire

Earlier in this book, the ancient domination system was described as a web of political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation.<sup>39</sup> Elites of power and wealth controlled societies in their own interests and declared the order they imposed to be the will of God. In his indictment of the Roman Empire, John names all of these features.<sup>40</sup>

*Political Oppression* Rome controlled the world of the first century through a combination of seduction, intimidation, and violence. The Roman Empire personified itself as a woman in the form of the goddess Roma. So also John personifies Rome as a woman, but as "the great whore" dressed in finery, the appealing seductress "with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication."<sup>41</sup> She practices not only seduction but sorcery, bewitching the inhabitants of earth to follow the ways of empire.<sup>42</sup>

Rome is not only a seductive sorceress; it is also a ferocious beast ruling through intimidation and violence. The inhabitants of "the whole earth followed the beast," for they said, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"<sup>43</sup> When intimidation was not adequate, the empire used brutal violence. John knew of Rome's reconquest of the Jewish homeland some twenty-five years earlier, the mass crucifixions, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. John knew also of Rome's execution of Christian martyrs, including Peter and Paul. But the beast incarnate in the empire of John's day is the slayer not only of Christian martyrs but also of prophets and countless others: "In you was found the blood of *prophets and saints*, and of all

*who have been slaughtered on earth.*"<sup>44</sup> Above all, John knew of the murderous power of the empire in its killing of Jesus, "the Lamb." In its execution of Jesus, the empire exposed itself as the beast as well as sealed its doom, for God had vindicated "the Lamb that was slain" against the power of empire.

*Economic Exploitation* It is striking how much of John's picture of "Roma" personified as "the great whore" and "Babylon the Great" emphasizes the wealth of Rome. Chapter eighteen imaginatively celebrates her fall. As it does so, it describes the luxury of empire: "She glorified herself and lived luxuriously . . . clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels and with pearls." Her "merchants were the magnates of the earth," and "the kings of the earth lived in luxury with her."<sup>45</sup>

John provides a vivid picture of cargo ships carrying the wealth of the world to Rome as the center of the domination system. His list of cargo includes luxury items, agricultural products, and human slaves:

. . . gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves, and human lives.<sup>46</sup>

But all of this will end: "All your dainties and your splendors are lost to you." Those who had grown wealthy from her exploitation will mourn: "Alas, alas the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth."<sup>47</sup>

*Religious Legitimation* Little more needs to be said about religious legitimation. The Roman Empire's claim that its domination reflected the will of the gods has already been emphasized. John refers to this in the second half of Revelation 13, in his

portrait of "the false prophet" who leads people to worship "the beast."<sup>48</sup>

Thus, as we have seen, Rome is indicted by John not simply for its persecution of Christians but because it incarnates the domination system. That same system, in different incarnations, was known in Egypt in the time of Moses and in Israel in the time of the predestruction prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Rome and the beast have an ancient lineage. "Babylon the Great" is not a code name simply for Rome; it designates all domination systems organized around power, wealth, seduction, intimidation, and violence. In whatever historical form it takes, ancient or modern, empire is the opposite of the kingdom of God as disclosed in Jesus.

This analysis is consistent with the content of John's letters to the seven churches. Some (and perhaps all) of these communities had been established a generation earlier. We should imagine them as having been similar to the communities of Paul: initially remarkably egalitarian communities living by an alternative social vision. Now, a generation later, some are beginning to fall away from the power and passion of the founding vision.

John does warn some of his communities of the possibility of persecution, but that is not his focus. His messages to the individual groups commend some for their faithfulness to Jesus and reprove others for their accommodation to the culture and values of empire, calling them back to what they first heard. The communities in Smyrna and Philadelphia, to whom nothing negative is said, are commended for being rich even though poor and for being faithful to Jesus' word even though they have little power.

The community in Ephesus is reproached for having abandoned the love its members had at first and is urged to repent "and do the works you did at first." The communities in Pergamum and Thyatira are charged with eating food that has been sacrificed to idols, a symptom of accommodation. To those in Sardis, John says, "You have a name of being alive, but you are dead." That community is urged to "strengthen what remains

and is on the point of death" and "to remember what you received and heard." The community at Laodicea, which has become rich and prosperous, is indicted for being "lukewarm, neither hot nor cold." Cumulatively, John's negative indictments portray communities that no longer differentiate themselves from the world of empire.

In this context, John's portrait of Rome means, Do not betray the vision of Jesus and accommodate yourself to empire, for it is the beast. In his own words, as he writes about Babylon the Great, the world of empire: "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues, for her sins are heaped high as heaven."<sup>49</sup>

### A Tale of Two Cities

The tale of two lordships concludes with a tale of two cities. The climax of the Apocalypse is a vision of a very different kind of city. After John's vision of Babylon the Great and its fall, he sees "a new heaven and a new earth" and "the New Jerusalem" descending out of the sky. Babylon the Great, just described, is the city of Rome as well as the Roman Empire. The New Jerusalem is the city of God as well as the kingdom of God. Revelation is thus a tale of two cities: one city comes from the abyss, the other from God.<sup>50</sup>

John's vision of the New Jerusalem is highly symbolic, with virtually every one of its details based on imagery from the Hebrew Bible. His symbolism echoes the story of creation and paradise even as it moves beyond and speaks of the deepest yearnings of humankind.

John sees a "new heaven [sky] and new earth."<sup>51</sup> It is a new creation, and in the new creation "the sea was no more." The sea as the home of the ancient monster, from which empire after empire ascended, is gone. Then he sees the New Jerusalem descending out of the sky "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband," and he hears a loud voice proclaiming that God now dwells with humankind:

See, the home of God is among mortals.  
 God will dwell with them.  
 They will be God's peoples,  
 And God will be with them.

In the New Jerusalem, the ancient afflictions of humankind are all gone: grief, pain, and death are no more. "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

The size and construction of the New Jerusalem are fantastic. It is huge. It is a square, fifteen hundred miles on each side. Indeed, its height is equal to its width and length, so it is a cube, like the holy of holies in the temple in Jerusalem. But the city has no need of a temple, "for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." The city is made of transparent gold, "pure gold, clear as glass." So also its streets are "pure gold, transparent as glass." It is Jerusalem the Golden.<sup>52</sup> Its walls are pure jasper, and its foundations are adorned with every kind of jewel. Its twelve gates are twelve pearls, and they are never shut by day—and there is no night.

The significance of the New Jerusalem is universal. Not only is it huge, with open gates, but "the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it." In this great city, next to "the river of the water of life" is "the tree of life" whose "leaves are for the healing of the nations." It is the city of light, in which there is no more night. It is the city of God, in which God and the Lamb dwell with humankind.

But what are we to make of this vision of the New Jerusalem? The city that John contrasts to Babylon and the world of empire is clearly no *actual* city. One cannot imagine it ever existing, whether in this world or another. So has John left the world of history? Is he, as one might imagine, speaking of "heaven" in his highly symbolic language?

We must not too quickly assume so. For it is impossible to reconcile all of what he says with the supposition that he is speaking of heaven. Many of the details John mentions are specific to earthly life:

- The new Jerusalem is "on earth," though it is a new earth and heaven.
- Kings and nations remain in John's vision, for they come streaming to the light of the New Jerusalem.
- The city's tree of life is for the healing of the nations.
- The gates of the city are open to the world.

Though John's vision recalls the language of paradise (and is in that sense paradise restored), it is not a vision of individuals communing with God in an idyllic garden. It is a vision of humans living together *in a city*. And it is the opposite of life in the other city, the world of empire.

Thus John's vision has historical elements. We need to remember that this is the language of apocalyptic. As such, it is enigmatic, metaphorical, parabolic. John's concluding vision is perhaps best understood as "the dream of God"—God's dream for humankind.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the Bible, God's dream is a dream for this earth, and not for another world. For John, it is the only dream worth dreaming.

## Concluding Reflections

The book of Revelation is not without its flaws. John's portrait of Rome as "the great whore" and of 144,000 men "who have not defiled themselves with women" reflects a misogynistic attitude.<sup>54</sup> His portrait of God as sending massive destruction upon the inhabitants of earth is extreme. In one scene, blood flows "as high as a horse's bridle for a distance of about two hundred miles."<sup>55</sup> The God of Revelation sometimes has more to do with vengeance than justice, and the difference is crucial.<sup>56</sup> Though John cannot be blamed for all the meanings that Christians have sometimes seen in his book, Revelation supports a picture of God as an angry tyrant who plans to destroy the earth and most of its people.

Nevertheless, in this final book of the Christian Bible, we find the same twofold focus that marks so much of the Bible as a whole: radical affirmation of the sovereignty and justice of God, and radi-



cal criticism of an oppressive domination system pretending to be the will of God. The domination system that John indicts is a subsequent incarnation of the domination system that existed in Egypt in the time of Moses and then within Israel itself in the time of the classical prophets. It is the same domination system that Jesus and Paul and the early Christian movement challenged.

Rome and the beast have an ancient lineage. "Babylon the Great" is not simply a symbolic name for Rome, but for domination systems organized around power, wealth, seduction, intimidation, and violence. In whatever ancient or modern forms they take, domination systems are the opposite of the lordship and kingdom of God as disclosed in Jesus. Thus John's indictment of empire sounds the same theme as the central voices of the biblical tradition. As with Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the gospel writers, and Paul, his claim is stark and compelling: God is Lord; the kingdoms and cultures of this world are not.

John's vision of the New Jerusalem has both historical and trans-historical elements. Indeed, its power as a trans-historical vision may be the primary reason that Revelation ultimately made it into the Bible. It speaks of the reunion of God with humankind, thereby overcoming the exile that began in Eden. There every tear shall be wiped away. The river of life flows through it and the tree of life is in it. There we will see God. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful ending to the Bible.

## NOTES

1. Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 773. Two excellent accessible commentaries on Revelation are Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1979), and Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: Knox, 1989). See also the earlier work by George B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966). An excellent highly readable introduction to various ways "the end of the world" has been understood in prophetic and apocalyptic literature and in the history of the church is Reginald Stackhouse, *The End of the World? A New Look at an Old Belief* (New York: Paulist, 1997).
2. A 1980 Gallup poll cited by Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), p. 16.

3. A *U.S. News & World Report* survey cited by Stackhouse, *The End of the World*, pp. 1-2.
4. Boring, *Revelation* p. 3.
5. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, p. 695.
6. I owe the phrase "fabulous beasts" to Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 514. On p. 515, he refers to the "apocalyptic menagerie."
7. For a study of Jewish apocalypses not included in the Hebrew Bible, see John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1984). Apocalyptic literature has antecedents in portions of exilic and postexilic books of the Hebrew Bible, including Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah, and Isaiah (24-27).
8. The argument that the author of the Fourth Gospel and the author of Revelation are two different people is also ancient, made by an early Christian writer named Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria in the middle of the third century. Dionysius's denial of apostolic authorship of Revelation was among the reasons for the book's slow acceptance as scripture in the Eastern church.
9. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 775. Boring, *Revelation*, p. 27, notes that there are over five hundred allusions to the Hebrew Bible.
10. Austin Farrer, *A Re-Birth of Images* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949).
11. About two hours are required to read Revelation aloud. For a contemporary dramatic reading of Revelation that seeks to convey what it was like to hear it at a single sitting, see a videotape featuring David Rhoads, professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. The video is available from SELECT, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio.
12. Rev. 1.10-20.
13. For the series of sevens and chapter and verse references, see Boring, *Revelation*, p. 31.
14. See the useful two-page tabulation in Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 784-85.
15. Are the vision narratives in these chapters based on actual visionary experiences? Did John "see" all of this in a visionary state of consciousness? Or are the vision narratives literary constructions? It is, I think, impossible to make a discerning judgment. Although I think that John did have visions, the use of repeating structural elements (seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, and so forth) and the frequent echoing of the Hebrew Bible suggest literary construction. But literary construction can be based on real experiences, of course.
16. Rev. 22.4-5.
17. The "proof text" for the rapture is I Thess. 4.13-18, in which Paul speaks of followers of Jesus "being caught up in the clouds . . . to meet the Lord in the air." It is difficult to know how literally Paul meant this language. In any case, he seems (like the author of Revelation) to have believed that the second coming of Christ was near, for he imagines that some of those to whom he is writing (and perhaps he himself) will still be alive when it happens.

18. This approach to Revelation is the foundation of modern scholarly study of the book and is affirmed by virtually all mainline scholars. Many scholars move beyond this approach and also emphasize the literary and/or aesthetic and/or political meanings of the book, but the past-historical reading is their common foundation.
19. Rev. 1.1, 3; 22.6, 10, 7, 12, 20.
20. II Pet. 3.8, echoing Ps. 90.4. It is interesting to note that the context is the delay of the second coming of Christ: II Pet. 3.1–10.
21. Rev. 13.18. Nero was caesar (emperor) from 54 until the time of his suicide in 68 CE, when he was still only about thirty years old. Because "666" refers to Nero, some have thought that Revelation must have been written during his reign rather than some thirty years later, near the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian. However, for two different reasons, the name of the beast as Nero need not conflict with a late-first-century date. On the one hand, there was a rumor that Nero had survived and would return to claim the imperial throne. On the other hand, Nero was the first Roman emperor to persecute Christians, and thus the name Nero could refer to the empire in its role as persecutor of the Christian movement.
22. In the New Testament, see I Pet. 5.13.
23. Rev. 17.9, 18.
24. In what he calls a "strong clarifying statement," Raymond Brown writes, "God has not revealed to human beings details about how the world began or how the world will end, and failing to recognize that, one is likely to misread both the first book and the last book of the Bible. The author of Revelation did not know how or when the world will end, and neither does anybody else." *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 810.
25. For further exposition, Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), chap. 13, esp. pp. 194–96.
26. In *The Writings of the New Testament*, p. 513, Luke Timothy Johnson comments, "[T]he book of Revelation is one of those rare compositions that speak to something deep and disturbed in the human spirit with a potency never diminished by fact or disconfirmation."
27. Excerpted from Richard Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 27. Italics added. See also pp. 25–33.
28. Rev. 1.5.
29. In sequence, Rev. 4.8, 5.12, 7.12, 11.15, 19.6.
30. See Walter Wink's compelling analysis of its presence in comic strips, television cartoons, spy thrillers, and movies, as well as in the policies of contemporary national-security states, in his *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 13–31. I am impressed again and again with the brilliance of this book and commend it to everybody. See also Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, rev. ed. (Santa Fe: Bear, 1984); and Robert Jewett and John Sheldon Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977).
31. Ps. 74.12–13; see also Ps. 89.9–10, where the primordial monster is named Rahab.

32. Isa. 27.1. See also 51.9: "Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?" In Isa. 30.7, Egypt is referred to as "Rahab"; see also Ezek. 29.3, which identifies Pharaoh "as the great dragon."
33. Job 7.12, 9.13, 26.12–13, and all of chap. 41.
34. See especially Gustav Aulen's classic study of Christian understandings of Jesus' death and resurrection: *Christus Victor*, trans. A. F. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969; first published in 1931).
35. For the way the ancient cosmic combat myth shapes Revelation, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976). See also compact expositions in Boring, *Revelation*, p. 151; Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, pp. 90–93; Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), pp. 148–50. On p. 148, Collins writes, "This basic plot or pattern is found in every series of visions in Revelation, beginning with the seven seals (in Rev. 6) . . . and in more elaborate form, for example, in the passage that extends from 19.11–22.5" (italics added).
36. Some scholars deny that there was any official Roman persecution of Christians in the time of Domitian. For a persuasive argument that there was minor (but not massive) persecution, see Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 807–9.
37. Antipas is mentioned in Rev. 2.13; references in the letters to persecutions to come are found in 2.10 and 3.10. See also 1.9.
38. The most sustained recent study arguing for this point of view is Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*. See also Ward Ewing, *The Power of the Lamb* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1990); and Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, pp. 89–104. See also earlier books by William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience* (Waco: Word Books, 1977), and Daniel Berrigan, *Beside the Sea of Glass: The Song of the Lamb* (New York: Seabury, 1978), and *The Nightmare of God* (Portland, OR: Sunburst, 1983).
39. See chap. 5 above.
40. Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 99: "Never has a more withering political and economic criticism of empire been penned."
41. Rev. 17.3, 18.3.
42. Rev. 18.23. See Wink's comment, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 93: "People must be made to believe that they benefit from a system that is in fact harmful to them."
43. Rev. 13.3–4.
44. Rev. 18.24.
45. Rev. 18.7, 16; 18.23, 9.
46. Rev. 18.12–13.
47. Rev. 18.14, 19.
48. Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 93: it "proselytizes by means of a civil religion that declares the state and its leaders divine."
49. Rev. 18.4. See the comment of Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), p. 244: John drives a wedge "between the community and the world. It was not the emperor cult that was the great problem, but the lack of demarcation between



- many Christians in the churches and the pagan world, its affairs, and its society." John seeks to resist "tendencies in the community to assimilate to this world. . . . The Roman empire did not declare war on the Christians; a Christian prophet declared war on the Roman empire."
50. For a striking tabulation of the symmetrical contrasts between the two cities, see Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, p. 160, and their chapter on "Babylon or New Jerusalem?" pp. 157–96.
  51. The paragraphs that follow are all based on Rev. 21.1–22.5.
  52. The phrase "gold transparent as glass" makes me wonder if John perhaps did see the New Jerusalem in a visionary state (in contrast to the whole of the vision being a literary creation). Mystical experiences are frequently marked by golden light, so much so that the historian of religions Mircea Eliade refers to such experiences as "experiences of the golden world." Cited by Robert A. Johnson (with Jerry M. Ruhl) in *Balancing Heaven and Earth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 2.
  53. As noted in chap. 6, I owe the phrase "the dream of God" to the title of Verna Dozier's book, *The Dream of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1991).
  54. Rev. 14.4: For critiques of his misogynistic language and two different ways of dealing with it, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) and Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).
  55. Rev. 14.20.
  56. See John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 586

## Epilogue

I close with some personal reflections. Of course, the whole book reflects my personal perceptions. I do not have an objective vantage point outside of my own history. All any of us can do is to say, "Here's how I see it." We can muster our reasons for seeing in a certain way, of course. But ultimately it is always personal. For me, this book comes down to what I have been able to see thus far about how to read the Bible.

So the whole book has been personal. Nevertheless, in this epilogue, I give myself permission to speak about how it all comes together for me—about how I see "the whole" of the Bible and "the whole" of the Christian life at a very elemental level. And if what I say perhaps has application to other religions as well; that is *lagniappe*, a bonus.

It is clear to me that the Bible speaks with more than one voice. I do not mean simply that many authors, communities, and storytellers speak in it, though this is true. Nor do I mean simply that in, with, and under these human voices the voice of the Spirit sometimes speaks to us, though this is also true. In addition to all of that, I mean that the Bible contains different voices (and thus different visions) of what life is about. And for each of the speakers, "what life is about" meant "what life with God" is about. Thus the Bible contains different voices responding to this central question.

These different voices are found throughout the history of the biblical period, as well as in the postbiblical history of Christianity. The conflict between them shapes both testaments. We hear the

B.-The Final Conflict before Christ's coming

1. Later part of his Paul, Paul does not include apocalyptic details and with passing years he moved away from strong sense of expectancy.

The terms "apocalypse" and "apocalyptic"

1. Transliterated from Greek word, apokalupto, which means to reveal what has previously been hidden.
2. The term "apocalypse" has a more precise meaning than this: it is the name given to a unique type of literature that purports to reveal the future through visions and elaborate symbolism.

Apocalypticism:

It is a primitive type of philosophy of history in which the convictions are expressed that:

1. the writer is living near the end of present age
2. that God will soon intervene to deliver his people from their difficulties
3. and that the situation must deteriorate before it can improve.

Paul shows influence of apocalypticism:

1. When in Romans 8 he speaks of birthpangs through which world must pass before the coming of new age
2. In Thessalonians 2:3-12, he anticipates a final outburst of satanic activity before arrival of day of redemption.

Paul did not adopt the practice of setting dates for the end or creating a time schedule for coming of new age.

Book of Revelation

Butt

Book 6

5

Howard Clark Fee and Frankling W. YOung, Undestanding the New Testament

## CHPATER 15. THE HOPE OF THE COMMUNKTY

### COMING OF THE KINGDOM

1. From beginning Christina communitiy looked to:  
time when God wuld complete work of transforming his creation.
2. This mood stnong in prophets from which Chx inherited.
3. Jesus set tone:  
his tachings abut kingdom of God
4. In last book of N.T. this Christian hpe is most fervently expressed.

### THE HOPE ACCORDING TO SYNPTICS

#### A. The Kingdom as present reality

1. Christian communitiy convicned that, with coming of Jesus and thru his works, a new era n God's dealings with men had been inaugurated.

Promises made by God to his ancient people Israel were now belieed to be in process of fulfillment.

The new age for which Judaism longed had now begun to dawn.  
-poers of evil were already being overcome by power of Christ

2. Establishment of God's sovereign rule over his creation had already begun and time of fukfillment was near.

#### B. The Kingdom as yet to come

On other had, communitiy was fully aware that the reign of God had not yet come in its fullness.

-evil rampart, most men alienated from God, etc. etc.

So hope: Son of Man must appear again, this time in glory/triumph.

So community in state of tension:

God's reign had dawned  
yet, it would arrive in fullness.

### THE HOPE ACCORDING TO PAUL

#### A. The Return of Christ

1. Paul was converted only a few years after crucifixion of Jesus, when the hope of Jesus' coming aain was still strong.

2. Yet he lived long enough to see serious problems arise in church when the hopes for Jesus' return failed to materialize.

3. At first, he expected the retrun--Paul described in full detail the series of events that would lead to end of present age and coming in fullness of long-awaited new age. I Cor 15:22-28; 51-54

## BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

John, author of book of Revelation.

Oftentimes he is credited of being same John who wrote Fourth Gospel and Letters of John.

Most scholars disagree - can't be the same person.

Fourth Gospel John is man of letters--knew Greek thoughts.

### REVELATION:

Author gravely concerned to stress the crisis that is now impending.

1. For him there is no indefinite or unlimited period of time stretching out into future, but rather a conviction that very soon the conflict of powers of evil against God and his people will reach its climax.

### PURPOSE OF BOOK OF REVELATION

1. Book was written at a time when efforts were being made to cripple the church.
2. The community was ill prepared to meet the crisis precipitated by the Christians' refusal to participate in emperor worship. Church had become half-hearted in matters of faith and life. "Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16)
3. Genius of John was not primarily foresight, but insight into real nature of problems confronting Christian community.

He saw with clarity the issues on which Christians must make decisions, and the far-reaching consequences of these issues.

John's ultimate concern was not for solution to immediate problem of empire's demand that Christians worship emperor.

Rather, he viewed immediate crisis as a crucial stage in final conflict between God and evil powers.

Steadfastness in this crisis would lead the community on to complete victory in which God's purpose for his creation would be achieved.

## PROMISES AND PREDICTIONS

1. John addresses in turn seven of churches of Asia Minor, pointing up in each case the church's weaknesses, strengths and prospects.
  - a) Some had been lulled to sleep and needed to be aroused
  - b) some had flirted with paganism and needed to be warned in the strongest terms of consequences of such behavior
2. John himself had been exiled to tiny, barren isle of Patmos, as a result of his courageous testimony to the faith.

Letters to the Churches

1. Pergamum is warned about Satan's throne: emperor was worshiped as divine in Pergamum.
2. Sardis: John wrote a warning of coming of the Lord "like a thief"
3. Spiritual blindness of Laodicea is stressed.

John says: new age could not come without birthpangs and people of God must meet them informed and confident.

THE VISIONS

The ingenuity of writer is nowhere more apparent than in series of apocalyptic visions that occupy the rest of book (Rev. 4:1-22:19)

1. Recurrence of number 7 is one of most striking features of this section:
  - there are seven seals
  - seven trumpets
  - seven visions of kingdom of dragon
  - seven ~~horns~~ bowls
  - seven visions of fall of Babylon
  - seven visions of the end.
2. Perhaps the greatest difficulty in interpreting this book has resulted from effort to discover a chronological sequence in this series of visions.
3. This method of interpretation has appeared in two forms:
  - a) the futuristic, which sees in these visions pictures of successive situation that will arise in last days
  - b) the historical, which relates the visions to ongoing history of the church, and identifies the symbolic figures of book with historical personages.

beast

The ~~best~~ of Revelatin 13

1. Napoleon, Hitler

How best to approach this book?

1. An awareness of historical crisis: actual or impending--that was the immediate provocation for the book
2. And second, a recognition of cyclical structure of writing.

#### THE HISTORICAL SITUATION

The historical situation that gave rise to book was empire's opposition to Chx.

1. Christians of Asia Minor had come under suspicion of subversion because of their refusal to join in worship of emperor.
2. On eastern edge of Asian Minor were located the Parthians, a warlike people who remained a constant threat to peace of Rome and whose border was the one perennially unsettled boundary of the entire empire.
3. The involved and highly figurative language of a book like Revelation would serve to communicate a message of resistance to those who understood the imagery.  
This kind of writing had become common in late Judaism.
4. The series of visions of end is not intended to describe a sequence of events in strict chronological fashion.

John is saying: no single set of visions could explain. So I will give you a series of them....

#### MORE ON THE VISION

1. Author shares apocalyptic viewpoint: it is deterministic: these things must take place.
2. But the author is not a fatalist.  
He regards the history of world as moving by divine will and in fulfillment of a wise and gracious purpose,  
and not as proceeding by chance.
3. The ultimate outcome of this determined course of history will be the achievement of God's program of redemption for his creation.
4. John, unlike Paul does not expect the redemption of all things,  
He looks forward to ending punishment of wicked spirits and of dragon, their leader.

## THE VANQUISEHED

SEVEN ~~XEN~~ ANGELS

New pictures of struggles with evil powers are presented under figure of seven angels with trumpets (Rev. 8:1-2)

1. Angels announce scourges that are to come upon earth and release fearful, fantastic creatures that spread death and destrtton on idolaters of world.  
-As numersu as locusts, and more horrible than dragons, these creatures torture with thier scorpion-like stings, and kill with sulphurous fumes and fire (REv. 8 and 9)

2. The holy city itself is to be ivisted with judgment, and the prophets of God rbring drought upon surrounding land (rev. 11)

The wicked try in vain to destroy the witnesses, just as the dragon(Satan) tries to destoy child who is destined to rule over the earth (Rev. 12)

3. In cunning fashion, the dragon gives supernatural powers to "the beast" (Rev. 13), who is a symbol of the emperor, with his demands for divine honors.

4. The prophet reveals the beast's identity by a cryptic number, 666.  
The figure must have had meaning for John's orignal readers, but now we can only guess at what it meant.

Probably the number was arrived at by adding the numerical values of the letters in emperor's name.

In Greek and Hebrew the letters of alphabet also served as numbers (alpha was 1; beta was 2; iota was 10, etc)

Since number of cmbinations to give sum of 666 is almost infinite, impossible to determine with certainty which emperor the atuhor had in mind.

One likely conjecture is Nero: the letters of Nero Caesar add up to 666, if spelled in Hebrew.

Though Domitian was probabably empepr at time of John's writing. (A.D. 81-96)

666 is a veiled allusion to an emperor claiing divine honors-- in all probabilty Domitian.

## SEVEN-FOLD PICTURE OF CHRIST

In contrast to all these demonic figures, John now turns to a sevenfold pictre of Christ.

1. He is portrayed as the Lamb in its purity  
-as herald of doom for emperor-worshipers  
-as Son of Man who both announces judgment and exectes it.
2. In vivid imagery based on Isaiah 63, he is pictured as trampig out the grapes of God's wrath just as ancients pressed out the wine from grapes with their feet in winepresses.



## THE VICTOR

### JESUS CHRIST

At opening of Revelation 5, there appera a figure, both majestic and humble,  
 -both conquering and submissive,  
 -who dominates the apocalypse  
 and accoridn to John,s convcitn, dominates the unfolding of  
 God's purpose.

1. Ahtough this figure is not name,d the openieng owrds of book make it  
 clear that it is Jesus Christ,  
 who is both Lion and Lamb.
  2. He comes in uhumility, yet he is the one thru whom victory over the  
 powers opposed to God will be won.
  3. He is the only one worthy to unroll the seven-sealed scroll, which is a  
 symbol for the unfolding purpose of God.
  4. What follows in rest of book is an elaboratin thru complicated symbolism  
 of what will be achieved according to God's plan.
- fearful conditons will arise on earth: war (6:2, the white horse)  
 -civil strife (6:3-4, the red- horse)  
 -femie (6:5-6, the black horse)  
 -and plagues (6:8, the pale horse)

There will be astronomical disturbances (6:12-17)--remidners that fate of  
 whole universe is invovled in fulfillment of man's destiny.

In the midst of this destruction and misery, however, God is at work  
 brining together his faithful witnesses.

1. They lookforward with eagernss to final delviance from  
 its subjection to control of evil poers (6:9-11)

Terrifying as some of John's visions are, primary intent of his book was  
 not to frighen but to comfort theCristians living under shadow of persecution.  
 No matter how oppressive the situation might beocme, they were to have  
 confidence that beyond tribulation lay peace andGod's victory.

## NEW SERIES OF SEVEN WOES

One series is to fall on all the earth, in a vain effort to bring it to repentance (Rev. 15-16)

the other is to fall on Babylon--that is, Rome--the scourge of God's people in John's day as Babylon was in the days of the ancient prophets (Rev 17).

The proud splendor and moral corruption of Rome are described under unforgettable figure of a harlot, gorgeously clad in scarlet, trying to entice all world to engage in emperor worship.

John, like Hebrew prophets, looks upon idolatry as closely related to adultery.

The harlot was seated on seven hills (Rev 17:9), which are the seven hills of Rome.

The seven heads of beasts are almost certainly seven emperors.

The completeness of destruction of city of seven hills is celebrated in an awesome dirge (Rev 18)

THE FINAL VICTORY

Final chapters of Revelation portray in majestic fashion the finale of present age and opening of the new.

1. Conflict and judgment are at an end;  
the adversary and his demonic aides are banished and enchained forever  
-the hostile nations are destroyed in the great battle of Armageddon, after which the birds of prey swarm over the field of the fallen warriors to gorge themselves on their flesh (Rev 19).
2. Then begins period of one thousand years (Rev 20) which is an initial stage of re-creation of God over his ~~creation~~ creation.
3. The period ends in a final judgment of men, the destruction of death itself, and the renewal of entire creation (Rev 21)
4. Book closes with description of serenity and plenty that come upon God's creation when, at last, it is subject to his will.

### THE HOPE IS MODIFIED

#### I. HOPE FULFILLED IN HEAVEN

Book of Hebrews.

1. Author weaves a quasi-Platonic strand into Christian understanding of history.

According to this scheme, things on earth are only imperfect copies of true realities, which are to be found in heaven.

1. The tension connected with Christian hope, then, would not be between the imperfect Now and perfect Future, but between earthly imperfection and heavenly perfection.

Hence ultimate fulfillment of God's purpose is to be found only in heaven.

#### OTHER EXPECTATIONS:

1. Jesus prayed that God's kingdom would come on earth (Mt 6:10) not in some other-worldly sphere.
2. The Gospels, the letters of Paul and Rev of John all look to the transformation of this world, not merely to some transferal to a heavenly realm.

When new age?

1. Paul expected it within the lifetime of his contemporaries (I Thess 4:15)
2. Jesus expected it within a generation (Mk 13:30)

#### HOPE FULFILLED IN THE PRESENT

~~Fourth Gospel.~~

1. In Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is represented as saying that the kingdom has been inaugurated with mighty works he is performing --and that it will come in its fullness at some future time.

Fourth Gospel--it introduces new note

That it had already begun to dawn.

Emphasis has shifted from sense of expectation of future fulfillment to confidence that the promises of God have already been fulfilled in form of resources presently available to Christians.

e.g. eternal life is now.

e.g. resurrection is not a future event, but a symbol of present enjoyment of new life in Christ.

### THE HOPE PERSISTS

#### I. REVISIONS IN THE SCHEDULE

II Peter. Probably the last book of NT to be written was II Peter.

Dates: range from A.D. 100 to as late as close of second century.

1. Significant feature of book is the way in which it seeks to solve the troublesome question of non-fulfillment of Christian hope by proposing new time scheme.

"With the Lord one day is a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day (II Pet 3:8). Hence present time was no more than a brief moment judged by God's time standards.

LACTANTIUS

1. One of fullest statements of expectation in language and imagery of apocalypticism is Lactantius, a teacher of rhetoric who lived at end of third ~~century~~ century, during reign of Diocletian, the 1<sup>st</sup> and fiercest persecutor of the church.
2. In additon to drawing freell on Revelation, he supports his picture of the end with quatations from such unlikely soces as the Sibylline Oracles--curious prophetic writings compounded ~~by~~ of Jewish and pagan spcualtion--and from Fourth Eclogue of Vergil, the Latin poet who hailed the coming of Augustus in terms closely resembling the messianic hopes of Israel.
3. The ferocit of persecution under Diocletian was sufficient reason for Lactantius and his contemporaries to look upon their fearful experiences as the final birthpangs of new age.

THE HOPE IS ECLIPSED

1. New <sup>era</sup> ~~ear~~ did come on heels of Diocletian's persecutiou.
2. With accession of Constantine to imperail throne, Chx was for the first time officially tolearted (in 313) and was subsequently regarded as the official state religin.
3. On becoming an establishe chruch: it was preoccupied with becoming a Chruch - hence all non-fulfillment of Christian hope was eclipsed.

THE HOPE IN A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Whole question of goal and meaning of history was ~~raised~~ in a profonnd manner by Augustine.
2. The sacking of city of Rome by barbarian inaders from north in 410 made it unmistaklbly clear that Rome was not eternal. And that it could not stادن forever as stronghold of culture and stabilityin in a abarbarian world.
3. His City of God.

PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT - HEGEL

1. Largely under influence of German philosohere (Hegel (1770-1831), historians et about rearranging history to conform to the dogma of inevitable progress. According to this thery, man moved thru conflict pupward toaard realization of the Absolute--i.e the fulfillment of the perfect, predetermind goal of the historial proecess.
1. Accordint to Hegel, man's hisotry is a story of unceasing progress from error to truth, from incompleteness to complete fulfillment of man's potentialities.

The "Kingdom of God" was at best an archaic symbol for culmination of process of inevitable progress.

#### THE RECOVERY OF ESCHATOLOGY

Albert Schweitzer: Quest of the Historical Jesus.

German edition published in 1906; English translation followed four years later.

##### 1. He gave new intp of life of Jesus.

For Schweitzer, center of Jesus teaching was the eschatological element. The new age is about to dawn provides Jesus with his understanding of his mission, and it provides perspective in which all his teachings are set.

Jesus was not a preacher of morals.

He was the herald of coming kingdom of God.

##### 2. Since the appearance of book, few scholars could deny the eschatological element as key to understanding Jesus.

#### IMPORTANT RESULT OF REVIVAL OF INTEREST IN ESCHATOLOGY:

Is the recognition that the church as it is pictured in New Testament does not regard itself primarily as an organization, though it does organize in order to assign responsibilities.

Nor is it a closed corporation, established to serve as the protector of the body of truth committed to it by God.

Rather, the church is the community of those who are convinced that the God of history has acted decisively in Jesus Christ to achieve the redemption of his creation,

-to overcome the evil at work in it

-and to bring the whole into subjection to his sovereignty.

In spite of periodic lapses into complacency, in the long run the community of the New Covenant has never been willing to accept the status quo,

since it has believed that its destiny lay not in this age, even at its best, but in the age to come.

Although community's history has been one of conflict within and hostile pressure from without,

it has refused to die in despair but has continued through the centuries to live in hope.

(PAU)

1. *Religion* *Bible* *Bk 6* *(5a)*

THE APOCALYPTIC DRAMA

James L. Price, Interpreting the New Testament, 558

1. Period of catastrophies on earth and in heaven
2. The coming of Christ to destroy the powers of evil
3. The final judgment with its eternal rewards and penalties.

HOW BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY HAS BEEN EXPRESSED

Robert m. Brown, The Bible speaks to You, p. 206

1. The OT books to the future.

The present is ambiguous: God chooses a people and that people forsake him; power in God's world goes to nations who do not acknowledge him; the way of the wicked prospers.

Consequently, the OT asserts, these ambiguities will finally be overcome. God will intervene to re-establish his righteousness.

The writers describe this fact by such eschatological phrases as the "Day of the Lord," "Age to Come" "Last days".

Sometimes this Day of the Lord is interpreted as a judgment: "It is darkness, and not light" (Amos 5:18)

Sometimes: as restoration: rebellious nations will be tramped underfoot, and the people of God will be restored, after their experience of suffering.

Sometimes: connected with hope of a Messiah who will come to vindicate God and God's people.

Then God will be all in all, the people will follow his will, and there will be a kind of earthly paradise.

Toward end of OT period we see a shift in this king.

In Daniel (last OT book to be written) the scene of New Age seems to shift from earth to somewhere else.

There will be violent interruption of the historical process, history itself will be transformed into something utterly different, and in an indescribable way God's rule will be manifested, not just on earth, but throughout the entire cosmos.

The NT atmosphere is somewhat different.

It is claimed that the "end" has come, but in a way very different from what OT expected.

With sending of his Son, Jesus Christ, God has actively intervened in human life. Christ has come, and with him has come the beginning of the Day of the Lord. And very soon, the NT avers, the full consummation will take place. Christ will return again, and "end" will be completed.

In the interim, Christians are to live as citizens both of the present age and the "age to come".

#### LOOK AT THE TERMS:

##### I. The Second Coming of Christ.

Just as the Creation stories say, "In the beginning God", so statements about the Second Coming affirm, "In the end Christ".

History is encompassed before and after by God.

God is the sovereign Lord of history.

History, in other words, moves toward Christ, rather than away from Christ. It is in terms of him that our history is to be understood.

The first coming of Christ is our present clue to what life is all about.

The claim that he will "come again" promises that what we now know of him in part will be clarified in full.

##### II. The Antichrist.

Antichrist is embodiment of all that is evil.

The Antichrist is revealed at the "end", along with true Christ.

The figure of Antichrist stands for fact that evil will continue up to the very end.

Is this a irrational, fantastic bit of imagery?

-the world does not, in fact, get "better and better"

-each new historical advance brings a new peril.

the greater the advance, the greater the peril.

Today we stand on brink of world community, but we also stand on brink of world destruction.

It is this kind of thing that the symbol of Antichrist makes plain. Evil persists, right up to the end.

##### III. The Last Judgment

1. The notion of a time of taking stock, of a judgment, means that what happens in human life has lasting consequences.

Right and wrong are significant and do make a difference, and some kind of accounting will be made concerning them.

Some thoughts on Judgment.

1. Some think that our relationship to God is based strictly on merit.

2. Not merit, but forgiveness and love.

We are dependent, no matter how good or bad we are, upon the mercy and love of God.



pages 1, 2. Summary of Epilogue  
pages 3, 4. Antiqua

## EPILOGUE

(a concluding section that rounds out the design of a literary work)

Marcus J. Borg, Reading the Bible Again for the First Time.

His Introduction:

① "I close with some personal reflections...I do not have an objective vantage point outside of my own history. All any of us can do is to say, "Here's how I see it."

③ He continues: "For me, this book comes down to what I have been able to see thus far about how to read the Bible again for the first time"

② Nevertheless, he says, "in this Epilogue, I give myself permission to speak about how it all comes together for me—about how I see "the whole" of the Bible and "the whole" of the Christian life at a very elemental level."

essential

## Part II

About the Bible (leggy)

1. "The Bible contains different voices (and thus different visions) of what life is about. And for each of the speakers, "what life is about" meant "what life with God" is about."

2. Then he focuses on two major voices expressed in the Bible. One dealing with "what life is about" called Royal theology and the other "what life with God" is about ~~called~~ prophetic criticizing and energizing.

Royal Theology \*\*\* (see below)

it shows the way the world looks from the elite point of view.

1. He takes Egypt and Pharaoh as a type, an archetype of the elite point of organizing human society. He describes such societies with three phrases:

-economic exploitation page 104

-political oppression (ordinary people had no voice in the structuring of society)

-and religious legitimization (the religion of the elites affirmed that the structures of society were ordained by God. page 104)

Prophetic criticizing and energizing left with God which allows you to see what life is about

1. Prophetic voices directed against the elites who were responsible for creating and maintaining structures of domination and exploitation

## ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION page 104

In Biblical times, societies had two primary social classes. Urban ruling elites—elites holding the reins of power, wealth, and status—consisted of the traditional aristocracy, with the monarchy at its center. With their extended families, these elites comprised about one to two percent of the population. The other primary social class, typically making up slightly over ninety percent of the population, was composed of rural peasants (mostly agricultural workers, but also fishers, artisans and so forth). The key economic fact of the central dynamic of these societies is this: roughly two-thirds of annual production of wealth (mostly from agriculture, and thus produced by peasants) ended up in the hands of the ruling elites. The means whereby they acquired their wealth were primarily twofold: taxation on agricultural production, and direct ownership of agricultural land (with peasants working as share-croppers, day-laborers or slaves.) The consequences for peasant existence were dire: unrelenting labor, borderline nourishment, high infant mortality and radically lower life expectancies. page 104

it was more than a wedding, we slept with the dominant culture, thus "domesticating" culture and leaving the domination systems of our day intact.

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\* for a detail account of Egypt and Pharaoh as perfect type of the "ancient domination system" or the preindustrial agrarian empire, see Chapter 5, Reading the Pentateuch Again, page 103f

Part IV

The Three Primary Biblical Vision of Life with God

First. There is a deep sense of the reality of the Sacred.  
God is not only Real, but Knowable.

Second. We live with God in a conscious relationship.

Third: God is a God of Justice and Compassion.

FIRST. God is not only Real, but Knowable

1. There is a deep sense of the reality of the Sacred
2. This Sacred, this Mystery, This God
  - is known experientially
  - transcends empires, emperor, nations, kings
  - transcends all of our domestications of reality

SECOND. We live with God in a conscious relationship

1. Our life with God is about relationship...covenantly relationship  
...about becoming conscious...about becoming intentional  
about deepening our relationship with God..about  
faithfulness, fidelity
2. Taking covenant seriously is the path of our life...it is a path  
of personal transformation. It involves dying to an old way of  
being and being born into a new way of being.

THIRD. God is a God of justice and compassion

-not criminal justice  
system.

-not procedural justice.

"fair play" that laws and

legal processes same for  
everybody. Focus on

individual (goes nicely

within core Am. cultural value  
of individualism.

SOCIAL JUSTICE. concerned with

structures of society and their

results. Justice of social

systems.

Affirms God's character, will,

Prophetic: God and justice.

1. The God of the Bible is full of compassion and passionate about  
justice.

"God's passion for justice flows out of the very character of God.

God cares about suffering, and the single greatest source of un-

necessary human misery is unjust and oppressive cultural systems.

These systems range from a few that have been relatively benign

and humane to more that have been demonically destructive, with

many in the middle range of mildly to severely oppressive. The

God about whom these voices speak wills human well-being and

rages against all humanly constructed systems that inflict

unnecessary wounds. They speak about God's passion for life on

earth—for the dream of God in the world of the everyday."

and justice different form justice of oppressive social orders.

A SUMMARY: A simple vision of the Christian Life page 301

From the above three primary Biblical Vision of Life with God, Borg states  
for he calls "A simple Vision of the Christian Life"

The first relationship is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the  
Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your  
Strength." This is the great and first relationship. And a second  
relationship is like it. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."  
On these two relationships depend all the Law and the Prophets."

And Borg wants to say something more. So he said it:

"Of course, being Christian means more than this. It means living  
within Christian community and letting one's life be shaped by that  
community's scriptures, stories, songs, rituals and practices." 302

In this process of shaping Christian identity and vision in community,  
the Bible has a central role. The Bible is the source of our images,  
and stories for speaking of God's passion.

THIRD. God is a God of justice and compassion

1. The God of the Bible is full of compassion and passionate about justice.

Part V

A SUMMARY: A simple vision of the Christian Life *you have a*  
FROM THE ABOVE three primary elements ~~life a remarkably~~ simple  
vision of the Christian life.

The first relationship is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." This is the great and first relationship. And a second relationship is like it. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two relationships depend all the Law and the Prophets."

And Borg wants to say something more. So he said it.

"Of course, being Christian means more than this. It means living within Christian community and letting one's life be shaped by that community's scriptures, stories, songs, rituals and practices."

In this process of shaping Christian identity and vision in community, the Bible has a central role. The Bible is the source of our images, and stories for speaking of God's passion.

## CRITIQUE

### Part 1. Subjectivity

Question: why Epilogue starts with these words: "I close with some personal reflections."

Comment: Remember the focus of the book is on READING the Bible.  
Focus on READING and what comes to your mind: CONFLICT about how we read the Bible.

What we learn from his PREFACE

"Conflict about the Bible is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today." (ix)

"The conflict is between two very different ways of reading the Bible.  
- a conflict between a "literal-factual" way  
-and a "historical-metaphorical" way.

What Borg attempts to do: (2 things)

- a) to address the present conflict about the Bible within the church
- b) provide Christians with a persuasive way of seeing and reading their sacred Scripture, a way that takes the Bible seriously without taking it literally. (xi)
- c) and he makes it clear: he chooses to represent the historical-metaphorical side of the debate. (ix)

Now comes the basic issue: how to interpret the biblical tradition?

His answer is clear: "what I present here is a way of seeing and reading the Bible that flows out of my total life experience:

- my education as a student of the Bible
- my vocation as a teacher of biblical and religious studies
- my journey as a Christian
- and what I have learned from the journeys of others." (xi)

Then comes his exclamation points:

"To say the obvious, the book reflects my own subjectivity.  
There is no point in pretending objectivity, as if I (or anybody) could have had a vantage point outside of one's own personal and cultural history." (xi)

This subjectivity is unavoidable; to be affirmed

"Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world." Schopenhauer

And yet, Subjectivity (I) is shaped by "WE" We go to Martin Buber

"In the beginning, relation", Buber

In the beginning—others: persons, trees, birds, the whole creation.

It is the "We" which creates the "I"

—what makes me to be a singular "I"?—the presence of the other.

The I develops by loving others—persons, trees, whole creation

I continue to exist as myself only because I am loved by others. The great aim of life is to know and be oneself, but we can only know and be ourselves insofar as we are open to others.

And Borg agrees with Buber, see page 299 (Epilogue)

He says, "we live with God in a conscious relationship...in covenantly relationship. It is his second primary biblical vision of life with God. Taking covenant seriously is the path of our life...it is a path of personal transformation. It involves dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) can be a guide for us here.

He said, whatever may be true or untrue about anything, all this is of no relevance to the individual who is passionately concerned with what is true for him/her.

Such subjective truth--truth for me...is found in faith and in decision.

"The decision lies in the subject...the thing of being a Christian is not determined by the what of Christianity, but by the how of the Christian." This how is faith. A Christian is a Christian by faith. This subjective truth is not "individualistic" or "I". Rather, it is "We".

Borg summarizes this Faith, this "We" in these words;

"To be Christian means to live within the world created by the Bible. We are to listen to it well and let its central stories shape our vision of God, our identity, and our sense of what faithfulness to God means. It is to shape our imagination, ~~that~~ <sup>the</sup> part of our psyches in which our foundational images of reality and life reside. We are to be a community shaped by scripture. The purpose of our continuing dialogue with the Bible as sacred scripture is nothing less than that." page 31

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Borg calls Brueggemann the best known Hebrew Bible scholar in North America 103

#### WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, THE BIBLE MAKES SENSE 1977

##### CHAPTER 10. Summary: Perspective on the Bible

1. This is a particular perspective on the Bible.  
Hence, not the only way of understanding the Bible
2. But this perspective is both:  
-faithful to the character of the Bible  
-and energizing for faith/life of the church.
3. What each perspective does:  
it shapes how the text is interpreted.
4. What we are dealing with:  
-with presuppositions, hence results are often already implicit in the presuppositions.

##### What are the presuppositions implicit in the perspective in the Bible?

First: Bible is a present resource for faith.

Second: Bible is to be discerned as much as a set of questions posed to church as a set of answers.

Third: Bible is not a statement of conclusions but a statement of presuppositions.

Fourth: Bible is not an "object" for us to study but a partner with whom we may dialogue.

Fifth: Bible has both a central direction and a rich diversity.

Sixth: Bible is a lens through which all of life is to be discerned.

##### FIRST: Bible is a present resource for faith.

1. It presumes that there is some significant impingement of these old texts upon the present.
2. Bible is a book in and for the believing community.  
-the Hebrew scriptures for Jewish people.  
-the Old and New for Christian Church.
3. Bible is a confessional statement kept alive in a confessing community
4. Our work: to get inside the confessions and traditions which can still be energizing for the church.

SECOND ISAIAH

1. Borg left out any mention of the Servant of the Lord.  
-a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.

2. Servant who is to come

he was a future figure, but he was also a figure of present age.

Diffrence: we inist on measureing time as a chronolgical progression from present to future. Bit in propheitic literature historical time is not measured gy calendar, but gy God's activity, God's purpose. From this perspecitvd, the future can enter the present, te power of the coing kingodm can be felt in the old order.

#### Victory thru Suffering.

He afirmed that Isarael would be hightly exalted thru suffering.  
this was the deepest mystery of her calling.

It is thru this suffering of the Servant that God inaugurattes his kingodm.

3. A man of sorrows. 52:13-53-12.

Nations confess that the Servant's sacrficie was Yahweh's redemptpive act for thekr welfare, thir slavaiton. "all we like sheep have gone astray; we hae turned efery one to his own wya; and Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 53:6

4. Vicarious Sacrifice.

Vicarious sacrifice--a sacrifice behalf of others--  
was widely prvalent in anciety world, and belief undrwent a special devleopment within Israel's cultic tradiotn.

In II Isaiah's pportrait of Suffeirng Servnat, the theology of sacrifice attaiend its highest expression in the O.T. It is a willing self-sacrifice made for others. The sadcrifice mvoes the nations to confess that power is made availabe for thier healing. Thru it they are made whole.

SECOND: Bible is to be discerned as much as a set of questions posed to church as a set of answers.

1. There is answer--e.g. tht in God self-giving graciousness and undoubted sovereignty are identical.
2. Bible is often perverted when regarded as an answer book or a security blanket. Bible is not a resolver of moral dilemmas or as a code of proper conduct. The end result of all this is to attribute to Bible an absolute, unchanging quality which denies freedom to God and which denies our own historical responsibility.
3. Bible is concerned with faithful relationships between God and his people, between his community and the world he has made.  
Faithful relationships can never be reduced to formulae but live always in free, risking exchange that belongs to covenanting.
4. Central concerns of Bible are not flat certitudes but assurances that are characterized by risk and open mystery. The quality of certitude offered by Bible is never that of a correct answer but rather of: a trusted memory; a dynamic image; a restless journey; a faithful voice.
5. Central thrust of Bible, then, is to raise new questions; to press exploration of new dimensions of fidelity, and new spheres for trusting. Such questions serve as invitations to bolder, richer faithfulness.

THIRD: Bible is not a statement of conclusions but a statement of presuppositions.

1. To treat the Bible as though it "proves" things is both to misunderstand it and to judge it by alien processes. Proof always belongs to realm of scientific verification, either by empirical or rational investigation
2. This is not characteristic way of Bible. Characteristic logic of Bible is confessional, assertive, and unargued.
  - a) Bible does not examine creation and conclude that God is creator.
  - b) It does not review Israel's history and conclude that God redeems.
  - c) It does not probe the history of church and prove that Jesus has been raised.
3. Rather, Bible asserts that God is creator and then draws derivative statements about creation.  
It confesses that God redeems and then asserts what this means for history.  
It affirms that Jesus is raised and then makes claims for church.
4. The central substance of bible is not based in proof but in the courage and sureness of witnesses who dare bring testimony. And that testimony is in the posture of confession, not proof.
5. Central substance of Bible is kerygma i.e. proclamation which is never argued or demonstrated or proven, but only proclaimed as bedrock of faith. Thus acceptance of "authority of Scripture" is based on a faith-decision to take as binding the voice of faith heard in the text.

FOURTH: Bible is not an "object" for us to study but a partner with whom we may dialogue.

1. It is usual in our modern world to regard any "thing" as an object which will yield its secrets to us if we are diligent and discerning.  
Indeed we tend to do the same with persons, reducing them to objects so that they can be "read like a book".
2. Such a process reduces both the object and the subject. The one is passively acted upon; the other becomes an agent who acts in a unilateral way. Such a process violates the character of both parties, for in the image of God we are meant for kind of dialogue in which we are each time nurtured and called into question by the dialogue partner.
3. It is task of Christian maturing to become more fully dialogical, to be more fully available to and responsive to dialogue partner.
4. Reading the Bible requires that we abandon the subject-object way of perceiving things. It requires that we give up notion of Bible as a "book" to be acted upon, analyzed, studied and interpreted.



5. Bible is not a closed object but a dialogue partner whom we must address but which also takes us seriously.  
We may analyze, but we must also listen and expect to be addressed.  
We listen to have our identity given to us; our present way called into question; and our future promised to us.

FIFTH: Bible has both a central direction and a rich diversity

1. There's diversity...meaning not all parts will cohere or agree.
  - a) Bible presents us with treasure of many people in many times and places trying to live and believe faithfully.
  - b) So, do not be reductionist because richness staggers us and will not be contained in our best categories.
2. But theologians also stress singularity of Bible.  
It is, in a clear way, about one thing:  
There is "one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all."  
Eph 4:5-6
3. We must not trivialize the Bible by fragmenting it into many things in which we miss its central agenda.  
We may not choose between these.

On the one hand there is a rich unpredictability of many resources which can be employed in many different ways.

On the other hand, there is a disciplined constancy in which all experience coheres and has a single destiny.

SIXTH: Bible is a lens through which all of life is to be discerned

1. All experience is seen through some set of experiences and some set of presuppositions.  
We must become more knowing about the various lenses which reflect our interests and ideologies and decisively shape what we see.
2. The Bible is a very peculiar lens.  
It is radically different from every other perspective.  
It claims our perception at the most elemental levels.  
It calls into question every other way of seeing life.
3. Thus, at bottom the Bible invites us to be a very different way of knowing, discerning and deciding.
4. All of this argues for a peculiar character and promise of Bible which must be confessed and honored in all its power.  
Danger for serious Christians:  
Bible is domesticated and subordinated to other frames of reference.
5. Bible affirms every different paradigm for humanness.  
Ever since Exodus, the Bible has been asserting the rhetorical question:  
"Who is like thee, O Lord, among the gods?  
Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" Exod 15:11

This proclamation of Exodus is that proclamation which determines the shape of the tradition.

The answer to these questions is of course; NONE!

Out of that comes a notion of our distinctiveness as his children and his people.

It is cause for celebration and risk.

It is also a point of entry for discerning what the Bible means to announce and what it promises to his faithful people.

Enduring Problem:

Question of Christianity and Culture. This is a problem inherent within Christian faith.

1. Helpful to know that repeated struggles of Christians with this problem have yielded no single Christian answer. Only a series of typical answers which together, for faith, represent phases of strategy of much in the world.
2. Christ's answer to problem of human culture is one thing. Christian answer is another.
3. Conviction of book:  
Christ as living Lord is answering the question of totality of history and life. In a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters, yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts.

Definition of Culture

It is that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name culture, now the name civilization is applied in common speech.

Culture is the "artificial, secondary environment" which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organizations, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values.

New Testament writers call it "the world".

Five Typical Answers of Christ and Culture

1. Christ against culture

Christ confronts men with challenge of an either/or decision.

Whatever customs of society, whatever human achievement it conserves; Christ is seen as opposed to them. Tertulian representative.

2. Christ of Culture

Interprets culture through Christ and Christ through culture. Jesus appears as a great hero to human cultural history. Liberals and culture-Protestantism.

3. Christ above Culture

It affirms both Christ and culture. Christ is Christ of culture yet he is also Christ above culture. Thomas Aquinas as best.

4. Christ and culture in Paradox

It accepts authority of both Christ and culture, but the opposition between them is also accepted. Martin Luther best.

5. Christ the Transformer of culture

Sees human culture as corrupt. Yet it believes that this human culture is under God's sovereign rule.

- many Christians in the churches and the pagan world, its affairs, and its society." John seeks to resist "tendencies in the community to assimilate to this world. . . . The Roman empire did not declare war on the Christians; a Christian prophet declared war on the Roman empire."
50. For a striking tabulation of the symmetrical contrasts between the two cities, see Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, p. 160, and their chapter on "Babylon or New Jerusalem?" pp. 157–96.
  51. The paragraphs that follow are all based on Rev. 21.1–22.5.
  52. The phrase "gold transparent as glass" makes me wonder if John perhaps did see the New Jerusalem in a visionary state (in contrast to the whole of the vision being a literary creation). Mystical experiences are frequently marked by golden light, so much so that the historian of religions Mircea Eliade refers to such experiences as "experiences of the golden world." Cited by Robert A. Johnson (with Jerry M. Ruhl) in *Balancing Heaven and Earth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 2.
  53. As noted in chap. 6, I owe the phrase "the dream of God" to the title of Verna Dozier's book, *The Dream of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1991).
  54. Rev. 14.4. For critiques of his misogynistic language and two different ways of dealing with it, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) and Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).
  55. Rev. 14.20.
  56. See John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 586

## Epilogue

I close with some personal reflections. Of course, the whole book reflects my personal perceptions. I do not have an objective vantage point outside of my own history. All any of us can do is to say, "Here's how I see it." We can muster our reasons for seeing in a certain way, of course. But ultimately it is always personal. For me, this book comes down to what I have been able to see thus far about how to read the Bible.

So the whole book has been personal. Nevertheless, in this epilogue, I give myself permission to speak about how it all comes together for me—about how I see "the whole" of the Bible and "the whole" of the Christian life at a very elemental level. And if what I say perhaps has application to other religions as well, that is *lagniappe*, a bonus.

It is clear to me that the Bible speaks with more than one voice. I do not mean simply that many authors, communities, and storytellers speak in it, though this is true. Nor do I mean simply that in, with, and under these human voices the voice of the Spirit sometimes speaks to us, though this is also true. In addition to all of that, I mean that the Bible contains different voices (and thus different visions) of what life is about. And for each of the speakers, "what life is about" meant "what life with God" is about. Thus the Bible contains different voices responding to this central question.

These different voices are found throughout the history of the biblical period, as well as in the postbiblical history of Christianity. The conflict between them shapes both testaments. We hear the

different voices in the conflict between the royal theology of pharaohs and kings and caesars, and prophetic protest against it by Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and in their own ways Paul and John of Patmos. Royal theology, whether in biblical or postbiblical forms, legitimates domination systems. Prophetic theology opposes them.

The tension between these voices continues into the present day in both religious and secular forms. Within Christianity, we see an acceptance of royal theology in the alliance between some forms of Christianity and a politics of radical individualism. The emphasis of these belief-forms upon individual responsibility and accountability, though good in itself, ignores the way that systems affect people's lives and leaves the domination systems of our day intact. Secular forms of individualism perform the same legitimization. Other Christians, especially (though not only) in marginalized communities, hear the voice of radical critique of domination systems that sounds through so much of the biblical tradition.

We also hear the different voices in the central conflict within the wisdom tradition. Some voices affirm a confident conventional wisdom that makes life "safe" by domesticating it. Other voices subvert the easy confidence of convention and affirm an alternative wisdom much more in touch with the wildness of life.

The tension between these voices also continues into the present day. Systems of conventional wisdom, both secular and religious, not only domesticate reality but put us in bondage to the internalized messages we acquire in our socialization. But does convention—even religious convention—come from God? Or is it like a grid that we lay over reality—a grid that in fact estranges us from "what is"? Is conventional wisdom to be blessed? Or is it to be let go of for the sake of following the road not taken? Is conventional wisdom an accurate map of how things are? Or is it a rough guide and a pointer to a sacred Mystery that lies right behind it?

Affirmations of both ways of seeing life are found in the Bible and in postbiblical Christianity. Much of Christianity through the centuries and into the present has simply been conventional wisdom in Christian form: a domestication of reality with Christian language and directives for how to live one's life—"Follow

this way and all will go well." The second way is the common voice of Job, Ecclesiastes, Jesus, and Paul. It surfaces again and again in the more experiential and spiritual stream of the Bible. Experience, and the experience of the Spirit, make it clear that convention is just that: convention.

From these paragraphs and this book as a whole, it is clear that among these voices I have favorites. I think I can make a decent case that the voices I favor are the major voices of the Bible, and that I am "hearing" them reasonably accurately (at least at a very general level).

Nevertheless, as I now suggest what I think I hear these voices saying, I want to acknowledge again that I am aware of how subjective all this is. But subjectivity in this arena is unavoidable.

¶The major voices of the biblical tradition, as I hear them, share three primary convictions in common:

¶First, there is a deep sense of the reality of the sacred. God is not only real, but knowable. Moreover, the sacred is known not in a set of statements about God, but experientially, as a Mystery beyond all language. This Mystery—God—transcends all of our domestications of reality, including those generated by theology and even the Bible itself. God also transcends empires and emperors, nations and kings. These humans and their creations are not lords; God alone is. God also transcends peoples and religions, and thus a unity is possible in the God who made heaven and earth that is not possible when lesser lords of cultures and religions rule.

¶Second, there is a strong conviction that our lives are made "whole" and "right" by living in a conscious relationship with the Mystery who is alone Lord. Life with God is not about believing certain teachings about God. It is about a covenant—a relationship. More specifically, it is about becoming conscious of a relationship that already exists, for the God of the Bible has been in relationship with us from our beginning, whether we know it or not, believe it or not. And we are not simply to become conscious of it; we are to become intentional about deepening the relationship. Christian faith is not about believing, but about faithfulness—fidelity—to the relationship. To use the rela-

tional metaphor at the center of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament: we are in a covenant with the sacred. Taking that covenant seriously is the path of life.

As the path of life, this relationship is the path of personal transformation. It is the path of liberation from existential, psychological, and spiritual bondage to the lords of convention and culture. It involves dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being. It is life lived in accord with radical monotheism: centering one's life in God rather than in the rival lords of culture and convention.

[Third, these voices are convinced that God is a God of justice and compassion.] The God of the Bible is full of compassion and passionate about justice. God's passion for justice flows out of the very character of God. God cares about suffering, and the single greatest source of unnecessary human misery is unjust and oppressive cultural systems. These systems range from a few that have been relatively benign and humane to more that have been demonically destructive, with many in the middle range of mildly to severely oppressive. The God about whom these voices speak wills human well-being and rages against all humanly constructed systems that inflict unnecessary wounds. They speak about God's passion for life on earth—for the dream of God in the world of the everyday.

God's passion is the ground of a biblical ethic centered in justice and compassion. Both words—"justice" and "compassion"—are needed. Justice without compassion easily sounds like "just politics"; compassion without justice too easily becomes individualized and systemically acquiescent.

By justice, as mentioned earlier in this book, I do not mean primarily criminal justice or procedural justice, but substantive or systemic justice: a justice judged by its results. But to emphasize God's passion for systemic and structural justice alone, as some theologies do, makes it sound as if the biblical message is primarily about politics and public morality and not very much about individuals at all. The message of the Bible's passion for social justice should always be grounded in the reality of God and accompanied by the message of personal liberation.

Yet the word "justice" is utterly essential, for to speak of compassion without justice easily turns the Bible's passion for the victims of systems into the importance of individual kind deeds and charity. Charity and kind deeds are always good; there will always be need for help. But the individualization of compassion means that one does not ask how many of the suffering are in fact victims. Compassion without justice can mean caring for victims while quietly acquiescing to a system that creates ever more victims. Justice means asking why there are so many victims and then doing something about it.

So these three, I am suggesting, are at the core of the biblical vision of life with God: a sacred Mystery at the center of life, with whom we are to be in a conscious relationship and who is passionate about the well-being of the whole creation. We are called to participate in the passion of God. This is what I perceive when I use the Bible as a lens for seeing life with God, when I think of it as a finger pointing to the moon, when I hear it as the foundation of the Christian cultural-linguistic world, and when I listen to it as a sacrament of the sacred.

[From these three core elements flows a remarkably simple vision of the Christian life. It is not complicated, though it is challenging. It is crystallized in the very familiar twofold "great commandment" attributed to Jesus.] I prefer to think of it as the "great relationship," and I thus paraphrase it as follows:<sup>1</sup>

[The first relationship is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." This is the great and first relationship. And a second relationship is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two relationships depend all the Law and the Prophets.]

The two primary relationships are common to Judaism and Christianity. Central to the Christian tradition and spoken by Jesus, they are also both quotations from and central to the Hebrew Bible. The first is the *Shema*, the classic Jewish expression

of faith through the centuries; the second is from the book of Leviticus.<sup>2</sup> Judaism and Christianity share this elemental core in common.

Thus at the center of a life grounded in the Bible is the twofold focus of the great relationship. Of course, being Christian means more than this. It means living within Christian community and letting one's life be shaped by that community's scriptures, stories, songs, rituals, and practices. Community is not only central to the biblical vision (the New Jerusalem, after all, is a *city*); it also mediates the internalization of a new identity and vision. At its best, Christian community nourishes the alternative life of centering in God and instills a passion for compassion and justice for the whole creation.

In this process of shaping Christian identity and vision in community, the Bible has a central role, perhaps second only to that of the Spirit. As the foundation of the Christian tradition, the Bible is the source of our images and stories for speaking of God's passion. Thus its interpretation shapes our vision of what it means to take the God of the Bible seriously. The Bible is also a sacrament of the same sacred Mystery, a means whereby God speaks to us still today. Through and within the Bible's many voices, we are called to discern *the voice* that addresses us in our time. And listen: what we hear matters greatly. It makes all the difference.

## NOTES

1. Matt. 22.37–40; see also Mark 12.29–31. I owe the relational readings of this passage to the Rev. Dr. Fred Burnham of Trinity Institute, New York City.
2. Deut. 6.4–5; Lev. 19.18.

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**Romans:** 3.9, 19-20, 23, 253; 3.24-25, 253, 257, 263n.79; 4.5, 253; 5.8, 10, 253, 257;

5.12-21, 246, 261n.47; 6.3-4, 249; 6.6-7, 18, 22, 247; 7.7-24, 247, 261n.48; 7.12, 254; 8.4-17, 248, 261n.53; 8.35, 38-39, 251; 10.4, 257, 263n.80; 12.1-2, 249; 12.4-5, 250

**I Samuel:** 8.4-22, 129; 8.11-18, 129; 9.1-10.16, 129; 10.17-19, 129

**II Samuel:** 7.1-17, 129

**Sirach (Wisdom of Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus):** 24, 180n.8

**I Thessalonians:** 4.13-18, 260n.39, 293n.17

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The Three Primary Biblical Vision of Life with God

First. There is a deep sense of the reality of the Sacred.  
God is not only Real, but Knowable.

Second. We live with God in a conscious relationship.

Third: God is a God of Justice and Compassion.

FIRST. God is not only Real, but Knowable

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2. This Sacred, this Mystery, This God
  - is known experientially
  - transcends empires, emperor, nations, kings
  - transcends all of our domestications of reality

SECOND. We live with God in a conscious relationship

1. Our life with God is about relationship...covenantly relationship  
...about becoming conscious...about becoming intentional  
about deepening our relationship with God..about  
faithfulness, fidelity
2. Taking covenant seriously is the path of our life...it is a path  
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1. The God of the Bible is full of compassion and passionate about  
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Part V

A SUMMARY: A simple vision of the Christian Life *you have a*  
FROM THE ABOVE three primary elements ~~life is~~ *life is* remarkably simple  
vision of the Christian life.

The first relationship is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." This is the great and first relationship. And a second relationship is like it. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two relationships depend all the Law and the Prophets."

And Borg wants to say something more. So he said it.

"Of course, being Christian means more than this. It means living within Christian community and letting one's life be shaped by that community's scriptures, stories, songs, rituals and practices."

In this process of shaping Christian identity and vision in community, the Bible has a central role. The Bible is the source of our images, and stories for speaking of God's passion.

CRITIQUE

Part 1. Subjectivity

Question: why Epilogue starts with these words: "I close with some personal reflections."

Comment: Remember the focus of the book is on READING the Bible.  
Focus on READING and what comes to your mind: CONFLICT about how we read the Bible.

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"Conflict about the Bible is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today." (ix)

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What Borg attempts to do: (2 things)

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Now comes the basic issue: how to interpret the biblical tradition?

His answer is clear: "what I present here is a way of seeing and reading the Bible that flows out of my total life experience:  
-my education as a student of the Bible  
-my vocation as a teacher of biblical and religious studies  
-my journey as a Christian  
-and what I have learned from the journeys of others." (xi)

Then comes his exclamation points:

"To say the obvious, the book reflects my own subjectivity.  
There is no point in pretending objectivity, as if I (or anybody) could have had a vantage point outside of one's own personal and cultural history." (xi)

This subjectivity is unavoidable; to be affirmed

"Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world." Schopenhauer

And yet, Subjectivity (I) is shaped by "WE" We go to Martin Buber

"In the beginning, relation", Buber

In the beginnig--others: persons, trees, birds, the whole creation.

It is the "We" which creates the "I"

-what makes me to be a singular "I"?--the presence of the other.

The I develops by loving others--persons, trees, whole creation

I continue to existe as myself only because I am loved by others. The great aim of life is to know and be oneself, but we can only know and be ourselves insofar as we are open to others.

And Borg agrees with Buber, see page 299 (Epilogue)

He says, "we live with God in a conscious relationship...in covenantly relationship. It is his second primary biblical vison of life with God. Taking covenant seriously is the path of our life...it is a path of p<sup>er</sup>sonal transformation. It involves dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) can be a guide for us here.

He said, whatever may be true or untrue about anything, all this is of no relevance to the individual who is passionately concerned with what is true for him/her.

Such subjective truth—truth for me...is found in faith and in decision. "The decision lies in the subject...the thing of being a Christian is not determined by the what of Christianity, but by the how of the Christian." This how is faith. A Christian is a Christian by faith. This subjective truth is not "individualistic" or "I". Rather, it is "We".

Borg summarizes this Faith, this "We" in these words;

"To be Christian means to live within the world created by the Bible. We are to listen to it well and let its central stories shape our vision of God, our identity, and our sense of what faithfulness to God means. It is to shape our imagination, that part of our psyches in which our foundational images of reality and life reside. We are to be a community shaped by scripture. The purpose of our continuing dialogue with the Bible as sacred scripture is nothing less than that." page 31

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#### WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, THE BIBLE MAKES SENSE 1977

##### CHAPTER 10. Summary: Perspective on the Bible

1. This is a particular perspective on the Bible.  
Hence, not the only way of understanding the Bible
2. But this perspective is both:  
-faithful to the character of the Bible  
-and energizing for faith/life of the church.
3. What each perspective does:  
it shapes how the text is interpreted.
4. What we are dealing with:  
-with presuppositions, hence results are often already implicit in the presuppositions.

##### What are the presuppositions implicit in the perspective in the Bible?

First: Bible is a present resource for faith.

Second: Bible is to be discerned as much as a set of questions posed to church as a set of answers.

Third: Bible is not a statement of conclusions but a statement of presuppositions.

Fourth: Bible is not an "object" for us to study but a partner with whom we may dialogue.

Fifth: Bible has both a central direction and a rich diversity.

Sixth: Bible is a lens through which all of life is to be discerned.

##### FIRST: Bible is a present resource for faith.

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2. Bible is a book in and for the believing community.  
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3. Bible is a confessional statement kept alive in a confessing community
4. Our work: to get inside the confessions and traditions which can still be energizing for the church.

SECOND: Bible is to be discerned as much as a set of questions posed to church as a set of answers.

1. There is answer—e.g. tht in God self-giving graciousness and undoubted sovereignty are identical.
2. Bible is often perverted when regarded as an answer book or a security blanket. Bible is not a resolver of moral dilemmas or as a code of proper conduct. The end result of all this is to attribute to Bible an absolute, unchanging quality which denies freedom to God and which denies our own historical responsibility.
3. Bible is concerned with faithful relationships between God and his people, between his community and the world he has made.  
Faithful relationships can never be reduced to formulae but live always in free, risking exchange that belongs to covenanting.
4. Central concerns of Bible are not flat certitudes but assurances that are characterized by risk and open mystery. The quality of certitude offered by Bible is never that of a correct answer but rather of: a trusted memory; a dynamic image; a restless journey; a faithful voice.
5. Central thrust of Bible, then, is to raise new questions; to press exploration of new dimensions of fidelity, and new spheres for trusting. Such questions serve as invitations to bolder, richer faithfulness.

THIRD: Bible is not a statement of conclusions but a statement of presuppositions.

1. To treat the Bible as though it "proves" things is both to misunderstand it and to judge it by alien processes. Proof always belongs to realm of scientific verification, either by empirical or rational investigation.
2. This is not characteristic way of Bible. Characteristic logic of Bible is confessional, assertive, and unargued.
  - a) Bible does not examine creation and conclude that God is creator.
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3. Rather, Bible asserts that God is creator and then draws derivative statements about creation.  
It confesses that God redeems and then asserts what this means for history.  
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5. Central substance of Bible is kerygma i.e. proclamation which is never argued or demonstrated or proven, but only proclaimed as bedrock of faith. Thus acceptance of "authority of Scripture" is based on a faith-decision to take as binding the voice of faith heard in the text.

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1. It is usual in our modern world to regard any "thing" as an object which will yield its secrets to us if we are diligent and discerning.  
Indeed we tend to do the same with persons, reducing them to objects so thaht they can be "read like a book".
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Such a process violates the character of both parties, for in the image of God we are meant for kind of dialogue in which we are each time nurtured and called into question by the dialogue partner.
3. It is task of Christian maturing to become more fully dislogical, to be more fully available to and responsive to dialogue partner.
4. Reading the Bible requires that we abandon the subject-object way of perceiving things. It requires taht we give up notion of Bible as a "book" to be acted upon, analyzed, studied and interpreted.



5. Bible is not a closed object but a dialogue partner whom we must address but which also takes us seriously.  
We may analyze, but we must also listen and expect to be addressed.  
We listen to have our identity given to us; our present way called into question; and our future promised to us.

FIFTH: Bible has both a central direction and a rich diversity

1. There's diversity...meaning not all parts will cohere or agree.
  - a) Bible presents us with treasure of many people in many times and places trying to live and believe faithfully.
  - b) So, do not be reductionist because richness staggers us and will not be contained in our best categories.
2. But theologians also stress singularity of Bible.  
It is, in a clear way, about one thing:  
There is "one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all."  
Eph 4:5-6
3. We must not trivialize the Bible by fragmenting it into many things in which we miss its central agenda.  
We may not choose between these.

On the one hand there is a rich unpredictability of many resources which can be employed in many different ways.

On the other hand, there is a disciplined constancy in which all experience coheres and has a single destiny.

SIXTH: Bible is a lens through which all of life is to be discerned

1. All experience is seen through some set of experiences and some set of presuppositions.  
We must become more knowing about the various lenses which reflect our interests and ideologies and decisively shape what we see.
2. The Bible is a very peculiar lens.  
It is radically different from every other perspective.  
It claims our perception at the most elemental levels.  
It calls into question every other way of seeing life.
3. Thus, at bottom the Bible invites us to be a very different way of knowing, discerning and deciding.
4. All of this argues for a peculiar character and promise of Bible which must be confessed and honored in all its power.  
Danger for serious Christians:  
Bible is domesticated and subordinated to other frames of reference.
5. Bible affirms every different paradigm for humanness.  
Ever since Exodus, the Bible has been asserting the rhetorical question:  
"Who is like thee, O Lord, among the gods?  
Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" Exod 15:11

This proclamation of Exodus is that proclamation which determines the shape of the tradition.

The answer to these questions is of course; NONE!

Out of that comes a notion of our distinctiveness as his children and his people.

It is cause for celebration and risk.

It is also a point of entry for discerning what the Bible means to announce and what it promises to his faithful people.

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FIFTH: Bible has both a central direction and a rich diversity

1. There's diversity...meaning not all parts will cohere or agree.
  - a) Bible presents us with treasure of many people in many times and places trying to live and believe faithfully.
  - b) So, do not be reductionist because richness staggers us and will not be contained in our best categories.
2. But theologians also stress singularity of Bible.  
It is, in a clear way, about one thing:  
There is "one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all."  
Eph 4:5-6
3. We must not trivialize the Bible by fragmenting it into many things in which we miss its central agenda.  
We may not choose between these.

On the one hand there is a rich unpredictability of many resources which can be employed in many different ways.

On the other hand, there is a disciplined constancy in which all experience coheres and has a single destiny.

SIXTH: Bible is a lens through which all of life is to be discerned.

1. All experience is seen through some set of experiences and some set of presuppositions.  
We must become more knowing about the various lenses which reflect our interests and ideologies and decisively shape what we see.
2. The Bible is a very peculiar lens.  
It is radically different from every other perspective.  
It claims our perception at the most elemental levels.  
It calls into question every other way of seeing life.
3. Thus, at bottom the Bible invites us to be a very different way of knowing, discerning and deciding.
4. All of this argues for a peculiar character and promise of Bible which must be confessed and honored in all its power.  
Danger for serious Christians:  
Bible is domesticated and subordinated to other frames of reference.
5. Bible affirms every different paradigm for humanness.  
Ever since Exodus, the Bible has been asserting the rhetorical question  
"Who is like thee, O Lord, among the gods?  
Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" Exod 15:11

This proclamation of Exodus is that proclamation which determines the shape of the tradition.

The answer to these questions is of course; NONE!

Out of that comes a notion of our distinctiveness as his children and his people.

It is cause for celebration and risk.

It is also a point of entry for discerning what the Bible means to announce and what it promises to his faithful people.