

# **The Gospels**

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These notes on the gospels began as a compilation of material in preparation for Ken Gilbert's class at Valley Church, Cupertino, California, on a harmony of the Gospels in 2009. This work begins with Ken's famous disclaimer. Don't believe anything I say. Study for yourself. Sometimes I play the role of "Devil's Advocate", expressing a view that isn't necessarily mine. I write tersely and sometimes in extreme terms so the reader can quickly get the idea and think about it. I invite argument against any such view, but I expect any argument to be reasoned, supported, and substantive, and based on something more solid than doctrine. Visit your church library and your local public library. Anyone who is honestly and openly studying to understand these writings will encounter these views. Unless otherwise stated, many of the sources cited or quoted here represent a consensus of serious modern scholars of the Bible texts. Modern, because a large share of the writings we have today from this era were discovered during my lifetime. Though we may not agree with all of them, we should be aware of them, and have good reasons for maintaining divergent views.

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## Background

### *Brief History of Israel*

A loose confederation of Semitic tribes led by judges coalesced into a kingdom, ruled first by Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, around 1020BC. The tribal city-state lifestyle of the Semitic peoples had narrowed within Israel by the teachings and writings of the Mosaic priesthood. The accounts of military conquests and the narrowness of the religious practices had given this people a ‘national’ identity by differentiating them from their neighbors. The credit for forming a strong, unified monarchy of both the northern and southern tribes is usually given to David, around 1006BC. This lasted around 76 years, until around 930BC, when the kingdom split into Israel (north) and Judah (south). Israel lasted until around 720BC, when it was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. The people were carried off into captivity. Assyria required its captives to abandon their own religions and adopt the religion of the Assyrians. These 'lost' tribes of Israel merely lost their unique identity and their religion as they were assimilated. Judah lasted until 586BC, when it was conquered by the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians were more accommodating, and allowed their captives to continue to practice their own historic religious traditions, as long as they didn't rebel politically, and as long as they put in a good word for Babylon in their prayers. This captive Jewish population became the core of the Diaspora (dispersion). A very striking transition happened with the Babylonian captivity. With the proclamation of Isaiah, their god, the God of Israel, became God with us. That is, Yahweh / Elohim changed from a typical regional god with regional influence, to a god of a people, wherever they were. The Jews of the Diaspora were quite happy with this. Jeremiah encouraged it. In 538BC, Cyrus the Great issued the Edict of Restoration, allowing those Jews who desired to return to their original land (Judah), and to rebuild their temple. Most of the Jews stayed behind in Babylon. The governor of this Yehud Province even donated 1000 golden darics (from his personal funds) to the rebuilding project.

Meanwhile, back in Judah, the Jews which were not carried captive to Babylon continued to practice Judaism. They held sacred only Torah (not all of Tanakh, Talmud etc.). Not surprising, since these other texts were most likely written in Diaspora. Since the temple was destroyed,

they worshiped mostly on Mount Gerizim. They consider themselves as having the true religion, not the Judaism of the Diaspora. The Jews who returned from captivity considered them half-breeds. In the gospels, we know them as the Samaritans.

## ***Culture and Language***

By the first century, Israel had become a cultural mix. Except perhaps for the Aaronic priesthood and Levitic support staff, tribal distinctions within the 'nation' had largely disappeared due to intermarriage. Ken thinks people knew their tribal heritage through the male line. During their sojourns, they also blended with their neighbors (or captors). But it was nearly all within the Semitic family, which included the Arabs, Assyrians, and Babylonians as well as the Hebrews. The Jews of first-century Israel were those from the Diaspora. When they returned, their language was Aramaic, a Semitic language like Hebrew, but with a strong influence from Babylonia and Assyria. A common belief was that the language of the Jews of this area was still Aramaic or had transitioned to Greek. More recent scholarship is showing that, by the time of Jesus, Jews of the region had already reverted to Hebrew, at least for religious matters. The writings of the Mishnah at the time were nearly all in Hebrew, giving strong indication that this was the preferred language of religious teachings and writings among the Jews. 90% of the content of the Dead Sea Scrolls is in Hebrew. Bivin and Blizzard suggest that the Jews who had not been taken captive, but stayed in the land or went to nearby lands, maintained the Hebrew language, and that by the time of Christ, those who had returned from captivity were well on their way to reverting to Hebrew, at least for the religious matters. For this and many other reasons, Bivin and Blizzard (and other linguists) believe the synoptic gospels (mainly the parables) were written in Hebrew. They cite many examples which make no sense in Greek, and don't follow Greek syntax and practices, but which make perfect sense when viewed as sloppy, mechanical translations of Hebrew into Greek. This innocent little book was an eye-opener for me. But that was only the beginning. I read a lot more about Jewish rabbinic thought and dialog of the time of Jesus. Suddenly all those passages which had been problematic for years made a lot of sense, and were consistent. What little we have of the sayings of Jesus is very thoroughly consistent with those of a first-century sage/rabbi of the school of Hillel. The arguments were typical of those between Hillel and Shammai (rather, their schools of thought, Bais Hillel and Bais Shammai). (See also Young, *Meet the Rabbis*, p. 10 and 20.) I think that applies primarily to the parables and other direct teachings and sayings of Jesus, less so to the gospel texts as a whole. Also note that the Pharisees never bothered to argue about the things they all agreed on.

## **Parables**

At the time of Christ, the Semitic languages may have still been related closely enough so that people could understand their neighbors. To 'speak in tongues' it might have been sufficient to enunciate clearly and use common vocabulary, as one should do when speaking to any diverse group. Then came Alexander the Great around 330BC. Along with the military conquest came the strong influence of Greek culture, thought, and language. This persisted through the entire Hellenistic period to around 150BC. Next comes conquest by the Roman Empire, which exerted political domination but hadn't been around long enough yet to have a major cultural or

linguistic influence. Greek was still the language of commerce of the early Roman Empire, especially the eastern part. The cultural backdrop for the time of Christ was broadly Semitic, narrowly Hebrew, with a strong Greek influence. Jesus and His peers most likely spoke Aramaic for routine matters and Hebrew for religious matters. The rural areas Jesus frequented had little reason to learn Greek, and the 'poor' (common people) with whom the Pharisees associated had little spare time from their work to learn another language.

The gospel parables and the rabbinic parables of the time are part of a single body of literature, written in Hebrew in a unique style. They must be studied together, as the total set of writings in this unique genre. (Young, Parables, p. 31)

People speak and write to communicate their ideas. For this demographic, speakers used parables in the same way as speakers today use illustrations. They are examples from common life that would be universally understood by their audience. They were not used to hide secrets.

To treat the Bible as literature is not to say that it is MERELY literature. Instead, it means that if you want to understand it, you need to handle it as you would any other ancient literature from a time and culture radically different from your own. That helps you understand each idea the author intends to convey. It does not tell you whether any particular idea is true.

The oldest complete manuscripts date from around 325BC, with tiny fragments claiming dates near 70AD. They are in Greek, so their authors (or translators) very likely used the Septuagint when quoting OT passages, even if Jesus was speaking Judeo-Aramaic when discussing them. No original (or near-original) manuscripts have ever been discovered. If the original writing was in Aramaic or Hebrew, we have no manuscripts of them, even copies. But see the notes above regarding Hebrew as the likely original language of the teachings of Jesus, especially the

## ***Religious Philosophy***

In this section, I review fundamentals of religious thought of the Mediterranean region, from earliest Israel and before, through very early Christianity of around the second century AD. All of the Semitic religions of the Ancient Near East had a common motif. The things we don't understand (rain, fertility, victory in battle) are controlled by the gods. If you want things to go your way, you need to please or appease the gods. That always required sacrifice. It rarely required adherence to a moral code. Judaism was relatively unique in this respect.

Israel accepted the Sinaitic Covenant, offered by God. To get the promised blessings, all they had to do, as a nation, was to keep the terms of the covenant. That meant obeying Torah. Joshua 24 expresses that covenant well.

The texts of the Old Testament make it very clear that the people of Israel were not monotheistic. For much of their history they were polytheistic, like all their neighbors. According to the texts, they chose henotheism when they accepted the Sinaitic Covenant. They freely acknowledged that there were many gods. With this covenant, they chose to accept a henotheistic covenant offered by their main god, the God of Israel. Their neighbors saw no problem worshiping a

variety of gods. Presumably, before this point, neither did the tribes of Israel. The change was that they were to receive special benefits from the God of Israel in return for their choosing to worship this god exclusively. Some use the term monolatry for this relationship. But the relationship prevailed until deuterio-Isaiah around the 6th century BC. That seems to be the first recorded indication of Jewish religious thought moving to monotheism.

Fast-forward to first-century Judah. The geography and people of the synoptic gospels are those restored by Cyrus in 538BC. It's those Jews of the Diaspora who chose to return to Judah, rebuild Jerusalem and its temple, and resume traditional Jewish worship and sacrifices there. This culture of this people in this time and place is called Second Temple Judaism. In the gospels, we hear almost exclusively about the common people (the 'poor'), who follow the teachings of the Pharisees. This philosophical segment of Judaism strongly emphasized the study and obedience of Torah. This is the philosophy represented in the synoptic gospels. It's the philosophy held by this population throughout the life of Jesus. Around 28AD, during the earthly ministry of Jesus, Israel was not a politically autonomous kingdom. Most of the people were quite content with that, as they were in the Diaspora. Some, however, were beginning to think the current Roman rule was so impure they could not in good conscience continue to live under it. They wanted political independence so they could form their own **kingdom of God**. Some, the Zealots, chose the path of military revolt. The rest chose the path of the prophets. Get Israel to fully obey Torah, so that God would then deliver them from Rome. A person who brought that about by either method would qualify for the role of a messiah.

"Almost all gospel references to the Pharisees can be shown to derive from the 70s, 80s, and 90s, the last years in which the gospels were being edited. The evidence for this is so full and many-sided that it must be treated separately in Appendix A." (Morton Smith p. 29)

## Sinners

In Jesus' day, who were these disobedient people who were responsible for the cursings from God (in place of blessings)? Not the Gentiles. God never held Israel accountable for the actions of the Gentiles. It was the Jews living among them but not practicing Judaism, not obeying Torah. The rabbis had a name for these people: **sinners**. That's what they meant by the word. That is, not offering the required sacrifices, observing the required feasts and ceremonies, following the dietary law, properly observing Sabbath, and so on. To **repent** meant to resume doing those things. It meant you were upholding your part of the Mosaic Covenant. And that meant that God could bless Israel instead of cursing Israel. Don't confuse that with the New Testament meaning of the word.

John the Baptist was aiming at the prophet role, pleading with people to repent, so that the Kingdom of God (a politically-autonomous nation) could be brought into being. Jesus carried on this ministry. The early teachings of Jesus match very well those of John the Baptist. Others, Zealots (the fourth sect), sought to incite people to rebel against Rome using military means. The people dissatisfied with Roman rule were looking for people to fill a role of messiah to bring about the kingdom of God. Some looked for the prophetic, some the military, and some for a single person who did both. A book I recently read (I'll include a reference when I find it)

suggests that John the Baptist (Matthew 11, Luke 7) was actually asking Jesus if he was to fulfill both roles, or if there would be another to fulfill the military role. Jesus includes a reference to Isaiah 61:1, “to bring good news to the poor”, but stops short of the rest of the verse, “to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of prison to those who are bound”. Ken Gilbert suggests this message from Jesus to his cousin was “No such luck, you are stuck in prison, I'm not getting you out.” The view of the book (and my view) is that Jesus was saying “My role is that of the prophet, not that of the military leader.”

Conflict among these factions of Judah was strong and continuous. From their experience in Diaspora, many were quite satisfied to remain under Roman political rule, just as they were satisfied to remain under Babylonian rule. Others believed certain demands of Rome went too far, conflicting with their Jewish religious views. Of this group, some pursued the prophetic solution: convince sinners to return to proper Jewish worship, thus permitting God to fulfill earlier promises of political independence. John the Baptist was in this camp. Perhaps Saul was also, before his conversion. Others pursued the military solution, overthrowing Rome by military means. Rome ruthlessly wiped out all such attempts.

Understanding just these ideas is enough to understand nearly everything shown as the teachings of Jesus in the synoptics. But even the synoptics were written at least a couple of decades after the crucifixion, in Greek, to Greeks, for the purpose of showing what kind of person these evangelists believed Jesus to be. Their intent was not to record history. For these reasons, ideas of later Christianity found their way into the gospel narratives. Further, the synoptic gospels go to great lengths to explain in several ways why these ideas seemed unknown during the lifetime of Jesus. If God were among us, why didn't we know it? Why didn't even his direct disciples know it?

Christianity experienced its earliest growth in the Greek world, not in Judea. All of the New Testament texts were written in Greek (except the parables, as noted elsewhere). Hurtado believes Christianity is a 'mutation' of Judaism. The ideas of Christianity come to us first from Paul. If Paul got them from someone else, we have no clear record of it, even from Paul. Proposed sources include some interaction with original apostles, oral tradition from those apostles, and 'directly' from Jesus by way of dreams. When I say the ideas of Christianity are the ideas of Paul, this is what I mean. If Paul was not the origin of the ideas, he was the funnel through which they passed on the way to us. He does use the “pass on to you” phrase for a few subjects like communion and resurrection appearances. Paul may have gotten baptism ideas from the Essenes. A few ideas are attributed to Peter by the author of Luke / Acts. I am convinced by the evidence that practically none of these ideas were known in Judah during the lifetime of Jesus.

The non-synoptic gospel of John, representing Christian thought of 90-95+ AD, has the most incidents of conflict relating to the idea of deity of Jesus. But as Hurtado notes, "In some passages, controversies over divine claims for Jesus are situated within the time of Jesus' own activities, but scholars widely agree that these particular controversies more likely (and directly) emerged in the historical context of early Jewish-Christian efforts to promote claims about Jesus

among fellow first-century Jews." (Hurtado, p. 52)

This is especially true if all they read is the writings of evangelists of a new, different religion claiming that a person, one of their own rabbis, was actually a god, in some mysterious way the same god as the God of Israel. The early Jesus Movement, a sect of Judaism, met in the synagogues. Christianity, either a metamorphosis of the Jesus Movement or a new religion of the Greek world whose god was identified with the Jewish God, or something in between, was justifiably forbidden to meet in the synagogues. That happened 90-95 CE for the Jerusalem synagogue. These evangelists are the ones criticizing a strawman caricature of Second Temple Judaism.

The chart below shows the philosophical memes in transition. The gray box represents the emergence of Christian thought, influenced by both Jewish and Greek thought. Unfortunately, practically no sources survive today to tell us how this transition took place. Hurtado argues that the ideas are of mostly Jewish origin, but in my view, he inadvertently presents evidence which much better supports greater Greek influence. Even before I read Hurtado, I had noticed that the ideas of Christianity much more closely resemble peer Greek religious ideas than Jewish. Christianity experienced its earliest growth in the Greek world, not in Judea. All of the New Testament texts were written in Greek (except the parables, as noted elsewhere). No first-century author of Palestine wrote Greek. Josephus was upper crust, and learned Greek only later in his life. (Ehrman blog) Hurtado believes Christianity is a 'mutation' of Judaism. The ideas of Christianity come to us first from Paul. If Paul got them from someone else, we have no clear record of it, even from Paul. Proposed sources include some interaction with original apostles, oral tradition from those apostles, and 'directly' from Jesus by way of dreams. When I say the ideas of Christianity are the ideas of Paul, this is what I mean. If Paul was not the origin of the ideas, he was the funnel through which they passed on the way to us. A few are attributed to Peter by the author of Luke / Acts. I am convinced by the evidence that practically none of these ideas were known in Judah during the lifetime of Jesus. Here, I suggest it is more a synthesis of thought from Jewish, Greek, Gnostic, and others.

Jewish	Sadducees	████████	Slaughtered	by Rome	AD 70
Thought	Essenes				
	Pharisees				Modern rabbinic Judaism
				Christian	
				Thought	
Greek					
Thought					

The foundational idea of Christianity is the one-time, once-for-all offering of Jesus as a sacrifice to provide remission of sin and to fulfill any present or future requirement for a sacrifice to be offered to God. The idea of this kind of sacrifice was already appearing in Greek thought at the



time. Some held that the only kind of being that would qualify as such a sacrificial offering would be a god. For Christianity to be acceptable in this arena, Jesus would need to be portrayed as a god. The very limited historical record about Jesus tells us only that Jesus was executed by Rome, and that some of his followers were worshiping him as a god. Pliny the Younger testified of this in AD 112, saying that the followers of Jesus would “chant antiphonally a hymn to Christ as to a god” (Epistles 10:96, cited in Hurtado p. 13). The beginning of this idea is what I consider the beginning of Christianity as a new religion. For lack of detail about any credible alternative, as I explain in the previous paragraph, I describe Paul as the source of the idea.

For an excellent, fairly conservative account of how (and how early) the idea of Jesus as God came about, read the reference (Hurtado). Hurtado cites the work of Wilhelm Bousset (see Hurtado p. 16) as representative of the religionsgeschichtliche Schule school of thought. His 1913 work, *Kyrios Christos*, “located the emergence of the worship of Jesus in early 'Hellenistic Gentile' circles, among whom a background of pagan reverence of demigods and divinized heroes could have provided the crucial atmosphere, model, and influence. Bousset posited such circles of Gentile Christians in Syria in the early/middle decades of the first century CE. In his view, it was the religious faith of these Hellenistic Gentile Christians that also shaped the beliefs of the Apostle Paul.” From his first chapter onward, I think Hurtado inadvertently makes some good arguments that Christianity did not originate in Second Temple Judaism.

Hurtado (p. 185) later cites Dunn, a “prominent New Testament scholar.” Hurtado writes and quotes, “Citing the Apostle Paul as an important case, Dunn insists that along with recognizing Paul’s 'debt to both Jew and Greek for the great bulk of his language and concepts,' we also have to grant 'the creative power of his own religious experience – a furnace which melted many concepts in its fires and poured them forth into new moulds .... Nothing should be allowed to obscure that fact.'” I trust Hurtado would approve of my diagram above. Hurtado continues, “the cognitive content of religious 'revelations' is often, perhaps characteristically, a reformulation or reconfiguring of religious convictions.”

### **Chronology**

The time scale should be evaluated in view of the human lifespan at the time. In classical Greece and Rome, it was 20-30 years, perhaps a little different in the middle east. The Herods ranged from 40-70 years, probably benefiting from the privileges of rank. For writings, one source is <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/>.

340BCE	Plato, very influential in ANE religious thought
5BCE	birth of Jesus
8	Jesus interacts with the leaders of the temple
29	Jesus begins public ministry
26-36	Pilate was governor of Judea
33	crucifixion (27-33)

50's	Paul's letters
64	Nero accuses Christians of setting fire to Rome. Tacitus says Nero did it.
70	destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (September)
75	first gospel (Mark) (some argue earlier) (65-80)
73	fall of Masada (April 16?)
80-100	Matthew published, relying on Mark and other sources
80-130	Luke probably written, based on Mark and Matthew
89-120	fourth gospel (John) probably written
98	Emperor Nerva decrees that Christians need not pay the annual tax upon the Jews, recognizing Christianity as distinct from Judaism, removing them from the Jewish exemption from civic pagan rites, opening the way for persecution for refusal to participate in the Roman Imperial cult.
112	Pliny the Younger, Bithynia (modern Turkey) notes Christianity distinct from Judaism (since they don't pay the Jewish tax), but still obscure.
116	Tacitus says Nero blamed Christians for the fire in Rome.
132-6	Bar Kokhba revolt
180	Trinity word first used, Theophilus of Antioch, Apology to Autolytus
203	martyrdom of Perpetua. Christianity has grown enough to be a recognized entity in the Roman Empire.
249	Emperor Decius declared Christianity illegal for 2 years until he died.
303	Emperor Diocletian initiates The Great Persecution.
313	Constantine proclaims the Edict of Milan, proclaiming religions toleration in the Roman Empire. He had converted the year before. Christianity had grown to about 5% of the Roman Empire.
380	Emperor Theodosius declares Christianity a king of 'official' state religion. Christianity now makes up about half of the Roman Empire.

With the possible exception of Mark if the very early date is correct, all the gospels came relatively late in Christian history, 35-70 years after his death. (Spong p. 67)

There aren't enough stylistic differences or event markers to narrow the dating. Most attempts focus on the snippets of prophetic literature in Mark (almost certainly the first). Everyone knew about the Jewish rebellions, mostly 66-73 CE, centering in Jerusalem. These were significant only for the local populations, simple political rebellion against empire. But it took time before some Christians began to try to attach some Christian significance to this. Time was needed for anti-Semitism to build, and to justify itself by blaming Jews for deicide. An author of a bios narrative presents ideas already familiar to his readers, and generally doesn't introduce new

ideas. That argues for authorship when these ideas were mature.

The only argument for an early date is a doctrinal one, based on a misunderstanding of prophetic literature. Most is explanatory, not predictive. The argument is that apparent descriptions of the Jewish rebellions is written in the style of prophetic literature, therefore it MUST have been written before 70 CE. Otherwise the author would have made a point of saying that it happened.

Jesus was acting as a teacher, master, and rabbi. He would be collecting a cadre of students to study and learn with him, as was the custom of the day. Since he did not claim lineage from Levi, I suspect he wouldn't be working or training as a priest. The Sadducees were more involved with the priesthood. His students would tend to be youth, starting around age 12, before they settled into careers or families, much as we do high school and college today. The teachings would be limited to the domain of Hebrew writings. They were already learning and apprenticing their trades through their family. The fishermen who 'left their nets' to follow Jesus (Luke 5:11) were not necessarily abandoning their occupations. But it appears they let others do the task of cleaning up after the day's fishing.

In the early years, there wouldn't be anything fundamentally new in His teachings. He would teach what He was taught, using the Hebrew writings, and applying it to daily life, as His peers would do, and as today's preachers do. One could infer from synoptic narratives that Jesus began as a disciple of John the Baptist. Mark 1 shows John promoting Jesus from disciple to apostle, while later narratives show Jesus expressing ideas of Hillel. He could use his position as a Hebrew sage to authoritatively declare God's position on issues, on the basis of the Hebrew writings. For this, He needed neither the office of a prophet, nor specific (unique) revelation from God. We have none of His writings, or those of any of his peers. Striking, for such an influential persona. Hillel the Elder (traditionally 110BC-10AD, with his best known activity 30BC-10AD), by comparison, was influential in the development of the Mishnah and the Talmud. In many cases, the absence of rabbinic writings from this period was due to their assessment that oral Torah was too sacred to write down. That assessment also placed full control of the passing on of these traditions into the hands of the religious leadership.

As time went on, Jesus taught moral precepts of behavior in the rabbinic style, notably in the Sermon on the Mount. His common theme was exemplified by His teaching on hate. You think you're doing OK and pleasing God as long as you don't take the life of an innocent human. But if your attitude is that of hate and anger without cause, you're missing the point (and missing the mark). This was consistent with the You try to be good at obeying the letter of the law, and even get ridiculous with your tithes of mint and anise, but you need to pay more attention to the spirit of the law. From what I've learned so far, the actual teachings of Jesus were very much in the style and tradition of the rabbinic teachings of the day. This parallels what preachers do today. His students would become trained in His reasoning and His arguments, and becoming qualified to teach in His place. He sent them out twice for what we would call an industrial co-op, for on-the-job experience. Their final graduation was forced by His execution. Some would move on to begin their careers in the family craft in which they apprenticed. Some would collect disciples of their own.

The teachings of Jesus are best understood in the context of the thought and teachings of his peers, rabbis of the Second Temple period of Judaism. The best introduction I have found so far is *Meet the Rabbis* by Brad H. Young, details in the references. I won't try to repeat his work here. His scholarship is direct, intensive, peer-supported and respected.

Jesus was deep into His ministry before He ever started talking about any uniqueness of Himself, putting off questions with things like “My time is not yet.” He needed time to establish His credentials and to develop His team and message, before facing the distractions to His team and His audience from people trying to discredit, destroy, and kill Him.

In my personal opinion, there is no reason to expect that Jesus’ contemporaries knew or understood the concepts presented in the New Testament, written well after the crucifixion. The teachings of Jesus should be understood in the context of his audience. He taught in the synagogues, in the fields, and by the sea. Many suggest that the ‘explanations’ of the parables were added by the diarists, not necessarily claiming that the explanations were given by Jesus at the time. They would be presented adjacent to the parables for instructional clarity.

My explanation is simpler and far more plausible than eyewitness testimony. The gospel diarists were native Greek speakers and writers, living outside of Judea, writing decades after the fact. It's most plausible that none of them every had contact with anyone who actually met Jesus. They never even claim that. So they didn't know anything that Jesus said or did during his lifetime. But they thought he was a Jew, and portrayed him as a sage of Second Temple Judaism, writing in the ancient bios genre. As such, what would he have said? Well, show him as saying the kinds of things that a well-known and widely respected sage already said: Hillel. Except for divorce, the ideas expressed by Jesus match those of Hillel. I just ran across (but have not yet looked at) a book presenting this idea. *Jesus the Pharisee: A New Look at the Jewishness of Jesus*, by Harvey Falk. Bivin and Blizzard support this idea, making an excellent case that in Matthew, the sayings of Jesus appear to be hasty translations from Hebrew, unlike the rest of Matthew.

Ironic, isn't it, that the resurrection is considered the central event of human history, yet we don't even know when it was. We think 27-33AD.

### ***Literary Modes and Purposes***

No one with any education in literature would expect to understand a text without understanding the literary genre in which it was written. This is especially true for ancient religious literature, largely unfamiliar to modern readers. My notes emphasize this. A book published in 2014 might help with this, though I haven't seen it: [\*A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible\*](#), Leland Ryken, Crossway.

### **Torah**

Tradition (and only tradition) attributes authorship to Moses. The first two books talk about how

Israel came to be. It need not follow the modern historical genre, which purports to tell things exactly as they really happened. It can just as well be allegorical or legendary without affecting the primary purpose of the overall writing. That is, to declare that the covenant was defined and offered by God and accepted by Israel, and to tell how to keep its terms. The truth of that message does not depend on any particular authorship or writing style. It depends solely on the truth of the claims.

## **New Testament**

The New Testament canon is not a systematic theology. The epistles are occasional letters written by a recognized authority (Paul) or a student/follower. Each addresses specific issues at a specific local assembly. Only Romans approaches a theological treatise. Hebrews is probably the earliest surviving Christian sermon. Its author intended to persuade his assembly not to abandon Christianity for other religions. They were tempted to do so to avoid persecution. Revelation is an apocalypse.

None communicates in isolation. Each depends on an understanding by the audience of well-known philosophical and cultural memes. They provide economy of expression to the audience, but a major challenge to a much later incidental audience unfamiliar with those memes. The central idea of Christianity is the one-time, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, and the appropriation of that sacrifice for an individual by believing it. As with Torah, the truth of that message does not depend on any particular authorship or writing style. It depends solely on the truth of the claims.

## **New Testament as Midrash**

Dr. Robert M. Price wrote an excellent piece (Price) about how much of the New Testament can be understood as the practice of Jewish midrash, haggadah, and pesher. It is well worth reading and using as a reference. Some of his examples might be coincidence by similarity.

## **The Gospels**

We don't understand the Gospels because we don't understand the **ancient 'bios' genre** in which they were written. Plutarch's Lives is an example. Their subject was key events about a person or teaching, not a history or a biography. I might compare them to Shakespeare writing about Julius Caesar. They are stories told to show what the author believed his protagonist to be like. Another comparison is the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. Never confirmed, the story is apocryphal. Same for the stories in the gospels. It is likely they were written after most or all of the epistles and the events in Acts. The authors are best described by their role as evangelists. They believe in something, and are writing to convey and promote that belief. They were advertising their religion. We err if we try to interpret them as journalism. A 15-minute explanation of this is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsaRQDxmLqY>. If it were journalism, then falsifiable retrodiction would show it clearly as bad, incorrect journalism. That's a very powerful tool of history. If A had happened, then B would have happened and C could not have happened. We see lots of C and none of B. Therefore, A did not happen. To claim the gospels are history is to build your religion on a known false premise, just as claiming

Genesis 1 is science.

The gospels are bios narratives with two specific purposes. Christianity is about Jesus, a Jewish **sage** (rabbi) of early first-century Judea. Christianity originated and grew outside of that geography and culture. People like to know something about the person whose sacrifice became so important to them. The bios genre addresses that specific desire by telling stories about the person to show what kind of person they were. Such a narrative says only, "These are the kinds of things which could have been done by a person like the kind of person I think Jesus was." The second purpose was evangelistic. Gospel diarists, writing much later, continued Paul's drive to make Christianity universal. Thus they wrote so that any Christian, regardless of what kind of person they believed Jesus to be, would find something to identify with in the gospel narratives. If you thought him a Zealot, you can find texts portraying him that way. Those gospels written with such broad appeal achieved popularity, thus were included in the proto-orthodox canon. Inclusive accommodation of divergent ideas made Christianity look more like one larger religion (though still niche) than many smaller ones.

The style of the gospels is **diegetic**. That is, they tell the story in the words of a narrator. They present a worldview experienced by the characters, not necessarily the worldview of the author. Sometimes the author speaks directly, as the narrator. An example is John 9:18-23. The author uses words attributed to the parents of the man born blind. Then, in a parenthetical expression, he explains, "His parents said these things because they feared the Jews." Again in 10:5, the author says, "This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them." Mark 1:34, "he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him." Compare this to Galatians, an epistle, where Paul makes clear that he is speaking for himself.

These documents were not called gospels until the middle of the second century. (Miller p. 1) They are Greek literature set in a Jewish context, set to the backdrop of Jewish beliefs, customs, style, and practices of the time. Ignoring that invites misunderstanding. There is peer literature, and a body of recent literature, to compare. The primary means to communicate ideas was with stories. It wasn't of primary importance whether a story was true. It is difficult or impossible to tell just from a written record of a story whether it was true. A parable is not always introduced as a parable. See Michael Grant, p. 38. "The purpose of the parables in the Gospels and in rabbinic literature was to instruct. Jesus' parables illustrate and teach, despite the argument of a number of scholars that they were designed to conceal his message from the people." (Young, Parables, p. 33) I view them as directly parallel to the illustrations and stories of today's preachers. "First and foremost, both the parables of Jesus and the parables of the rabbis must be studied as Jewish haggadah." (Young, Parables, p. 7)

Names and dates weren't important in this genre. They aren't called histories or objective biographies. There was no psychological sense of formative influences on a person. They show the key events of a person's life to show what he/she was really like. Childhood was shown to demonstrate how the character a person already had, was manifested early in life. The Bible gospels have an unusual emphasis on the death and resurrection of the main character. They have been described as passion (from Greek *pasco*, to suffer) narratives with long introductions.

The gospels give few words to the suffering and execution. (Ehrman audiobook, History of the Bible)

“So the Gospels were not descriptions of what happened or what Jesus said or did; they were interpretations of who Jesus was based on their ancient and sacred heritage.” (Spong, p. 20)

"Disconcertingly, we do now know who any of the authors of the four Gospels were. The traditions that they were written by Jesus' apostles Matthew and John, and Paul's companions Mark (John Mark) and Luke, are in each case subject to grave and virtually insuperable doubts." (Grant p. 180)

"So the Gospels were all written between thirty-five and seventy years after Jesus' death. But several further generations passed before they were at all widely accepted. At and after the turn of the century, the later books of the New Testament and then the early Fathers of the Church show remarkably little reflection of Gospel material. Indeed, the earliest-known author to name all four evangelists, Irenaeus, lived nearly a hundred years after they were written." (Grant, p. 189)

“The Jewish Christians began to build anthologies by which they identified the shadows of Jesus everywhere in the ancient sacred story of the Jews. In them these anthologies were employed by the compilers of the post-70 Gospels writers – Matthew, Luke, and John – when the oral traditions of their faith communities were transformed into written documents through which the Jesus story could be heard on a regular basis. We see these Jesus stories following in their written forms the liturgical tradition of the synagogues in which surely the Jesus story was first preached. We discover now and again the license that every preacher takes in the way the stories of the past were used to shape the stories of Jesus. Their concern was to show how Jesus was foreshadowed in the Jewish scriptures of yesterday and, indeed, how the life of Jesus was illumined by those scriptures. So echoes from the heroes of the Jewish past were woven, orally at first, into the story of Jesus. It was not dishonest. It was the ancient tradition of the Jews being employed by the Christians, most of whom were still Jews, to tell their story of Jesus.” (Spong p. 51)

We have four 'painters' painting pictures for their peers of what they believed Jesus to be like during his lifetime. Mark wrote the first. Matthew and Luke each took Mark's painting and added their own touches to it. Their art was in a classical style, a form of realism. John is more like Kandinsky in his Great Synthesis period. John might be talking about the same Jesus, but it's so different that it's hard to tell.

## **Authorship**

All are anonymous, all written in the third person. Even Matthew doesn't identify Matthew as the author. The titles, added later, are written in a way that shows they aren't claiming legitimate authorship, as the gospel according to Matthew. An author wouldn't call it that. The naming was second-century tradition, after Justin, aiming to impute apostolic authority to the works. [I call this an ex post facto application of pseudonymity, an attempt to raise the credibility of the

anonymous author by crediting it to a respected authority.] The authors were highly educated and literate Christians of at least the second generation. At the best of those times in the ancient Roman world, only 10-15% were literate. For rural Palestine, literacy was more like 3% (Ehrman blog). Of those, most could write just enough to sign their name. Jesus' followers were peasants from Galilee. They couldn't afford the time or leisure to get an education or learn another language. They had no reason to even speak trade Greek, much less the more professional Koine Greek. An eyewitness wouldn't need to copy Mark or Q. Since they're not eyewitness accounts, where did they get their information? They would be based on circulating oral traditions of the intervening decades (30-35 years). Christianity was spreading, though not as a flood with huge numbers. People were trying to convert polytheists to worship the one God of Israel and his son Jesus who died for their sins. They had to tell stories about Jesus. Conversions were a chain reaction, with the stories told down the chain. Have you ever played the gossip game of telephone? Try the game for decades among people of differing languages and cultures. And these are stories told with the purpose of conversion, not for historical accuracy. Cultural anthropologists show oral societies don't have concern for verbatim accuracy, as for written cultures, where you can check accuracy. Oral societies tell a story for an occasion. This is well documented in Christian stories. (Ehrman audiobook, History of the Bible) In addition, many studies continue to show eyewitness testimony as notoriously unreliable.

For simplicity, I will usually follow tradition and simply say, "Luke says," though I really mean "The author of Luke says." Similarly, "Jesus said" is an abbreviation for "The author of Luke said that Jesus said."

We have no indication whatever that Jesus ever wrote anything. We have no direct written record of anything Jesus said. We can't even say with any certainty that any such writings ever existed. Scholars discuss the possibilities of collections of "Sayings of Jesus" but can't find evidence for them. If they were written, why weren't they considered worthy of preservation? It has been suggested that they were already convinced the end of the world was at hand.

Another possibility arises from how Jewish thought and tradition viewed their torot (laws). They (of the Pharisees, not the Sadducees) interpret Leviticus 26:46 as saying that "God gave two Laws at Mount Sinai – one in writing, and one by word of mouth. As we have seen, the aim of the Oral Torah is to interpret and help implement the Written Torah. In Jewish tradition, the Bible is called Mikra, meaning 'that which is read.' The Mishnah was memorized and repeated in antiquity because the sages transmitted it orally from one generation to the next. Jewish tradition discouraged the writing down of the oral law in order to maintain a distinction between Mikra and Mishnah." (Young, Meet the Rabbis, p. 81). They stayed unwritten until Rabbi Judah HaHasi compiled and edited them around 220AD, to establish a standard canon. The teaching that Jesus was doing was Mishnah, oral interpretation of the written law. It would seem to make sense that it wasn't written down. "Thus, the traditional Jewish view traces the Oral Torah back to Mount Sinai. The monumental importance of this view for a correct understanding of Judaism and the beginnings of Christianity cannot be overemphasized. (Young, Meet the Rabbis, p. 197) In Matt 23:3, Jesus clearly indicated his support for oral Torah. (Bivin, New Light, p. 44)



## Who Was Jesus?

The gospels were written to answer that question, among others. Earliest Christianity had decided that he was the universal sacrifice. For Paul, that was enough (1 Cor 2:2). Others wanted to hear more about this 'person' whose sacrifice had accomplished so much. The gospel narratives were written to help fill that hunger. In bios tradition, they had to describe what his life might have been like. They would have been expected to address several questions. Where did he come from? What did he do? What kind of person was he? Did he really fulfill prophecy? Why was he killed? Why doesn't anyone know anything about his life?

From Wikipedia, "The name Jesus is derived from the Latin Iesus, a transliteration of the Greek Ἰησοῦς (Iesous). The Greek form is a rendition of the Aramaic ܝܫܘܥ (Yeshua), which is derived from the Hebrew ܝܫܘܥ (Yehoshua)." It was a common name in the ANE. When that Hebrew name is translated directly to English, we know it as Joshua. Thus the name is common in the Old Testament, but no instance refers to Jesus of Nazareth of the first century CE.

Conjecture about the nature Jesus varied widely within the diverse threads of Christianity and beyond. I think the gospel authors tried to cover all the bases. No matter who you were, you would recognize some of your ideas about Jesus in the gospels. True to the bios genre, the writings were less about who Jesus was, and more about what people believed about Jesus. Therefore contradictions should be expected. It also explains why everyone has so much trouble trying to establish the 'identity' of the historical Jesus. Those who understand the bios genre understand that this task is impossible. Instead, we should endeavor to understand what each author and each text is saying. Don't try to make them all appropriate for a single person. They represent different ideas about a single person.

Another good reason for the absence of a definitive characterization of Jesus is that, by the time the diarists got around to writing (4-7 decades later), they couldn't find anyone who had met Jesus. None of the NT authors wrote from Judea, or even in the language of Judea (Aramaic).

Gospel authors and other peer authors portray Jesus in these personas:

1. a sage of Second Temple Judaism, from the backwoods town of Nazareth
2. a prophet like John the Baptist
3. a Zealot, wanting to overthrow Rome by military rebellion
4. a magician (See page 31)
5. a 'perfect' being, suitable to be the universal sacrifice
6. a man, a god-man, adopted by God at his baptism (Docetic adoptionist)
7. a god, appearing as a human (Docetic)
8. a Gnostic aeon which emanated from Sophia, which in turn emanated from the pleroma (fullness) of God (perhaps a subset of pure myth, below)
9. both god and man (unlike the typical god-man figures of Greek mythology), proto-orthodoxy
10. pure myth (See page 32)

These ideas are further detailed in The Next Phase on page 30.

Carefully read the gospel texts to see what each author says about each portrayal. For example, I cite several places in these notes about portrayal of Jesus as a Zealot. I think the authors make a point of showing why that was not true.

## Philosophical Background

The major theme of the teachings of Christ (and therefore the Gospels) was repentance (matanoia). This was a common rabbinic theme of the day, but came most directly from John the Baptist, who preached it around AD27-29 as the only remedy for sin. This is consistent with long-standing themes in Jewish thought. John practiced ritual baptism, and probably observed that in the nearby Qumran settlement. John's baptisms differed from those of Qumran: he baptized others rather than himself. The most dramatic innovation was baptism as a single, unique act, rather than a repeated one. It was predicated on repentance. No efficacy was claimed apart from repentance (unlike similar Palestinian and Syrian rites). John also explicitly associated baptism with the Kingdom of God. John claimed merely to be preparing the way, whereas Jesus claimed to be actually ushering in the Kingdom of God. See Michael Grant, p. 45ff. At least that's the story according to the followers of Jesus. I don't think we have John's side of the story. But Matthew 14 tells us that John still had disciples, even after Jesus' ministry was well under way.

Baptism was also an echo of other Jewish rites of purification (e.g. of utensils), and could reasonably be considered ceremonial. There's also a resemblance to the Jewish Mikvah (from Wikipedia):

In the [Jewish Bible](#) and other Jewish texts, immersion in water for ritual purification was established for restoration to a condition of "ritual purity" in specific circumstances. For example, [Jews](#) who (according to the [Law of Moses](#)) became ritually defiled by contact with a corpse had to use the [mikvah](#) before being allowed to participate in the Holy Temple. Immersion is required for [converts to Judaism](#) as part of their conversion. Immersion in the mikvah represents a change in status in regards to purification, restoration, and qualification for full religious participation in the life of the community, ensuring that the cleansed person will not impose uncleanness on property or its owners [Num. 19](#) and [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chagigah](#), p. 12). This change of status by the mikvah could be obtained repeatedly, while Christian baptism, like [circumcision](#), is, in the general view of Christians, unique and not repeatable.

Jesus emphasized that forgiveness immediately follows repentance. Perhaps that was a new emphasis, but not a new thought. Completely new was the claim that he, himself, could forgive sins. That was 'perhaps the first irremovable wedge, between himself and his fellow-Jews.' See Michael Grant, p. 50. But did Jesus actually claim that he was forgiving sins? Or was he simply stating that one who repents immediately receives forgiveness from God? That's what modern Christian evangelists do when they proclaim that a person is saved on the basis of their profession of faith.

In John 1:35, it looks like Jesus 'stole' some of the disciples of John the Baptist. It is likely that

many, if not all, of Jesus' disciples started out as disciples of John. More likely would have joined Jesus after the imprisonment and execution of John. The replacement of Judas in Acts 1 hints that all 12 were at least witnesses to John's baptism of Jesus. (Diaries p. 154)

## The Hedge of Hillel

Among the Halakhah laws of Judaism is the gezeirah. This is a rabbinic ruling designed to help prevent accidental violation of Torah. From Mishna, Abot 1.1, on Tradition of the Elders:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders and the elders to the prophets; and the prophets committed it to the men of the Great Congregation. These said three things:

"Be deliberate in judgment";

"Raise up many disciples"; and

"Make a hedge for the Torah."

"The interpretations placed a hedge or fence around the law, on the principle that if one does not break through the fence then he will not be able to break the law itself." (Ferguson p. 542)

The Great Congregation (Great Assembly, Great Synagogue) was an assembly of 120 scribes, sages, and prophets, from the end of the Biblical prophets for about two centuries to AD 70. To them is attributed the fixing of the Jewish Biblical canon. A more modern term for this is חומרה (khumra or chumra).

## Theodicy

Ah, the problem of good and evil. Why do the evil prosper while the righteous suffer? In the original covenants, God promised Israel this would not happen to them. But people observed it happening. The Psalms have laments over this, and pleadings with God to fix the problem. The prophetic worldview begs the question. It says bad things are happening to Israel because Israel disobeyed the covenant terms in some way. Thus most is explanatory, not predictive. If a prophet observes that Israel is doing things forbidden by the Mosaic Covenant, he will threaten Israel. If you keep disobeying, bad things will happen to you. That requires no special revelation, just knowledge of the covenant and observation of behavior. Those predictions are very generic. But after an event happens (like defeat in a battle or conquest by the Assyrians or Babylonians), prophetic literature is written to explain it. It's written in the name of a well-known prophet as a detailed prediction by that prophet. This literature is easy to recognize, since the predictions match what actually happened in history. The apocalyptic worldview carried this farther, explaining this as the cosmic conflict between the forces of good and evil, and proclaiming that 'in the end', evil will be punished and good rewarded. The Greek/Roman world of the first century viewed all existence as encompassed within three domains: earth, the heavenlies, and the depths. Much apocalyptic literature did not specify where the final reckoning would occur. Some, such as the book of Revelation, show the evil, collected from wherever else they might be, and transferred to the depths, the domain of darkness, the lake of fire. The good, also collected, are transferred to the heavenlies. Those who hold a doctrine of bodily resurrection would not be in this camp. Instead, they would write (or interpret) apocalyptic literature as requiring the final judgment to happen on earth. Revelation can be interpreted to show both. Perhaps it tried to appeal to both camps.

This apocalyptic worldview dominated the Ancient Near East of the first century. They all expected it to happen within a generation (20-40 years or so). By the end of the first century, everyone realized that it didn't happen. Luke may be the earliest Christian text to abandon that soon apocalypse on earth. (Wright) But with Luke 9:27, I'm not so sure of that. Some gospel diarists (and some of Revelation) then applied it to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Later Christian writers spiritualized it. Over time, the focus shifted toward the individual soul.

Christian difficulties with prophetic and apocalyptic literature thus arise from three basic errors:

1. Ignorance of the fact that most prophetic literature was explanatory, not predictive
2. Ignorance of the fact that apocalypse expresses a wish, not a prediction
3. Refusal to admit that some predictions are wrong

### ***Approaching the Text***

People wrote what they believed to be true, using language their peers and direct audience would understand. Language uses words [and phrases]. [Everett] An author uses a word to represent an idea he has in his mind. A word is useful only if the reader associates that same idea with that same word. Every written text is a collection of words chosen by an author to express an idea to an audience. Writing can be very compact when it uses economy of expression. If I just say Noah, you know exactly what I mean, and I brought that idea into the forefront of your mind with a single word. If I do the same with Harry Potter, you get the same economy of expression, but only for an audience familiar with Harry Potter. When a first-century rabbi used the words bind and loose, everyone knew exactly what they meant, and knew exactly the idea being expressed. If you read those words today and want to understand the idea being expressed, you must understand what those words meant to the author and their audience. The alternative, the method nearly always practiced today, is to make up your own meaning, or to quote an 'expert' who made up their own meaning.

My approach is to use every tool available today to understand the meaning each author intended to convey, and what his direct audience would understand. "If one is to interpret the teaching of Paul – and, indeed all of Scripture – correctly, one must understand his background and the context in which he wrote. Krister Stendahl has wisely observed that 'the task of biblical studies, even of biblical theology is to describe, to relive and relate, in terms of presuppositions of the period of the texts, what they meant to their authors and their contemporaries.'" (Wilson, chapter 1)

Some classes of sentient being use a tool for communication that we call language. Its purpose is to transmit an idea from the mind of the sender to the mind of the receiver. It can be as simple as the rattle of a rattlesnake (I will defend myself) or the fluff of tail feathers (I want to mate with you). In my view, that is the purpose of any writing, sacred or not. The task of the reader, any reader, is to discern the ideas the author was attempting to communicate. Any claim of divine authorship, or assistance in authorship, should not change the intent and methods for reading a text. Extract the ideas the author intended to communicate. Anyone who considers a text valuable should be willing to apply whatever tools and methods which help extract the author's

ideas. How could anyone identifying himself as a Bible student want to do otherwise?

## **Christian Fundamentalism and Inspiration**

The basic tenets of Christian Fundamentalism regarding the Bible, to me, are:

1. One can understand the meaning of Bible texts simply by reading them. For some, reading English translations is adequate. For others, even a paraphrase is adequate. In a paraphrase, someone reads a text (and/or a translation of a text) and forms an interpretation of that text. They then express that interpretation in modern language, sometimes using modern idioms.
2. The Bible has a mystical origin. Various doctrines of 'inspiration' assert that the writers of the text were coerced, in some manner, and to some degree, to write what God revealed directly to them. A corollary of this is that the selection of writings for the Canon of Scripture (the set of writings chosen by committee to comprise our Bible) was similarly inspired or coerced. The entire field of Presuppositional Apologetics is based on the presupposition that the Bible is divine revelation. Therefore everything in it must be true. This view sees the Bible as a single book, written by a single author, presenting a single unified view.

These doctrines drive their holders' interpretation of the texts.

A more plausible view of inspiration, with much better textual support, is that a prophet was inspired, rather than any writing of his words. That better fits an OT view, especially for the history of Israel before they had or used writing.

By holding a Fundamentalist view, a person is requiring that the Bible meet his stylistic, authorship, and content requirements. He has requirements the authors and their audience did not have. This view has been described as bibliolatry.

This Fundamentalist doctrine makes the practice of theology extremely difficult. The task is to formulate a religious philosophy you think is, or can be, true. Then, you must expend extreme effort to re-interpret Bible texts in ways that support their philosophy without contradicting it. In principle, this is impossible when you recognize that the texts were written by different people, in different eras, in different cultures, with different ideas. As noted elsewhere, the practice of peshar is used to bypass this problem.

Modern theologians are not the only ones facing this problem. Imagine the redactor / editor (or team of them) around 450 BCE, editing Torah into the form we have now. As the Documentary Hypothesis recognized, they worked with four disparate streams of tradition. They tried to craft narratives that would satisfy people of each tradition. That they somehow managed to do that for all of Judaism is phenomenal. It probably helped that most of the people of the Elohist tradition had been carried off by the Assyrians and assimilated. Sometimes they included parts of two traditions (creation, the flood), sometimes they formed a composite.

Genesis 3 had to explain why life is tough. They had to blame Eve, blame Adam, blame the

snake, and show male superiority, all without making the story too convoluted or too long. If you think today's editors pressure authors to be concise, imagine when each text had to be copied by hand onto costly materials!

## Doctrines of Inspiration

Doctrines of inspiration tend to fall into categories roughly like these:

1. Dictation. Each word was chosen by God, who forced those words to be written.
2. Plenary. The ideas were specified by God, but the authors could use their own words.
3. Verbal. The authors were constrained so that even their word choices were coerced by God so that they would be correct. This doctrine is often applied only to the original autographs, none of which we have.
4. Dynamic. "The thoughts contained in the Bible are inspired, but the words used were left to the individual writers." I'm not quite sure how this differs from the others.
5. Sacred text. Perhaps this is the one that would describe the authors as inspired by God in the same way that a poet is inspired by a beautiful sunset.

Each form needs its own set of arguments and rationales for interpreting texts.

The modern doctrines of inerrancy can be traced back to the Niagara Conferences at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, later popularized by B. B. Warfield and the Princeton theologians (Bart Ehrman blog).

## Textual Criticism

Don Flood taught our Sunday School class four steps to Biblical exegesis:

1. What does it say?
2. What did it mean then?
3. What does it mean now?
4. How do I apply it?

The first step aims to keep us true to the original texts, in the original languages, to the best of our ability. It helps protect us from bias and artifacts of translation, paraphrase, and interpretation. The second gives primary emphasis to what the words would have meant to their intended audience. That would include what the audience knows about the writers and their writing style and background. The third gives us tools to distinguish cultural relativities from moral requirements, such as whether your head is covered in church, or perhaps even who is permitted to speak in church and how. The fourth is obvious, and is the focus of modern preaching, to the neglect of the other three.

The relatively modern discipline of biblical textual criticism focuses on steps one and two. Most thoughtful proponents of a doctrine of inspiration are clear to apply that doctrine only to the original autographs. Biblical textual scholarship works to help determine what those autographs likely were (since we have none of them).

The vast majority of texts from the early first century (sacred and secular) have been discovered

in my lifetime. It has taken most of my lifetime for them to be made available to scholars and studied in detail. It should not be considered surprising or heretical that modern scholars, with texts and tools unavailable to church thinkers of the second through the sixth centuries, might reach different conclusions about the texts.

Texts like the Johannine Comma, not found in the earliest manuscripts, are very unlikely to have been in the original autographs. Someone who regards the Bible as the word of God, really should care about this, and care about exactly what texts they consider to be inspired. The Jesus Seminar might be described as taking this approach to unbridled extremes. My intent would be textual criticism as a tool to help understand from the early writings about Jesus what those authors believed. If textual criticism can lead to an extreme, so can entirely ignoring the context of those writings. In my personal opinion, it is folly to presume that a modern reader can read and understand this ancient literature independent of, and ignorant of, its literary peers and heritage, and the history, culture, and practices of its people. To do so practically guarantees bizarre interpretations based on misunderstandings of what the authors are saying. Spong agrees with me. (Spong, p. 29) To ignore this resource is, at best, to put our heads in the sand. Fundamentalism skips that second step, and often also the first.

Spong goes further to show how Christian negativity toward things Jewish warps their usage and interpretation of the Old Testament. “The primary value of the Hebrew sacred story has had for most Christians lies in the prejudiced assumption that the meaning of the Old Testament is exhausted once its task of pointing to and being fulfilled by the New Testament has been accomplished. The prophets were thought to be something like fortune-tellers who served as the divine predictors of future events. His example is using Gen 3:15 as a prophecy of the atonement.

I applaud the conservative Christian community for its prioritization of Scripture above that of commentaries about Scripture. Yet I decry its relative unwillingness to try to actually understand those texts in the context of the intellectual backdrop against which they were written, and the unwillingness to set aside ancient traditions about who wrote what in favor of actually trying to figure out, to the best of available resources, who could or could not have been the author.

The philosophy that seems to govern Bible study, even in Conservative and Fundamentalist circles, is Deconstructionism. In effect, it dismisses from serious concern what the author intended for a text, and instead favors “What does this text say to you?”.

In my writing, I present some of the work of these scholars, providing references as appropriate. I generally present ideas that represent the consensus of modern scholars, to the best of my ability. This is a relatively new area of study for me. Christianity, especially its branches of Conservative and Fundamental Christianity, place strong emphasis on the texts of our New Testament. It should therefore be of great importance for any such Christian to understand, as best they can, how these texts were collected into a canon, and especially what the texts mean.

## Translations

If you hold a doctrine of inspiration of the original autographs, then why would you settle for anything less than an accurate translation of the best collection of texts that textual criticism can provide, based on all manuscripts available today? Those are Masoretic and Nestles. Translations based on those texts, emphasizing formal equivalence ("essentially literal"), and faithful to the texts, are ESV, NRSV, and NASB. NET is almost as good. KJV is the worst, since it's based on a different textual body (Textus Receptus). For OT, they used the 1524 Hebrew Rabbinic Bible, but chose Septuagint or Vulgate when they better suited their doctrines. That was definitely biased!

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the ESV.

## Eisegesis vs. Exegesis

First I'll quote definitions given by Paul Alden on a Facebook post. I'll cite a better reference when I find one.

Exegesis (from the Greek ἐξηγεῖσθαι 'to lead out') is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially a religious text. Traditionally the term was used primarily for exegesis of the Bible; however, in contemporary usage it has broadened to mean a critical explanation of any text, and the term Biblical exegesis is used for greater specificity. The goal of Biblical exegesis is to explore the meaning of the text which then leads to discovering its significance or relevance.

Exegesis includes a wide range of critical disciplines: textual criticism is the investigation into the history and origins of the text, but exegesis may include the study of the historical and cultural backgrounds for the author, the text, and the original audience. Other analysis includes classification of the type of literary genres present in the text, and an analysis of grammatical and syntactical features in the text itself.

The terms exegesis and hermeneutics have been used interchangeably. However, hermeneutics is a more widely-defined discipline of interpretation theory: hermeneutics includes the entire framework of the interpretive process, encompassing all forms of communication: written, verbal and nonverbal, while exegesis focuses primarily on the written text.

Eisegesis (from Greek εἰς "into" and ending from exegesis from ἐξηγεῖσθαι "to lead out") is the process of misinterpreting a text in such a way that it introduces one's own ideas, reading into the text. This is best understood when contrasted with exegesis. While exegesis draws out the meaning from the text, eisegesis occurs when a reader reads his/her interpretation into the text. As a result, exegesis tends to be objective when employed effectively while eisegesis is regarded as highly subjective. An individual who practices eisegesis is known as an eisegete, as someone who practices exegesis is known as an exegete. The term eisegete is often used in a mildly derogatory fashion.

I find that eisegesis dominates exegesis when Christians (including Christian theologians) interpret Tanakh (Old Testament). When this practice is combined with obstinate refusal to use other methods of understanding ancient texts, misinterpretations unrelated to any thought or intent of the writer are guaranteed. Other methods include studying thoughts and writings of others of the era, and of geographic and philosophic neighbors of the authors. I consider this the primary cause of bad doctrine. A colorful description of this practice, "they [Gnostics and Manichaeans] came, not to learn its language, but to see if they could not compel it to speak theirs; with no desire to draw out of Scripture its meaning, but only to thrust into Scripture their own.", from (Trench, p. 42).



The attitude of eisegesis: I don't care what the text says, I know my doctrine. I'll make the text say something that's consistent with my doctrine.

## **Pesher / Presentism**

Midrash pesher is a form of rabbinic interpretation. The term appears in a large body of documents from the Dead Sea Scrolls (Rendsburg). In this genre, the writer takes a text, typically a prophet, and interprets it verse by verse. Presentism describes the situation as if it applies to the present time, not to the situation the prophet was actually talking about. 2 Clement begins with an example, citing Isaiah 54:1 (about Israel in Babylonian captivity) but claiming it is talking about Christians in the Roman Empire. Another is Matthew 2:15. The author (and only this author) cites Hosea 11:1, which speaks clearly of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, but claims it is prophetic of Jesus. It 'interprets' a text by inserting a meaning into it which is clearly not the meaning the author intended. I consider it a form of eisegesis.

The use of pesher in the New Testament can have many purposes:

1. identify Christianity with an established ancient religion (Judaism) to gain respect in Greek thought, which valued the ancient over the modern, and perhaps to gain Roman religio licita legal protection
2. gain credibility with a Jewish community by attempting to show Jewish prophecies as predicting Jesus
3. contrast with Judaism as anti-Semitic sentiments grew
4. coalition-building and amassing power/influence by a savvy politician, by citing texts and figures of other religions. Paul wanted to make Christianity universal. Mohammad did the same in Qur'an by citing Jews and Jesus, in his later empire-building phase.

## **Groupthink**

Understanding the idea of groupthink can help one wisely decide how they will seek truth. This excerpt (Fisher, p. 94) expresses it well.

When Yale psychologist Irving Janis coined the term groupthink in 1972, he listed its main characteristics as

- Pressures for uniformity, such as the threat or actual application of sanctions that makes people feel excluded if they disagree with its way of thinking and its conclusions.
- Closed-mindedness within the group, so that any doubt is rationalized away.
- An overestimation of the group as strong, smart, morally superior to other groups, or even invulnerable.

## **Hermeneutics**

From Wikipedia, hermeneutics is “is the philosophy and methodology of text interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts.” In layman's terms, it's how you answer the question, “What does this mean?” The previous sections are all part of this subject.

Your approach is governed by your views of how God is/was involved in Bible texts. If God controlled the words, or even just the ideas, that went into the texts, then your job is to understand what those words meant to their authors and their direct audiences. People write to communicate ideas. If you want to understand the ideas, then you must understand the language, vocabulary, and culture of each original author. When we lack the historical background to do that for a particular text, then we must admit that we can't reliably understand the text.

If God instead controls the ideas that enter your brain as you read the texts, you have Gnosticism. The meaning intended by the original author is irrelevant. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit applies to your reading of the text, not to the author of the text. Paul expresses this idea in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." This is the justification for the modern trend which replaces "What does the Bible mean?" with "What does the Bible mean TO ME?" This, of course, is relative and untestable.

### **Holy: a Hermeneutic Example**

When you find this word in a Bible text, what does it mean? Most OT usages are translations of Strong's 6944, *qodesh*, a sacred or dedicated place or thing. It is also translated sanctuary. It's a form of *קָדַשׁ*, to set apart. It's also used to be or to make ceremonially clean. This is the meaning of the word whenever it is used in Torah. Yahweh was set apart, exclusively for Israel. Israel was set apart, exclusively for Yahweh. Israel was distinctive, different from everyone else. Only they observed Sabbath, Kosher, and various other customs.

In the NT, Strong's 40, *ἅγιος*, *hagios* is used. The essential root meaning is still set apart, different. Some usages of the word perfectly match the OT usage of *qodesh*. But in other places, it is used in a moral sense. That type of usage is rare in Torah. I'm not sure I have yet found an example.

A point here is that a NT author commonly uses a Greek word which can be a suitable translation of a Hebrew word, but it does not necessarily have the same meaning a Jew would have when using the Hebrew word.

### **Lectionary Theory of Gospel Formation**

With his prophecy class, Ken Gilbert gave me a key which unlocked a lot of the mystery of Biblical prophetic writing. It doesn't make sense until you learn the language of prophecy and what it means. A major clue to that was to use our knowledge about prophecies already fulfilled to understand the language of the predictions of those events. The sun didn't really turn into blood. The stars didn't really fall out of the skies. Further, Revelation becomes clearer when you recognize that it is, in all important stylistic respects, an Old Testament book, and primarily (if not exclusively) about Israel. For more detail, see my companion work on Revelation.

Now look at the time of the early church. It was still mainly a Jewish phenomenon, mainly composed of Jews. Their background, knowledge, and worship experience were all Jewish.

Further, it wasn't just the experience of the Old Testament, it was the experience of Jews of post-30AD.

I strongly encourage all to read John Shelby Spong's book, *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*, available from the Santa Clara County public library system. You may also borrow my copy. I don't ask you to believe everything he says. But I do ask you to consider his primary thesis about why and how the gospels were written.

Jewish worship at the time was centered around the scheduled reading of the Pentateuch (Torah) over the course of the liturgical year. Its organization was centered around the key festivals, feasts, and holy days of Israel:

1. Passover
2. Pentecost
3. Ninth of Ab
4. New Year (Rosh Hashanah)
5. Atonement (Yom Kippur)
6. Tabernacles
7. Dedication (Hanukkah)
8. Purim

Spong (p. 76) also notes that one of the earliest manuscripts of Mark, Codex Alexandrinus, is specifically divided into 49 separate lections for use in worship. The gospels seem to be written as a guide to how this new Christian community can adapt its familiar structure for the worship of God to the new knowledge about Jesus. "... the oral traditions of their faith communities were transformed into written documents through which the Jesus story could be heard on a regular basis." This happened 35-70 years after Jesus' earthly life was over.

Further, the style is midrashic, showing who Jesus was not by the later historic or documentary process of relating accurate details and events, but by telling stories which show Jesus by comparison with themes with which they are all already familiar. "So the Gospels were not descriptions of what happened or what Jesus said or did, they were interpretations of who Jesus was based on their ancient and sacred heritage." (Spong p. 20) Spong covers this in great detail with abundant examples.

This would also explain why the earliest Christians believed that everything which had been written about the Christ had already been completely fulfilled in Jesus.

To succeed, an attempt to 'harmonize' the gospels must do so around the themes of the traditional practices of Jewish worship, the themes of the holy days and the teaching path through the Pentateuch (Torah). For a fairly exhaustive analysis of this, see Michael Goulder's *The Evangelist's Calendar*. In my view, the gospels were not written to be harmonized, and that especially with an attempted alignment to historical chronology.

## **Doctrines**

In the early Christian church, there was no orthodoxy of doctrine. "... there existed in the first Christian centuries an enormous range of doctrines and practices, all equally legitimate, all with equal right to boast a link to Jesus and his first apostles. No particular path should ipso facto be labeled orthodoxy or heresy. What later became orthodoxy, the Catholic Church, originally held no privileged position, but was just one strand of opinion among many: it was not a case of the mainstream versus the heresies, but rather a struggle of competing mainstreams." (Jenkins, p. 6)

The first round of "resolutions" to this battle of ideas came with the First Council of Nicaea in 325AD. The winners of the power struggle enumerated their key doctrines in the Nicene Creed, providing the first standard of orthodoxy. That didn't end the conflicts, so other councils and creeds followed. Canons of the Apostles began to accumulate, reaching over 130 in number, defining Canon Law (ecclesiastical law). A subset of these rulings (or perhaps a separately-counted set?) covers the Biblical canon, or canon of scripture. The Jewish one developed in the range of 200BC - 200AD. The Christian (Catholic) one was formed informally by around 150AD. Formal proclamations were made from 367-405AD, though some didn't make a formal declaration until the 16th and 17th centuries. (Wikipedia) "The winners chose the canon, and on grounds of political expediency rather than historical judgment." (Jenkins, p. 8) The books rejected by the winners show Gnosticism in a very different light from that presented in the Catholic canon. But the texts we have for these books are newer than the texts we have for the canonical books. (Jenkins p. 11)

Perhaps the doctrines which survived are those whose proponents were the most persuasive. Paul was certainly a dynamic and forceful personality.

## ***How It Happened***

Here I present what seems to me the most plausible scenario by which earliest Christianity developed. Since we have no independent record from when this happened, we can't tell for sure. Most Christians are exposed to Christianity as a unified philosophical system, religion, and worldview. History tells us nothing about the person of Jesus other than he was a Jew of Galilee, and was executed by Rome. The synoptics portray him as a sage (later called rabbi) of Second Temple Judaism, from the backwoods town of Nazareth. No ideas are attributed to him in any rabbinic literature, though they were diligent about citing their sources. Either he was unknown or his ideas were unremarkable. We see no unique views of his in the synoptic gospels. It's plausible that all reference to him was redacted because of what people later said about him, though I think that's unlikely. Eusebius cites the first extra-biblical reference of Nazareth to 200 CE, calling it a village in Judea. No Jewish source earlier than the third century CE mentions it. New Testament writings of Christianity begin with Paul. We have no direct record of how the ideas of Christianity developed from the time of the crucifixion to the time of Paul. Paul himself seems to give contradictory source attributions in Galatians 1 vs. 1 Corinthians 15. My current view results from an assessment of the NT texts, as well as writings we have today from the ANE from the late first century. I leave it to the reader to read and understand these sources for themselves, and make their own judgments about which of the competing views is the most

likely explanation, and most consistent with the evidence we have. I urge the reader to make that evaluation without bias from your existing views and doctrines that you wish to support.

I think it most likely that the earliest Jesus movement was a strictly Jewish movement. A group of people following (and if an apostle, carrying on) the teachings of a sage they respected. They would meet in the synagogues. That wouldn't be a problem, since they weren't calling the sage they were following a god. The ideas of Christianity were not yet formulated. As noted throughout these notes, the synoptic authors were continually explaining why these ideas were unknown during the lifetime of Jesus. I think the book of James may well reflect this group, since it contains no ideas specific to Christianity.

All the religions of the ANE required sacrifices of some kind. Judaism has one kind of sacrifice (e.g. the scapegoat, Leviticus 16) for the sins of all the people. Some Greek mystery religions already had the idea of a universal sacrifice. Among those, some thought the only suitable sacrificial object would be a god. Someone championed the idea that Jesus would be a good candidate for such a sacrifice. Perhaps someone had a dream. Perhaps because they recognized the utility of identifying the sacrifice with a god of an established religion, as noted in the next paragraph. Perhaps they chose a god of a monotheistic religion which claimed that its god was the only god. Think big, so your universal sacrifice can apply to all geography, not just a Judea or a Syria or a Moab. It would have a natural appeal as the first free religion of the ANE. The Greeks pursuing this idea would write bios narratives about what kind of person they thought their sacrifice was. Not being Jewish, they could access some typical rabbinic teaching and dialog and (hastily) translate it into Greek. That's what the linguistic style of the parables in the synoptics looks like.

If Saul was actively persecuting followers of Jesus, it is very plausible that he would have a dream about Jesus, an indication perhaps of a guilty conscience. But it's not clear why a Jew would be persecuting them unless they were already making claims that Jesus was a god. While the ANE had a plethora of god-man figures, these Christians were saying Jesus was their god, the God of Israel. Also, if Paul were so thoroughly Jewish, he likely would not be thinking of Greek ideas of a universal sacrifice. Thus, while I still refer to Paul as the founder of Christianity, I do so because we can't trace the idea any farther back than Paul. In this scenario, it seems more likely the idea came from someone else, and Saul was persecuting the people who believed that idea.

I don't think early Christians cared as much as we think they did about marketing their religion. But they did care about avoiding persecution. Jews and Christians were persecuted (by people, not by governments) because they were atheists. They refused to worship the traditional (polytheistic) gods. So the gods will be upset with us and we're all in trouble. Jews had official **religio licita** legal protection by Rome, since Judaism was an ancient religion and the Romans respected antiquity. Christians had no such protection. A theory is that Christianity tried to gain some of that respect/protection by portraying itself as a form or extension of Judaism. I don't know if we have any surviving writings to answer this definitively. To choose Jesus, an executed Jewish sage, as that sacrifice is a good choice in this respect. To re-interpret the prophets as

predicting this cements the deal. The rest is history. (Ehrman, After the New Testament, lecture 21, very freely paraphrased) It looks like a wise strategy, but gaining acceptance of the idea that sacrifice was unnecessary was an uphill battle. People tenaciously cling to their doctrines. It took approval by a Roman emperor (Constantine) to finally turn the tide, a journey of almost three centuries.

Why would religious leaders feel threatened by Christianity? If universally adopted, it would defund all the priesthods of all the religions of the ANE. Christianity never really had a priesthood since it never offered sacrifices.

In lecture 14 of that same class, Ehrman offers a conjecture about how this might have come about. Paul had his dream / vision about Jesus as if it were a living person. If God raised Jesus from the dead, why did that happen? God must think Jesus is special. Therefore his execution was not punishment for his own bad behavior. Then for whose? Everyone else's! Thus the universal sacrifice.

## The Next Phase

We have a large body of writings showing what people believed during the first century in the greater Roman Empire. Much of it was discovered during my lifetime. By minimizing the time and effort we need to spend on survival and self-defense, modern society has enabled the rise of a body of scholars willing and able to study these writings. By fostering a mindset of objectivity, the Enlightenment has enabled those scholars to pursue what is most likely true, rather than what we wish were true. Thus, the onus is on the believer to explain why all the other peer religions are myth, while Christianity is not; and why their particular variant of Christianity is true, while all other variants of Christianity throughout history are not.

The appeal of the first free religion of the ANE is obvious. All the others require sacrifices. From the foundation concept of the universal sacrifice, and incorporating the idea of the sacrifice actually being a god, we try to develop explanations and doctrines. We can't ask the disciples because they are still in Judea and they are still Jewish. Besides, all that's really relevant about Jesus is his death as a sacrifice, as Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 2:2. Thinking on the subject develops into several schools of thought. Each becomes a clear, popular body of thought, so far none dominating.

1. Docetism. God but not man. Jesus was actually God. He was never human, but just appeared to be. He was 'adopted' when baptized. From an early ms of Luke, "This day have I begotten you." The idea also appears in Philippians. It was still a Christian view. Paul came to think it wasn't. He wanted to see Jesus as a firstfruits precursor of human resurrection. That can't happen unless Jesus was a living human who actually died.
2. Marcionism. A form of Docetism. The god of the Old Testament was a wrathful tyrant. The god of Jesus was a loving save-the-world god. Jesus was not actually born, since that would make him part of creation.
3. Ebionites. Man but not God. Jesus was mortal, born like every other human, chosen and anointed by God. Jesus was a Jew, fully obedient to Torah. Christians must do the same (perhaps except for offering sacrifices).

4. Gnosticism. This is a broader, heterogeneous, Greek school of thought. Several areas of Christian thought were largely Gnostic. Gnostic ideas which remain in orthodox Christianity center on the Holy Spirit. This was a mechanism by which God imparts gnostic 'special knowledge' directly to an individual. An example of its exercise was the practice of speaking in tongues. I think most other Gnostic ideas were rejected by proto-orthodoxy. Valentinus was one of the best known Gnostic Christians.
5. Proto-orthodoxy. Bart Ehrman uses this term for the school of thought from earliest Christianity which eventually won the battle for the minds of men, and was declared orthodox by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. God and man. Jesus was both god and man. It doesn't need to make sense. It's a paradox or a mystery.

For a very good overview of these branches of earliest Christianity, see course 6593 from The Teaching Company, *Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles over Authentication*. The material is also available in a book of the same title.

## Orthodoxy

The traditional model of church history was that originated by Eusebius, a Roman and Christian historian, 263-339 CE. Lacking the modern goal of objectivity, ancient historians told their stories in ways supporting their beliefs. His model was that truth was communicated from Jesus through his apostles, who communicated it to the bishops they appointed, who in turn communicated it through their successors. This model was thoroughly refuted by Walter Bauer in his 1934 book, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Some of the ideas now branded as heresy (Gnostic ideas from Egypt, Marcionite ideas from Asia Minor) were actually older. Bauer says proto-orthodoxy won because it was Roman. Roman was the center of the empire. The Roman church was rich. You are likely to favor a religion which gives you alms or frees you from slavery.

## *Jesus as Magician*

As I suggested earlier, this section especially is not necessarily about who Jesus was, but about who Jesus was believed to be by some people. A lot of people. Volumes of supporting material are provided by Morton Smith in his book, *Jesus the Magician*. From his introduction:

"Yet Jesus should be one of the better known figures of antiquity. ... Few public figures from the Greco-Roman world are so well documented, but none is so widely disputed. This suggests that there is something strange about the documents, or about the scholars who have studied them, or both."

"Probably both. Most of the scholars have not been historians, but theologians determined to make the documents justify their own theological positions. This has been true of liberals, no less than conservatives; both have used 'critical scholarship' to get rid of theologically unacceptable evidence."

I prefer "written about" to "documented" as more accurate. Other public figures did not have religions created about them. That's why people wrote about them. If people had 'documented', they would have done so shortly after his death, or even during his lifetime.

From page 4, "The picture of the world common to Jesus and his Jewish Palestinian contemporaries is known to us from many surviving Jewish and Christian documents. It was

wholly mythological."

Smith (p. 61ff) offers many examples showing that magicians were using the name of Jesus in spells, even as early as during his lifetime. We see this after his death in Acts 19:13. Again, this addresses not who Jesus was, but what people believed him to be.

"Widespread ancient reports of Jewish magic involving worship of angels and demons, as well as Yahweh, have now been confirmed by the recovery of SHR (Sefer ha-Razim, Book of Secrets), a Jewish magical text of late Roman times that gives directions for such worship, prescribing the prayers and sacrifices to be made to these minor powers." (Smith p. 69)

As I noted in the Who Was Jesus? section on page 17, the gospel diarists wanted to cover all the bases. Why would they describe Jesus as a magician if they didn't believe that's who he was? They were first and foremost evangelists. A reader who thought of Jesus as a magician would instantly recognize that in the gospel accounts. The hope would be for them to become Christians. Some diarists may include references to this idea by way of showing that this is not who Jesus actually was. I'll note some key examples of these references. Read Morton Smith's book for more detail and to judge for yourself.

Smith draws and documents an extended analogy between Jesus and Apollonius of Tyana as magus (Morton Smith, p. 84). "Given these basic historical similarities, it is not surprising that similar opinions and legends grew up about the two of them. Both were said to have been fathered by gods and to have been amazingly precocious youths..." The Life of Apollonius resembles the gospels in literary form (ibid, p. 86). "Porphyry also seems to have been the first to compare Apollonius and Jesus." (ibid, p. 88) Eusebius argued for the incomparable superiority of Jesus to Apollonius (ibid, p. 90).

The idea of Jesus as magician had never occurred to me before I read the book. The parallels are far too strong to dismiss. "This brings us to the risen Jesus. Of the miracles that followed his death, his post-mortem appearances to his followers, making himself unrecognizable or invisible, going through locked doors, empowering his followers to handle serpents and drink poison without being harmed, and breathing into them the holy spirit have been treated above and are without exception paralleled in magical material." (ibid, p. 124) This portrayal of Jesus as a magician is either (1) an accurate portrayal of who Jesus really was; (2) an accurate portrayal of who the gospel diarists believed Jesus to be; or (3) a very strong attempt to lead a large audience of magic-believers into identifying with Jesus. I have no way to tell whether 2 or 3 is more likely. An evangelist wanting to reach a demographic fascinated by magic (i.e., the entire ANE) would likely describe Jesus to match magicians they knew about.

## ***Jesus as Myth***

Popularity of mythology in the ANE of the first century is well known, including the Greek, Roman, and others I already noted. Some scholarly discussion on this and related subjects use **myth** in its more philosophical sense. "The term "myth" should not here be taken to mean "stories that are not true", but rather, that the truths embodied in these myths are of a different



order from the dogmas of theology or the statements of philosophy.” That is taken from The Gnosis Archive, which offers an excellent general overview at <http://gnosis.org/gnintro.htm>.

It has been suggested that Jesus was in this category, and never existed (or was never perceived as) a real, live, flesh-and-blood person. Beyond Christian writings, there are only three references to Christianity in the entire century after the estimated crucifixion date of 30 CE. One in Josephus refers to him incidentally as a brother of James. The other in Josephus, *Testimonium Flavianum*, is widely considered to be a Christian insertion or expansion of some original mention. The parts considered authentic show only that Josephus had heard about Jesus and probably the manner of his death. Another is in Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44, written 116 CE. The passage is about the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE, with Nero blaming Christians (though he likely set the fire himself). Richard Carrier suggests that part of the text, 'Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus', was a later Christian insertion. I think that's plausible. The earliest manuscript we have of *Annals* is from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. I think a historian would have used his name rather than an imputed title.

Bart Ehrman critiques and teaches a wide range of early views about Jesus, but rejects this hypothesis. See his book, *Did Jesus Exist?*. There is an excellent, well-researched, well-presented refutation by Richard Carrier at <http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/1794>. As Carrier notes there (speaking of Paul), “The idea that anyone actually saw him or spent time with him in the flesh is nowhere found in his letters.” Carrier effectively demonstrates that myth is as plausible an explanation for Jesus as all of the non-myth ('historical') hypotheses. People of the ANE would have no trouble at all accepting that. This reminds me of one of my favorite quotes. "Often wrong, never in doubt." Most people KNOW, with absolute certainty, whether a historical Jesus existed. In terms of a historical claim, with historical evidence, scholars are divided. In my opinion, Jesus as myth will increase in prevalence as scholars begin to take the question seriously.

Those paragraphs cover the controversy about whether Jesus was a real, living person (a historical Jesus) rather than a purely mythological creation. The extent to which the ideas of Christianity were derived from peer mythology is a different debate. Some accuse Christianity of plagiarizing earlier mythology. That claim is very difficult to support. There is no exact match. It can be difficult to date the first appearance of a particular mythological idea. I think it was more syncretism than plagiarism. Someone hears an interesting idea from another religion and incorporates it into his own. Or simply doesn't remember that the idea came from a different religion, and just starts speaking of it as from his own. Few religions had authoritative arbiters of their ideas. As a religion of the book, Judaism was a rare exception. I suspect Christianity began as an amalgam of popular ideas from Greek mystery religions. Associating it with Judaism was probably an afterthought. If you want to claim universality for your religion, it helps if you link it to a monotheistic religion. They were few and far between. Perhaps Judaism was the only surviving one at the time.

Parallels between beliefs about Jesus and ancient mythology of Greece, Rome, Egypt,

Mesopotamia, and the far east are easy to find. It's just difficult sometimes to date those ideas to support claims that Christianity appropriated those ideas. Robert McNair Price has written extensively on the subject. The Egyptian god **Horus** was born to Isis by non-traditional means. "Horus was born to the goddess Isis after she retrieved all the dismembered body parts of her murdered husband Osiris, except his penis, which was thrown into the Nile and eaten by a catfish, or sometimes depicted as instead by a crab, and according to Plutarch's account used her magic powers to resurrect Osiris and fashion a golden phallus to conceive her son (older Egyptian accounts have the penis of Osiris surviving)." (Wikipedia) Note that the resurrection of **Osiris** is part of that myth.

"Both **Mithras** and Christ were described variously as 'the Way,' 'the Truth,' 'the Light,' 'the Life,' 'the Word,' 'the Son of God,' 'the Good Shepherd.' The Christian litany to Jesus could easily be an allegorical litany to the sun-god. Mithras is often represented as carrying a lamb on his shoulders, just as Jesus is. Midnight services were found in both religions. The virgin mother...was easily merged with the virgin mother Mary. Petra, the sacred rock of Mithraism, became Peter, the foundation of the Christian Church." – Gerald Berry, Religions of the World. Mithra was an ancient Zoroastrian deity, in definite records to 1400 BCE, and most likely to 3500 BCE. A form of Mithraism was growing rapidly in the Roman Empire before the first century. The birth of Mithras was celebrated on December 25. Part of the Mithraic communion liturgy included, "He who will not eat of my body and drink of my blood, so that he will be made one with me and I with him, the same shall not know salvation." According to The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries by Mithraic scholar David Ulansey in 1989, Mithraism originated in Tarsus. Christians know this place as the home of Paul. Tertullian and Justin Martyr tried to say that Mithraism copied the eucharist from Christianity, but the former predates the latter. Ulansey is cited even by Christian apologists.

A cult of **Attis** began around 1250 BCE in Dindymon (in modern Turkey). He was born of a virgin (Nana, herself daughter of the river-god Sangarius) impregnated by an almond placed in her bosom.

A variation on this theme views Jesus as legend rather than myth. Compare to Pocahontas, Mike Fink, Davy Crockett, and others of American legend.

### ***Jesus as Roman Invention***

A related analysis, too new to evaluate, since it wasn't even presented until October 19, 2013. <http://uk.prweb.com/releases/2013/10/prweb11201273.htm>. Strange but plausible, and we'll probably never know for sure. I doubt it's all true, if any. Most suspect is the motivation to tone down Jewish rebellions by creating a competing religion. Perhaps the best clue against that is how long it took for Christianity to become known outside its own circles. We have only three-four historical references to it during the first century after the death of Jesus: Josephus, Nerva, Pliny the Younger, perhaps Tacitus. I think other explanations are more plausible. A lot of new religious thought was happening, especially in the areas of the Greek mystery religions. Along comes the region's first free religion. That made it naturally attractive.

## Detailed Notes

### **Mark**

This first gospel covers that portion of the liturgical year most important, and most unique to Christianity, the Passion of Christ. "... neither biography nor history so much as it is a corporate memory" (Spong p. 86) "Mark is unique among the Gospels in stressing this idea that no one can figure out who Jesus is." (Bart Ehrman blog, April 2, 2017)

If the author was Mark, a 'disciple' of Peter, one would expect him to emphasize what Peter emphasized. Mark's gospel would also be viewed as carrying Peter's authority, and would certainly be promoted in Peter's domain or sphere of influence. It would also have been the first distributed. See Thiede p. 52. Bart Ehrman suggests in his blog that the gospel wasn't attributed directly to Peter because there was already a gospel of Peter. Also, Peter was known to be illiterate, thus incapable of writing it, and likely incapable of even composing such a work.

The document itself never mentions its author, nor the place, time, or circumstances of its origin. Scholars estimate 66-70 CE, perhaps in Greek-speaking Syria. This was after Paul's death in 64 CE. The tradition of authorship by "Mark" grew some time in the second century. ... The Greek prose employed is the informal language of ordinary men and women who made up the common eastern Mediterranean culture in the first century. (Miller , p. 10-11) Many date it after 70 CE.

Mark 1:14 – Starting with John the Baptist and continuing with Jesus, an apocalyptic judgment was imminent (at hand). Evil would be punished, Rome would be evicted, and a nation of Israel would be restored. You should change your behavior now (repent), so you'll be on the good side of that judgment. You should also repent so that God can resume blessing you by giving you back your political independence. Preaching the gospel meant proclaiming that message.

### **Disciples**

In Second Temple Judaism, a disciple was someone who studied directly under a sage (later called rabbi). That means no person today can honestly be called a disciple of Jesus. See also notes on Luke 10:10.

Mark 1:23 – Demon possession isn't found in the Old Testament. (Diaries) The modern term that seems to be the closest linguistically is pathogen. (Diaries p. 141)

In Mark 2, the author portrays Jesus as disagreeing that only God can forgive sins.

The pig scene of Mark 5 is a story written as a demonstration of power. The pig scene is far more dramatic than if they had simply gone away. I haven't confirmed this Facebook comment by Eric Craig, "The decapolis side of Galilee, where this incident occurs, was under the supervision of the 10th Roman legion. The banner of the 10th legion was a boar/ war pig. So Jesus here is demonstrating his authority over secular and demonic powers in a covert way."

Mark 6:3 “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?” Matt 13:55 refers to Joseph (not Jesus) as a carpenter. The word is τέκτων (*tektion*).

This means a craftsman, a worker in wood. Some suggest stone instead of wood, since there wasn't much wood in Galilee. It's more likely rough daily utilities than fine furniture. The word can also mean planner, contriver, plotter, or author. In modern Greek, it means Freemason. It's used in Hebrews 11:10. Various ancient gods, goddesses, and god-men have been described in these terms. This might be an allusion to his role as architect or creator. Perhaps not, since that idea doesn't seem to appear until John 1:3.

Mark 6:45 “Walking on water ... is one of the feats attributed to a 'Hyperborean' magician by Lucian's dupes (*Philopseudes* 13). A magical papyrus promises that a powerful demon will enable his possessor to walk on water.” (Morton Smith, p. 120)

Mark 8:23 Spittle was commonly considered to have magical powers (Morton Smith, p. 128)

Mark 8:27 is explicit acknowledgement of the wide variety of views about who Jesus was. The author selects his own view to portray as the 'truth'. Perhaps the diarists show so many views so that each reader is likely to recognize his own, or those of his peers, and to be persuaded that the views of the diarist are the correct ones. (Morton Smith p. 21)

Mark 8:33 A common epithet hurled by members of one group against another (Pharisaic, prophetic, rabbinic) was “firstborn of Satan” or “synagogue of Satan”. (Moseley p. 146)

The “how long” of Mark 9 echoes the lament of the prophets. Mark 9:28 an exorcism by a secret prayer. “Clement of Alexandria commented that 'the prayer' of the gnostic is more powerful than faith.” (Morton Smith, p. 95)

Mark 11:12 The withering of the fig tree would be recognized as a magician's curse (Morton Smith, p. 119).

The tax episode of Mark 12:13-17 likely refers to *fiscus Iudaicus*, August 29 of 17 CE at the earliest. Caesar may be a generic reference to Rome and its rulers. No denarius with an image of a ruler from prior to these Jewish Wars has been found; many found minted after the wars.

Mark 13 This may be the earliest example of someone attaching Christian significance to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. I think this writing was likely at least 5-10 years after the event.

"The fervency and specificity of these passages [Mark 13] suggest that the author was writing for readers who knew such experiences, either directly or indirectly, and were in danger of facing similar sufferings in their immediate future. This means the narratives of Jesus' arrest and trials would have been intended to have a practical, existential force and would have been

read accordingly." (Hurtado, p. 164)

Mark 15:42-47 Only a rich man (i.e. with power and influence), in the Sanhedrin, such as Joseph of Arimathea, would even have occasion for private conversation with Pilate. That is necessary to make the story plausible. It's easier to believe in a resurrection of Jesus if his body was buried rather than left on the cross for scavengers to eat. It was more typical for Rome to deny a respectful burial as a way of further shame and threat.

Mark 16:9-20 (the "Longer Ending") is widely recognized as a later addition to Mark. Mark 16:16 incorporates Paul's idea that baptism is essential, "Whoever believes **and is baptized** will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

## **Matthew**

Early church tradition refers to the apostle Matthew as the author. It is written in good Koine Greek of the period. No clue remains to tell us whether it was originally written in another language like Aramaic or Hebrew (but see Bivin and Blizzard). Authorship is referred to as Matthew, by convention. (Miller, p. 56)

It is targeted to a Jewish audience, probably those who fled Jerusalem before or during the slaughter of AD70, and settled in the upper Galilee/lower Syria area. A new rabbinic tradition was developing here, starting what is now rabbinic Judaism. But Matthew's Jewish Christian community felt threatened by these changes. The account has the strongest ties to Torah content, teaching, story, and structure. The scathing rebukes of the Pharisees are those of this community, not those of Jesus' time. Jesus fit right in with the Pharisees. His teachings matched theirs.

Matthew is organized into five teaching blocks, each closing with the phrase "when Jesus had finished." The blocks are organized by Jewish festival (Spong p. 91) Perhaps he wanted this text viewed as the "Christian Torah," but that doesn't help understand the organization. Others suggest it's organized by books of Torah (5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). The scholars' best guess is 80-82 CE for its writing. (Spong p. 102) Ancient manuscripts such as the Codex Alexandrinus divided the text into a preface (chapter 1) followed by 68 units. This likely reflected an even earlier tradition. The recent discovery of the Magdalen Papyrus by Thiede offers some evidence of an earlier date, perhaps before 70 CE. Keep an eye out for scrolls to be discovered during the continuing excavations at Herculaneum. Also watch for more to be learned from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library. Of greatest value to study of Christian documents would be the newest Greek and Roman documents in the caves, as well the newest copies of Jewish documents in the caves. Since these documents could be no newer than the 68 CE date of the abandonment of the caves, they could be very helpful in establishing dates for Christian documents found elsewhere. See Thiede, p. 110. The language of the parable of the banquet in 22:7 seems to be describing the destruction of Jerusalem as a past event, leading most to consider the writing as after 70 CE. (Miller, p. 57, see also the argument there that Matthew represents a debate, not between Jew and Gentile or Christian, but between rival sects of rabbinic Judaism, Pharisaic vs. John the Baptist, then Jesus, then the Matthean community)

If the author is indeed the disciple Matthew, his day job was probably more like a customs officer, assessing and collecting taxes on the goods passing through the trade routes. He would have been in a high economic class, and respected professionally, though still not liked by those who had to pay tax. Matthew probably held the religious office of provincial scribe. He led the synagogue as *sophar* (worship leader), and served as the provincial schoolmaster for Jewish children in his Syrian town (Spong, p. 102). His task in the synagogue was to teach the scriptures to adults who gathered for worship, relating one text to another in midrashic fashion. Matthew incorporated 606 of the 664 verses of Mark into his own work. But Mark covered just 6.5 months of the liturgical year, so Matthew needed to provide quite a bit of material of his own to cover the rest of the year. Some say he used the proposed 'Q' text as a source, but if there was a Q, there doesn't seem to be evidence that Matthew didn't write it. These proposed 'Q' documents, the *Loqienquelle*, are more of a generic name for collected sayings of Jesus

Matthew could have overtaken Mark in popularity, since it was broader in scope, used more action and a more exciting writing style, and included more content like the sermon on the mount. See Thiede, p. 52. It also covered more of the liturgical year, as mentioned above.

Sermon on the Mount – (Spong p. 114) explains the sermon on the mount as patterned after the Jewish celebration of Pentecost, organized as a 24-hour watch vigil. Each beatitude states a theme. Each of the 8 watches of the vigil centers on the theme of the corresponding beatitude, last to first, in a typical Jewish pattern. Read it, I won't retype it. It revealed Jesus as "the new Moses presiding at the new Sinai".

"There is no mention of what to believe in the Sermon on the Mount. The focus rather is on action: what to do and thereby fulfill the meaning of Torah." (Young, *Meet the Rabbis*, p. 204)

## **The Virgin Birth**

Matt 1:23 "... the word 'virgin' does not appear in the original Hebrew passage in Isaiah. It is simply not there! Matthew has developed an idea based on a concept that was not present in the original source Matthew was quoting. The word 'virgin' did not enter the Book of Isaiah until it was translated into Greek some 500 years after Isaiah had written these words and some 200 years before the birth of Jesus." (Spong p. 188, with further explanations)

The Isaiah text itself is easy to understand in context, and with understanding of the language and idioms of the time. It's talking specifically about Ahaz (king of Judah) and the siege of the Ephraimite-Syrian alliance. First Isaiah tends to refer to the northern tribes of Israel as Ephraim. A child would be born (the normal way). By the time it's old enough to know right from wrong, Judah will win and Ephraim-Syria will lose. The 16-year reign of Ahaz has been estimated to end around 728-715 BCE. The Babylonian conquest of Judah happened in 586 BCE, and the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. At that time, Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Judah and Jerusalem.

The virgin birth of Matthew and Luke was based on a misinterpretation of this Isaiah text,

and on a word choice by the Septuagint of the Hebrew word *almah*. Miraculous birth were a common theme in religious literature, even some virgin births. It didn't become an idea important to Christianity until Augustine proposed the idea of **original sin** passed from Adam through the male line. That's when it became important to explain how Jesus could avoid having a male human father.

The idea doesn't even appear until these two late authors, probably 2-3 decades after Paul died. The Johannine community doesn't mention it in any of their writings. They either hadn't heard of the idea, thought it unimportant, or didn't believe it. The Ebionites, some Gnostics, and probably the Marcionites didn't believe it.

Matt 2 For the Magi, see my notes on Luke 2. Some see the gifts as appropriate for the anointing of a future king. 2:6 Micah was not predicting this. Micah was saying that in the restoration of Israel from Babylonian Diaspora, they would be led by someone from the Davidic line. That was Zerubbabel (Ezra, Nehemiah).

Matt 2:15 – Hosea was not prophesying this. It barely qualifies as a type. It was about God bringing his son (Israel) out of Egypt with the exodus. It seems that Matthew shouldn't be citing this as fulfillment of a detailed prophecy.

Matt 2:16 – There is no historical evidence for the slaughter of the innocents, though there is quite a bit of historical information about Herod.

Matt 3:13 Ockham's Razor plus context give us a good explanation. Baptism by **John the Baptist** was a baptism of repentance, indicating your alignment with his philosophy and a willingness to resume obedience of Torah so that God would evict Rome. The philosophy was the Mosaic Covenant. The application here was an expression of the prophetic worldview (we were conquered by our enemies because we disobeyed) combined with the solution (if we repent, God will stop punishing and resume blessing Israel).

The author both shows Jesus identifying himself with the ministry of John the Baptist, but also saying that Jesus didn't need to repent. There is nothing surprising about that. It doesn't even require any Christian doctrine about the sinlessness of Jesus. The Pharisees were all about obedience to Torah. The people who need to repent are the Jews who are not obeying Torah. Later texts show Jesus continuing the ministry of John the Baptist as John's apostle. We see the early ministry of Jesus as the same as that of John the Baptist, down to the same language. That shows clearly in Matt 4:17, 'From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."' The next few chapters show how this teaching might have happened, concluding with 7:21. A central emphasis is the Hedge of Hillel.

## **The Poor and the Rich**

In the context of the setting of these stories, Second Temple Judaism, the poor meant the common people. This was the audience of the Pharisees. Complaints that the rich abuse their power by oppressing the poor, taking advantage of them, and denying them justice, go all the

way back to the prophets. It usually didn't mean poverty. In contrast, the rich were those in power: the priests and the ruling class. This was the audience of the Sadducees. Then, as now, those in power often manage to funnel the money to themselves. In general, if you think poverty when you see 'poor' in these texts, you're wrong. The exceptions are obvious, such as giving to the poor. That's what the words meant as commonly used. Now to hear what some others think.

Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." but Luke 6:20, "And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God."

From The Eight Beatitudes - Catholic Encyclopedia, see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02371a.htm>.

The word poor seems to represent an Aramaic 'ányâ (Hebrew 'anî), bent down, afflicted, miserable, poor; while meek is rather a synonym from the same root, 'ánwan (Hebrew 'ánaw), bending oneself down, humble, meek, gentle. Some scholars would attach to the former word also the sense of humility; others think of "beggars before God" humbly acknowledging their need of Divine help. But the opposition of "rich" (Luke 6:24) points especially to the common and obvious meaning, which, however, ought not to be confined to economical need and distress, but may comprehend the whole of the painful condition of the poor: their low estate, their social dependence, their defenseless exposure to injustice from the rich and the mighty.

From the Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary, see <http://bible.cc/matthew/5-3.htm>.

3. Blessed are the poor in spirit-All familiar with Old Testament phraseology know how frequently God's true people are styled "the poor" (the "oppressed," "afflicted," "miserable") or "the needy"-or both together (as in Ps 40:17; Isa 41:17). The explanation of this lies in the fact that it is generally "the poor of this world" who are "rich in faith" (Jas 2:5; compare 2Co 6:10; Re 2:9); while it is often "the ungodly" who "prosper in the world" (Ps 73:12). Accordingly, in Lu 6:20, 21, it seems to be this class-the literally "poor" and "hungry"-that are specially addressed. But since God's people are in so many places styled "the poor" and "the needy," with no evident reference to their temporal circumstances (as in Ps 68:10; 69:29-33; 132:15; Isa 61:1; 66:2), it is plainly a frame of mind which those terms are meant to express. Accordingly, our translators sometimes render such words "the humble" (Ps 10:12, 17), "the meek" (Ps 22:26), "the lowly" (Pr 3:34), as having no reference to outward circumstances. But here the explanatory words, "in spirit," fix the sense to "those who in their deepest consciousness realize their entire need" (compare the Greek of Luke 10:21; John 11:33; 13:21; Acts 20:22; Romans 12:11; 1 Corinthians 5:3; Philippians 3:3). This self-emptying conviction, that "before God we are void of everything," lies at the foundation of all spiritual excellence, according to the teaching of Scripture. Without it we are inaccessible to the riches of Christ; with it we are in the fitting state for receiving all spiritual supplies (Re 3:17, 18; Mt 9:12, 13).

From <http://sce.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/22/3/261>



In his study on the Sermon on the Mount, Hans Dieter Betz remarks that the expression 'the poor in spirit' (Mt. 5:3) is unique in the entire New Testament and does not appear at all in the early Christian literature or elsewhere in the Greek language.

Luke 6:20 has just "Blessed are ye poor." (Luke 6:24) But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." The most likely explanation, and the most plausible, is a scribal change. At the very least, we must admit we don't understand what is being said. Humility or self-abjection is out of context here.

Jesus appealed to the poor, and elevated them above others. Matt 6:1-4 give to the needy. Matt 6:18 treasures in heaven. Matt 6:25-34 do not be anxious - life, food, drink, clothing. Matt 19:16-30 rich man, sell and give to the poor, easier for camel ... Another reason for this was the continuing conflict between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Relevant to this is the fact that the Shammai were considered the mouthpiece of the wealthy Pharisees. (Moseley p. 147)

Matt 5:3 "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" It doesn't belong to them. The Beatitudes are a characterization or description of those in the kingdom. (Bivin)

Matthew 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers."

These were people who encouraged resolution of conflicts by nonviolent means. Today, on a grand scale, it's the likes of Jimmy Carter and Henry Kissinger.

Perhaps David's greatest accomplishment was unifying a dozen semitic tribes, who probably warred with their neighbors just like all the other semitic tribes, into a nation unified by a strong military/political leader (David) and a religion (Judaism).

These people were not monotheistic. Judaism fought a constant battle for supremacy.

The most powerful factor for progress throughout history was the ability to resolve conflict by nonviolent means. The united tribes of Israel could spend more of their efforts on literary, intellectual, and economic endeavors.

Today's peacemakers help marriages and families to develop healthy relationships and resolve conflict in meaningful, unifying ways.

At Valley I attended the film and theology class, and excellent class and experience. I began the class as the only non-Asian. But among other things, it was a step toward integrating a cultural subculture and the greater Valley community.

It's easy to be offended or threatened by the influx of the Asian hordes, taking over our communities, now the majority population in Cupertino, Saratoga, and others. But they make very good citizens. They behave, they are well educated and work hard, and they meld into American society more than some other immigrant populations such as Hispanic. It becomes

unthinkable to again go to war with such a kindred society. Think of Germany. Today, the only way you can tell a person is of German descent is to ask them.

Look around these related references:

From The Eight Beatitudes - Catholic Encyclopedia, see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02371a.htm>.

From the Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary, see <http://bible.cc/matthew/5-3.htm>.

From <http://sce.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/22/3/261>

Matt 5:17-18 “Destroy” and “fulfill” are technical terms used in rabbinic argumentation. When a sage felt that a colleague had misinterpreted a passage of Scripture, he would say, “You are destroying the Law!” ... What was “destroying the law” for one sage, was “fulfilling the Law” (correctly interpreting Scripture) for another.’ (Bivin p. 114) Moseley (p. 64-65) elaborates:

#### *Fourth-Century Theology*

It is obvious that neither Jesus nor Paul ever renounced Judaism, deviated from the Jewish faith, or attempted to start a new religion. At this point, a major question needs to be answered. If Jesus and Paul did not form a new anti-Jewish religion, who did?

A quick look at church history shows that as the church moved westward and away from its Jewish roots, the Roman church leaders of the fourth century developed theologies which virtually did away with all that was Jewish. The most fundamental change was the teaching that the Law was evil and stood in opposition to the grace of God.

By the fourth century, the Roman church had changed the church's fundamental teaching of keeping the Law to a religion whose message avoided anything having to do with the term. Pseudo-Christian writers taught that the Law of Moses had been fulfilled by the coming of Christ, but they redefined the word "fulfilled" to mean abolished or canceled, which was the exact opposite of its true meaning as used by Christ (Matthew 5:18-19). To Jesus, as in the rabbinic literature of his day, to "fulfill" the Law meant to keep the Law and correctly interpret its teachings. We can see from Paul's writings that he also understood the phrase "fulfill the Law" to mean that the Law is only fulfilled through love for God and our fellow man (see Galatians 6:2 and Romans 13:10).

The new ideas opposing Law in Christianity began to spring up as early as A.D. 160-220 in the Roman African communities represented by Tertullian, and were spearheaded by popular speakers such as Bishop John Chrysostom in Antioch (A.D. 349-400). From the mid-second century through the seventh century, Roman theologians developed doctrine upon doctrine in opposition to authentic biblical teachings. Origen, for example, a third-

century Christian philosopher, took Paul's phrase "the letter of the Law," and developed a completely new teaching on legalism. By suggesting a dichotomy between "the letter" and "the spirit," he set the stage for the term "legalism" to become synonymous with Judaism, both of which he condemned.

Paul's use of the phrase "letter of the Law" was solely against Judaizers who misused the Law, claiming it was the means of salvation even for Gentiles. He never criticized the Law of God as being legalistic. In fact, it was Paul who argued that before the Law death reigned and that the Law has dominion over believers while they live, because the Law is holy, just, good, and spiritual (see Romans 5:14 and 7:1-25). He insisted that the Law of God is the will of God, and that if we believe it, God will write it on our hearts, and it will be manifested in our lives (see Romans 2:17-18 and 20-29).

Matt 5:19 is better expressed as, "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Young, Meet the Rabbis, p. 45)

This passage is a strong statement of unequivocal support of Torah by Jesus. Unlike Peter and Paul, who had no trouble declaring it passe'. Any Pharisee of the first century could easily have said what Jesus said. They all would have meant what they said. As long as heaven and earth exist, Torah is law.

Matt 5:20 unless your alms-giving exceeds that of the scribes ... (Bivin) who also says "If your righteousness is reduced to almsgiving, Jesus admonished, you will not be in my movement, the Kingdom of Heaven." (Bivin p. 111)

In Matt 5:22 (and probably all other places), the word translated hell is γέεννα (**Gehenna**), from the Hebrew גהנום (Gehinnom). It's the Valley of Hinnom. In rabbinic literature, it's the destination of the wicked (vs. Sheol or Hades, the place of the dead). It's a ravine just south of Jerusalem. They would incinerate rubbish there, probably so that rain would carry the ashes away into the desert). It's also a place where Israel thought Canaanites offered child sacrifices to **Moloch (Molech, Malcam)**. Mark seems to use it only in the burning trash heap sense, though Matthew uses it various ways.

Matt 5:29-30 Hyperbole to emphasize the seriousness of sin.

Matt 5:39 "do not resist evil" means don't compete with evil-doers. Don't take revenge, even if you are entitled to it. Ps 37:1,8 and Proverbs 24:19. Matt 5:42 continues the theme: don't exact revenge on your neighbor with whom you have a quarrel by refusing to lend to him. Matt 5:10 Blessed are those who are pursued (not persecuted) because they are godly. v. 11-12 are about persecution, but the pronouns also change. (Bivin)

Matt 6:9-13 (the Lord's Prayer) In response to the disciples' request to teach them to pray, Jesus

recites the Jewish Aveinu, see <http://jerusalemcouncil.org/halacha/tefillah/aveinu-our-father-lords-prayer/> . Acts 2:42 states, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” Those prayers were the Amidah, prayed three times daily, followed by the Aveinu. That source suggests the disciples were asking him what he prayed after the Amidah. The words sound familiar (Didache 8:2-3):

*Likewise, don't pray as the hypocrites, but as commanded in the Gospel in this manner:  
Our Father in heaven,  
Sacred is Your Name.  
Your kingdom comes.  
Your will is accomplished,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us each day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our debt  
in the manner that we forgive our debtors.  
And do not allow us to fall to temptation,  
but deliver us from evil,  
for Yours is the power and the glory forever.  
Amen!*

Matt 6:48 misquotes Exodus 20:7. Matt 7:1-6 most likely revisits the bind/loose paradigm. See notes on Matt 16. I am not to criticize another Jew for doing the questionable thing that my rabbi binds, but theirs looses. The idea of the hedge did not require adoption of the union of all prohibitions. It inhibited the unbounded escalation of prohibitions. The context for this statement in Luke 6 is set in 6:1, a disagreement about Sabbath rules. Verse 6 continues the subject. Dogs and pigs were considered unclean animals. A Jew who chooses to stay unclean demonstrates a disregard for Torah. Don't bother trying to teach them, they don't want to learn. It's reminiscent of the Proverb teaching not to bother correcting a fool, and also of the request in the Lord's Prayer to forgive me as I forgive others.

Matt 7:7-11 The ask-seek-knock passage teaches the same message as the persistent widow, see Luke 18. “Ask, and it will be given to you” also appears in the magical papyri. (Morton Smith, p. 131)

Matt 7:12 The Golden Rule, see note on Matt 22:36.

Matt 7:15 Beware of false prophets. Hey, what was that about not judging? Only 15 verses away is good evidence that “judge not” is not an admonition against discernment. Jesus adds further warning in the Olivet Discourse in Matt 24.

Matt 7:21 concludes several chapters covering the teachings of Jesus introduced in 4:17. His hearers must do the will of God. That is, obey Torah. That's what he has been teaching.

Matt 9:11 – The use of ‘sinners’ implies not everyone was a ‘sinner’. The term was used as a

pejorative for a Jew not living under the Mosaic Law. Thus in this context at least, Jesus was likely using the term as it would be used by the Pharisees who were challenging Him.

Matt 9:20-21 “And behold, a woman which was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years came behind him and touched the hem of his garment: For she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole.” On the hem of the garment would have been the tzitzit, the tassels of Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12. In Numbers, the word translated border or corner is also often translated wings. During the first century, one tradition about this tzitzit was that these knotted fringes possessed healing powers. This probably came from Malachi 4:2, which speaks of Messiah coming “with healing in His wings.” (Moseley p. 22)

Matt 10:16-40 These sayings about persecution reflect the experiences early Christians were having when the texts were written. They were persecuted by the traditional polytheists because they refused to offer sacrifices to the traditional gods. (Hurtado p. 60-62)

Matt 11:7 and Luke 7:24 Jesus alludes to the fable of “The Oak and The Reed”. The politicians who inhabit kings' palaces bend with the wind, surviving the political storms. John the Baptist, unwilling to compromise his message, broke with the wind. For a discussion of this with references, see (Young, Parables, p. 20)

Matt 11:12(?) is a rabbinic (midrash) interpretation of Micah 2:12-13. The sheep have been penned up all night for protection. The breach-maker opens up the wall and the sheep are anxious to get out. The king (Messiah) leads them out. (Bivin)

Matt 11:28-30 The task of the rabbi was the learning and teaching of Torah. To share that task, to pull the same load as your teacher, is to take his yoke upon you. It wasn't considered negative, or a 'burden' as we use the word. The same theme is seen in Ben Sira 51, written over a century before Jesus. (Bivin, New Light, p. 23ff) According to Ben Sira, it's Wisdom who invited people to her, to find rest, and accept her yoke (op cit, p. 28)

Matt 13:1-9, 18-23 parable of the sower. This parable, and the one following, are the kind any rabbi of the Pharisees would use when talking about the value of studying Torah.

Matt 13:24-30, 36-43 parable of the tares. It's a reference to all the apocalyptic literature. More specifically, it's saying that, even though 'in the end', the good are rewarded and the evil punished, we can't tell now which is which. It makes more palatable the idea that we are not responsible for the punishment of the evil ones. It helps preserve a society from endless retaliation for perceived wrongs. Especially, don't use violent means for the suppression of error. Crusaders would have done well to heed this. It's the “causes of sin and all law-breakers” (ESV) who will be cast into the fiery furnace, not those who lack some belief.

When Jesus speaks of the son of man, he is not necessarily saying he is that person. In the OT, a prophet (especially Ezekiel) shows God referring to him (the prophet) as son of man, emphasizing his humanity. Perhaps a modern equivalent would be an advanced intellect of

science fiction referring to a person in a condescending way as 'human', or 'carbon unit'. It thus was sometimes used as a way for a prophet to refer to himself.

Matt 13:10-17 The author of Matthew is offering an explanation for why the idea of Jesus as God was unknown during his lifetime. It was intentionally kept a secret. Parables were a normal and typical way of teaching for the rabbis. Their purpose was an example from everyday life to illustrate a point, not to hide a meaning.

Matt 13:31-32 parable of the mustard seed. "small as a mustard seed' was a proverbial expression among the Jews for something exceedingly minute." Don't let small or humble beginnings fool you. The Kingdom of God will grow.

Matt 13:33 parable of leaven. Leaven need not always symbolize sin. Here, it simply represents something which grows or spreads.

Matt 13:52 "According to a saying attributed to Hillel, anyone who does not add to one's learning through new and innovative creativity should be killed. One adds to the old as one captures the essence of Torah and passes the message on to subsequent generations." (Abot 1:13 from Young, Parables, p. 30) I see this as a parallel to modern preaching and authoring.

Matt 14 This account tells us that John the Baptist still had disciples. We never get to hear his side of the story, only what the evangelists for Jesus chose to tell us. The feeding of the 5000 might be an echo of Moses. Or it might not be. It might simply be because some people thought Jesus would have been a miracle-worker during his lifetime on earth. Some people expected a messiah to match Isaiah 29. That's why there had to be miracle accounts.

## **Bind and Loose**

Matt 16:18-19 is the graduation ceremony of Peter. Jesus was appointing Peter as his apostle, to lead the assembly in the future. It was done in the presence of the other disciples, so they would know who the future leader would be. Bind means to forbid; loose means to permit. Jesus was telling Peter that Peter had the authority to interpret the Law, and that his rulings would be respected in heaven. The apostles did that in regard to big decisions like circumcision, offering meat to idols, etc. This is what rabbis did when they made rulings on what constituted 'labor' and therefore was forbidden on the Sabbath. (Bivin) Jesus was passing on rabbinic authority to make rulings. The ceremony included a bit of humor, since *petra* usually meant a pebble, whereas *rock* meant a larger boulder.

## **The Church (*ekklesia*)**

Matt 16:18 and 18:17 are the only gospel usages of *ekklesia*. The Greek word refers to an assembly of people, usually a periodic gathering. It's used primarily in Acts to refer to a (typically weekly) gathering of Christians for the purpose of religious observance. It was later broadened and redefined to refer to the set of all Christians, rather than a

particular meeting of Christians. This is discussed in great detail in [http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration\\_quarterly/archives/1950s/vol\\_2\\_no\\_4\\_contents/ward.html](http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration_quarterly/archives/1950s/vol_2_no_4_contents/ward.html). I think doctrinal bias prevented this author from understanding why this word was used only here. First, there were as yet no Christians. When any sage used the word, he referred to a local Jewish assembly such as a weekly meeting at a synagogue. That's how Jesus would have used it. Jesus would have spoken Aramaic if he were speaking to a larger, general group. Were he part of mainstream rabbinic dialog of the day, he likely would have participated in Hebrew. With *ekklesia*, we have, not a word Jesus used, but a Greek author expressing an idea he thought Jesus would have expressed, using whatever language he was using.

Matt 16:20 One of this author's explanations for why the ideas of Christianity were unknown during the lifetime of Jesus. The disciples were told the secrets, but told not to tell.

Matt 17 The language of the Transfiguration would be instantly recognized by the reader as a description of Jesus conjuring the spirits of the dead, specifically Moses and Elijah. It would demonstrate that he had power over these spirits, and could use that power for his own purposes. See Jesus as Magician on page 31. Morton Smith (p. 121) compares it to a magician's initiation ceremony in Lucian's Alexander (chapter 40) and to Moses meeting Yahweh on Sinai.

Matt 18:12-14 (and Luke 15:3-7) Shepherds would herd their flocks into a protected place in the evening, often a walled pen (see note above for Matt 11:12). The diligent ones would count the flock. If any were missing, they would leave their flock in the protected place (usually in the care of other shepherds) and search for the missing ones. Spiritual leaders were often compared to shepherds. Ezekiel 34 is a challenge to these leaders to do their job. 34:16 speaks of seeking that which was lost. That's one reason Young, Flusser, Lindsey and others to suggest the context of this parable was Levi's dinner, and why Luke associated this with the parable of the lost coins. The motivational emphasis of most prophetic writings was to draw a wayward Israel back to the God of Israel, both in worship and in obedience.

Matt 18:21-35 parable of the unmerciful servant. Peter was being magnanimous, offering to forgive seven times. He knew that only three were required, Amos 1:3, 2:6, and Job 33:29,30. (Trench p. 151) The new motif of seventy times seven was practically unlimited. In ancient societies, revenge was the norm. Judaism tempered the revenge by prohibiting escalation. The eye-for-an-eye was a limitation on revenge. Christianity tempers it even more. This made Christianity very appealing to rulers of empire, who had to always work at reducing violent conflict among parts of an empire. This could have been part of the appeal for Constantine.

Matt 19:9 This is a relatively rare instance where Jesus sides with Beit Shammai, discouraging divorce, whereas Hillel tended to make it easy. Or the author chooses the view of Shammai because it is more consistent with Paul.

Don't miss the points of the parable of the rich young ruler in Matt 19. Torah required caring for the poor. Prophets (and later, sages) often criticize people for failing to do that. The Pharisees

associated with the common man (aka the poor). Their rants against the rich were not just jealousy and envy. The rich were the powerful, who often abused their power to oppress the poor, denying them justice, and so on. The point (exaggerated for emphasis) was that this rich man was righteous, but not quite righteous enough. It was to motivate everyone (not just the rich) to care for the poor. This skillful author leaves you pondering whether this man will be considered righteous enough to enter the KOG. It's far from a claim that righteousness was impossible.

A common theme in apocalyptic literature was reversal of fortunes. They (the poor) liked the idea that in the KOG they would receive the wealth that they never had, and the sadistic pleasure that the rich would lose theirs. Jesus is saying that not every rich person is unrighteous.

Matt 20:1-16 parable of the laborers. The school of Shammai is jealous of sinners who repent. Why should these latecomers get all the benefits of Judaism, when we dedicated our whole lives to it? This parable is designed to stir up emotions against that jealousy. To resent the happiness of another is an "evil eye".

Matt 21 The triumphal entry is reminiscent of a custom of the Pharisees for the Feast of Tabernacles (Moseley p. 141)

Matt 21:12-13 The 'cleansing of the temple' act would be considered by the Romans as threatening to their control of the temple. This alone would be suitable cause for executing him.

Matt 21:33-43 The parable of the tenants was written by Christians to justify anti-Semitism and to justify ending Judaism in favor of Gentile Christianity.

Matt 22:1-14 the parable of the wedding feast. The language of verse 3 refers to the practice, in Eastern manners, wherein the host sends a servant (a chamberlain) to escort or usher a guest (who was previously invited) to the banquet. For such a guest to refuse to attend at that point would be a serious breach of manners or custom. The offense is the same as in Matt 21:28-32, the parable of the two sons. You said you would, but you didn't. What counts is not what you say you are going to do, but what you actually do.

Matt 22:36-40 the greatest commandment. This is an encapsulation of the essence of Torah. Compare this to the Golden Rule, cited earlier by Hillel, "What you would not have done to thyself do not to another; that is the whole law, the rest is commentary" (BT Shabbath 31 a). Akiva ben Joseph, in Genesis Rabbah 24:7, calls this the greatest principle of the Torah. An even earlier expression of this form of reciprocity appears in Leviticus 19:18 and 34, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Reciprocity also shows up in the request in the Lord's Prayer to forgive me as I forgive others.

Matt 23 is an introduction to the apocalypse of the next two chapters, and a justification for it. I think this is much more likely to be from early Christianity than from the lifetime of Jesus.



Matt 24-25 the apocalypse of Jesus. It begins with prophetic literature explaining AD70 by way of a prediction/warning. In the battle against Rome, choose your side now, and stick with it. Side with Rome now, and when Rome loses, don't expect to change sides. Rome will lose, but no one knows when.

Matt 25:14-30 parable of the talents. The message is stewardship. "Character is doing what's right when nobody is looking." (Oklahoma Congressman J. C. Watts, speech at the Republican National Convention (August 13, 1996) The surprise element is that all the servants had the proper attitude: to please the master. But good intentions are not enough.

Matt 25:29 "This saying is closely related to a Jewish tradition that speaks about the giving of the law. The Torah was freely given by God. In like manner, it is taught freely. The one who learns the most from Torah receives more, while the one who neglects the study of the ways of the Lord will lose what he or she has acquired. The more learning, the more life. The more one has, the more one will receive." (Young, Parables, p. 85) "Luke's version of the parable makes subtle allusions to the historical events surrounding Archelaus' rise to power." Rewarding the successful administrators with cities probably reflects the kings desire to choose representatives most capable of extracting taxes from the populace. (Young, Parables, p. 86) "In rabbinic thought, either death or the end of the present world may cause the final accounting to determine a person's reward or punishment (Young, Parables p. 85).

Matt 25:31-46 is about the apocalyptic worldview in any of its early forms. Good people will be rewarded and evil people punished. The particular emphasis is that good people help others and bad people do not. But for all these variations of the worldview, your destiny was decided by your behavior. The Christian (only) idea that came much later was that your eternal destiny is decided, not by what you do, but by what you believe.

Matt 27:16 Barabbas, a Greek name (bar-abbas) meaning "son of the father". Appearing in all four gospels, the name would likely have been recognized immediately by Greek-speakers as a literary contrast to Jesus as "Son of the Father". The chief priests and elders are portrayed as preferring the former over the latter.

Matt 28 The author is practicing his own historical revisionism. The authenticity of 28:19, the only overtly trinitarian NT text, is hotly debated. We have no direct texts newer than the fourth century. Eusebius (col 240 p. 136 and elsewhere) quotes it as, "*Go ye, and make disciples of all the nations in my name.*" All 18 or so of his citations have that same form.

The term **disciple** had a very specific meaning. It was a Jewish student of a Jewish sage. The term is used 245 times in the gospels. In his writing, Paul never uses the term. He is all about making Christians, not making disciples.

## **Luke**

Luke's community was far more Hellenized and therefore less traditionally Jewish. Luke was probably one of those gentile Christians as well. The Luke of traditional authorship was a

‘disciple’ of Paul, leading expectations of affinity in that direction. He tells how word of Jesus reached the rest of the world. He reflects the continuing drift of that sect of Judaism which followed Jesus, from the rest of Judaism. He portrays Jesus as a scholar (like himself), leading that drift. Luke aimed to match the most desired features of pagan religions (Wright).

Some take the generic nature of the name Theophilus as an indication that the address is to ‘lovers of God’ in general rather than a specific person. Otherwise, this was likely a dedication to a high-ranking Roman civil servant. This dedication would have obliged Theophilus to pay for the copying and distribution of the work. And his office would give him access to the imperial mail, getting the works to anywhere in 3 days to 2 weeks. These factors, along with Paul’s authority, would have helped the wide distribution and popularity of Luke’s gospel. See Thiede, p. 109.

Luke is addressed with an intent to ‘set the record straight’, expressing tactful dissatisfaction with previous narratives about Jesus. In doing so, he acknowledges pre-existing writing. It is the first volume of a set (Luke-Acts). Luke expresses the story with God (rather than Jesus) as the prime mover. He downplays the belief in the imminence of the return of Jesus and the end of the world, viewing the Christian movement as a long-term proposition (“the Way” in Acts). (Miller, p. 116) The set is written in the style of other novelistic literature of the time, “an early Christian romance.” It has the highest literary style of the NT. It addresses whether Christians can be good citizens of the Empire. Thus, Luke is more antagonistic toward Judaism, trending toward the Roman. (Frontline)

Luke is written in shorter lessons, perhaps to a younger audience (Spong p. 89), and perhaps as a catechism (Spong p. 126) Written 60 years (3 generations) after Jesus’ death, “Would anyone dare to pretend that they could recapture the chronological order of the events of Jesus’ birth or of his earthly life and ministry from the vantage point of sixty to one hundred years later?” (Spong p. 125) Rather, Luke’s account parallels Genesis. (Spong p. 132) Luke 9:19 parallels Numbers 13-15 (sending out the spies), and note that “the names Joshua and Jesus were identical in Hebrew” (Spong p. 154) (FAN note: the Greek writers/translators probably used the Septuagint.) See Spong p. 166 for a mapping of Luke to the Torah in the Jewish liturgical year.

Luke 1 Hannah, the annunciation of Mary: “midrashic interpretations by Jewish people seeking to process their experience of God in Jesus of Nazareth in a traditional Jewish way.” (Spong p. 216) The “special baby” motif is definitely reminiscent of Moses. Further, Joseph is reminiscent of the Joseph who saved Israel by bringing them to Egypt. Compare Matthew 2. By the time the gospel narratives were written, probably no one knew (or cared) who Jesus’ parents were.

**Abijah** was the fourth king of the line of David. Zechariah was a priest of his division. At this time, the priests were divided into 24 divisions, each taking a turn at temple service. This becomes relevant In verse 69.

Luke 1:32-33 These words attributed to Gabriel could suitably be said of any king of Israel. Mary would have understood that her child (conceived and born the normal way) was chosen for

a special role. Even impregnation by a god was a very familiar theme. She would have thought of the many demi-urge characters. But perhaps she would have thought of Noah. God didn't like gods mating with humans, and flushed them all off the earth. Now it's going to happen again? Was she going to be responsible for another flood?

Luke 1:7, 36 Elizabeth and Zechariah sound a whole lot like Abraham and Sarah.

Luke 1:39-45 Gabriel announces the birth of **John the Baptist** as a prophet, to Zechariah. In verse 43, Elizabeth's exclamation shifts from Mary to herself. I think it is more likely Elizabeth is speaking of herself in verse 45, rather than of Mary. The contrast would be to 1:20, where her husband Zechariah was punished because he did not believe the pronouncement of Gabriel.

By contrast, Mary is told (by the same Gabriel) that her son Jesus (the English form of the Greek form of the Aramaic form of the Hebrew name we see as Joshua) would fill a messianic role by becoming king of Israel. At the very least, that would mean he was to be a successor of Herod. But in the context of the talk about the Kingdom of God, that would mean Jesus would be king of the newly independent nation of Israel (free from Rome). You can read about that in her Magnificat. It's exactly what she describes, along with the apocalyptic reversal of fortunes. Jesus would lead Israel into their promised land, as his namesake Joshua had done.

Luke 1:46-55 Mary's Magnificat is a Psalm.

Luke 1:63 His name is John (not "Let's name him John.").

Luke 1:66, "For the hand of the Lord was with him." That meant that he was commissioned to do a specific job. Does that apply to anyone today? As a Conservative Christian, I would say no. No biblical text has commissioned a role, or even prophesied a role, for a person in our future. There's plenty of apocalyptic literature saying what God will do, but not a person.

All this language about Zechariah and John the Baptist is thoroughly Jewish. The horn of salvation refers to the saving power of a king. The one being elevated to service is of course John the Baptist, in context. The prophecies about him in this chapter say he will save Israel by causing them to repent (verse 16) with the result that Israel will be saved from their enemies (verse 71). i.e., Rome. Verse 68 introduces Yahweh / Elohim, the antecedent of the pronouns through verse 75.

Luke 1:71-72 shows what John the Baptist was expected to accomplish. He was answering the question in verse 66. "that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,"

Luke 2:1 We have good historical records of the reign of Caesar Augustus, but no historical record whatever of any such census, even within the Roman Empire. A census requiring such widespread travel would surely be noticed. If anything, you might be required to register in your birthplace, but more likely where you currently reside. Instead, the likely purpose of this detail is

to explain how and why Jesus is said to be born in Bethlehem, presumably to fulfill what someone thought was prophecy, instead of Nazareth, his hometown that everyone knew.

The inn of 2:7 would likely be a guest room or upper room. If Joseph was born in Bethlehem, he likely would still have family there. Presumably the guest room was occupied by another family member for the occasion

The announcement to obscure shepherds, and that Mary pondered these things in her heart (i.e., didn't tell anyone) explain why no one knew about this event, including when it happened.

The **Magi** (wise men) “ were a priestly clan of Media who came on the Greek scene in the 540s BC when Cyrus, King of the Medes and Persians, conquered the Greek cities of Asia Minor. Herodotus, writing a century later, tells us they were interpreters of dreams, omens, and portents.” (Morton Smith p. 71) And, as the text shows, astrologers. The “Their story was inspired by the visit of Tiridates and his train to Nero that culminated in their reverencing him as a god.” (ibid, p. 96) Others say the Magi were of the Magian Order within Zurvanism, a now-extinct branch of Zoroastrianism. All other NT usages of **μάγοι** are translated magician or sorcerer.

Luke 2:11 and John 4:42 – the only places in the gospels where Jesus is referred to as “savior”. (MacArthur note to Luke 2:11). This concept seemed hidden during Jesus' ministry.

Luke 2:12 Spong p. 190 explains the manger reference. It's not a stable or animals. It's both God's crib (home) and David's home (Isaiah 1:3). The author really thinks Jesus must be born in David's hometown. It's another reason to feature shepherds, since David was one.

The heavenly host of 2:13 is the pantheon, the Divine Council (Exodus 15:11, Deuteronomy 4:17, 17:3 etc.). 2:14 *doxa theos hypistos* likely refers to El Elyon, usually translated this way in Septuagint. The god with the highest position in the pantheon. This verse is a concise encapsulation of the Jewish apocalyptic worldview.

Luke 2:22 The purpose of this sacrifice was for the purification and atonement of the mother. Exodus 13 required that firstborn male animals be sacrificed. But firstborn humans or donkeys must be redeemed. That is, a different animal is sacrificed in its place.

Luke 2:46 Jesus could well have been interacting directly with Hillel the Elder, shortly before his death around 10 CE. If Jesus was not a direct disciple of Hillel, or perhaps Gamaliel his grandson, his teachings still show a very strong influence from Hillel.

Luke 4:16-21 Jesus was formally announcing the beginning of his ministry to the poor (the common people). He is filling a role, not satisfying a prediction. Isaiah 61 is about Israel's return from Babylonian Diaspora. Some suggest the change of mood was because he said Elijah healed only Gentiles. I think it's just part of the author's explanation for why no one in Nazareth had heard of Jesus.

People in the ANE thought physical and mental illness was caused by demons. People today don't think that because science has discovered their true causes. There is no credible evidence for the activity or even existence of demons. All we have is textual evidence that ancient peoples believed in them.

Luke 5 Is this how it happened? Compare to the accounts in Mark and John.

Luke 5:14 is an explanation for why people hadn't heard of the miracles.

Luke 5:24 is an interpretation by the author.

Luke 5:27 Levi (probably not the Matthew of Matt 9:9) was a tax collector but not a sinner. A clear Hillel-Shammai distinction is that Hillel chose to appeal to sinners to repent (resume Torah obedience), while Shammai proclaimed that purity requires observant Jews to not even interact with sinners. Only a sinner needed to repent. Not an observant Jew. Not a gentile. A sinner (a non-practicing Jew) would never interrupt his life to follow a sage (rabbi). From [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hillel\\_the\\_Elder](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hillel_the_Elder),

While the Gospels generally portray the Pharisees as enemies of Jesus, their objections are often based on points important to the House of Shammai rather than the House of Hillel, such as association with sinners, strict interpretation of the dietary and Sabbath laws, etc. Questioned by certain Pharisees, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:30-32) Since tax collectors work for Rome, this confrontation makes less sense if the Pharisees were Hillel's followers, who favored coexistence with Rome, but much more sense if these Pharisees belonged to the House of Shammai, which disdained the Romans and their collaborators.

Luke 5:33-39 In the context of fasting, another Hillel-Shammai difference shows up. Isaiah 62:5 introduces the **bridegroom** analogy with "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." But the immediate reference is to the philosophy introduced with Isaiah 7, Immanuel, God with us. In Diaspora, Israel changed their view of their god away from the typical god of a geography toward a new idea, a god of the people, wherever they happened to be. Perhaps this warns sinners who would be on the wrong side of the apocalypse. But if the audience had understood Jesus to be referring to himself as God (in the bridegroom analogy), they would rightfully have accused him of blasphemy.

**Old wineskins.** This is most often described as a philosophical incompatibility between competing religious idioms, name the old vs. the new covenant. That, of course, would be an anachronism. It's in the greater context of the calling of disciples. The criticisms are of the disciples, not of their teacher. Compare with the Pharisaic proverb of Avot 4:20. The idea seems to be that new teaching requires previously uneducated students in order to be received. That's consistent with the descriptions of the called disciples. There's a good discussion of this at <http://www.bethimmanuel.org/articles/new-wine-and-old-wineskins-parable-luke-536-39-re-examined>. The last verse is an eloquent expression of the fact that people don't change their views.

Luke 6 Here, the Beatitudes are a typical expression of apocalyptic reversal of fortunes. 6:37 reflects another teaching of Hillel, "Pass not judgment upon thy neighbor until thou hast put thyself in his place."

## Love your Enemy

This familiar motif encapsulates two distinct aspects of advancement of Jewish moral philosophy. First is the shrinking of xenophobia with the attendant expansion of the scope of mutual amity. You can bury the hatchet. You can scale back the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys. You can interact and trade with people your ancestors considered to be enemies. This began with Babylonian Diaspora. Israel thrived under Babylonian rule. The book of Jonah explained why they could now look favorably on a traditional enemy: God send them a prophet and they repented. So much so that Israel was willing to call Cyrus a messiah. Empires like Rome prevented their member states from warring with each other, with the famous *pax Romana*. They no longer wasted resources and lives on war, allowing unprecedented progress and prosperity. You see this starting to happen even in Exodus 23:4-5, "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him." It was even sneaked (probably as an anachronism) into Deuteronomy 23:8, "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner in his land." This is expanded on in Mishpatim 5769.

Understanding whom ancient Israel considered to be their enemies necessitates nothing further than Torah. It ranged from those who conquered Israel in battle or ruled over them as empire, to merely those from foreign 'races'. These are listed in Deuteronomy 7:1-3, "When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons."

Second is the continuing progress away from required revenge, first with the prohibition of escalation (eye for an eye), then with the turn the other cheek (you're entitled to revenge, but you can choose not to exact it). This shows up in Lamentations 3:25+. In Yoma 87a of Talmud, that can take the form of allowing someone who wronged you the opportunity to apologize. The modern advice of "count to 10" lets the victim calm down from the heat of anger to choose actions better than instant knee-jerk revenge. That allows a gradual transition away from the destructive honor/shame culture to which Islamic cultures still cling.

Luke 7:11-17 raising widow's son. It's Isaiah from 1 Kings 17 all over again. I wrote a note that the Luke passage is almost an exact quote of the Septuagint, but I can't find where it came from.

Luke 7:18-23 Some people expected a messiah to match Isaiah 29. That's why there had to be miracle accounts. 7:37 As noted elsewhere, sinner meant a non-practicing Jew, not a prostitute. 7:47 Jesus was telling her that her sins are forgiven. He wasn't claiming to forgive them. 7:28, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." He is emphasizing the goodness of the post-apocalyptic world. It's even better than one who helped to bring it about. What would Israel expect a just god to do? Keep his commitment to his end of the Mosaic Covenant. No more, no less.

Luke 8 I think it was very unusual for a rabbi to accept women as students. Several gospel accounts show Jesus according women a status higher than typical for earlier tradition. Apparently the church did not retain this view.

Luke 8:4-8 Parable of the sower. The covenant demanded two things: worship (ceremonies, sacrifices) and law (Torah). The Sadducees took care of the former. To the Sadducees, the temple sacrifices were the only valid form of worship. The Pharisees emphasized the latter. Read (for most, that meant listen to it being read) Torah and obey it. The study of Torah has value. Don't neglect it. Don't let other things crowd it out.

Luke 8:10 Luke offers a partial explanation for why the ideas of Christianity were unknown during the lifetime of Jesus. Jesus taught in parables designed to conceal the meaning from the general public, while supplemented by deeper explanations for the inner circle. This is not how the rabbis used parables. They used everyday illustrations to make a point, so they would be understood by everyone. Pastors do this today.

Luke 8:26-39 Gadara, and generally the whole area of the Gerasenes, was thoroughly Gentile territory at the time of Jesus. The large herd of pigs is a clue. This is a thinly veiled ethnic / political attack. As a member of the Decapolis, Gerasa was an important urban center in the Roman Empire. Jesus would have had no reason to go there. While the symbolic name for the demon of 'legion' might simply mean many, its relation to a Roman legion can't be a coincidence. This would remind apocalyptic Jews of Isaiah 65:4, "who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat pig's flesh, and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels." Stewardship and care for animals clearly wasn't high on their priority list. Especially for animals they chose to call unclean. But their intent was clear. We want Jesus (or anyone, for that matter) to cleanse the land of Rome. It ends with another explanation for why the miracles of Jesus were unknown during his lifetime. But it may be a hint for why the growth of earliest Christianity was in the broader Roman Empire, not Judea.

Luke 8:40 Jairus was an archisynagōgos, responsible for both organization and teaching in a synagogue. He would have been a Pharisee by philosophy, but not likely a participant in debate among leading Pharisees. The author appeals to expectations that someone acting in a role as a messiah would be a miracle worker, and that's all Jairus needed. Even in today's era of science, desperate people turn to crackpots for medical cures.

Luke 8:44 This woman was ceremonially unclean, so by touching him, she broke the law. It would have made Jesus unclean. The author needed to portray Jesus as a miracle worker, but also had to explain away why no one had heard of this during his lifetime.

Luke 9 shows that this text was not intended as a chronological, historical account of events. If you simply follow the narrative, the 12 disciples had no opportunity for the kind of intensive interaction and training by a sage that would need to happen before the sage was willing to 'graduate' any of them and approve them to the role of apostle. That is, to carry forward the sage's teachings and service.

Luke 9:7-9 Herod seems to have collected an odd assortment of rumors about Jesus. All have in common that Jesus was filling the role of a prophet. So far, no sign of Jesus filling the role of a king, even a future king. This seems to be Herod Antipas (also called Herod the tetrarch), since Herod the Great died ca. 4 BCE / 1 CE. Or the author just didn't know when the Jesus events might have happened.

Luke 9 (and other places) talk about following Jesus. This meant one of two things: follow Jesus as an apocalyptic political/military leader, and rebel against Rome; or follow Jesus as a rabbinic student (disciple). Bivin covers this second view thoroughly in his second book (*New Light ...*). Count the cost. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. Study of Torah ranks in importance at a level comparable to (even above) your duty to care for your parents. This broader theme is all over the teachings of Jesus. Study of Torah is a treasure worth selling everything else (Luke 18, or the pearl of great price and others in Matthew 13). Some suggest the hidden treasure in the field refers either to people hunting relics in ruins, or to people looking for where someone buried their wealth (lacking banks) but never retrieved it. In all cases, the point is that searching for treasure by studying Torah is worth the effort.

Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." To take up the cross is a parallel to take up the yoke, to share in the work. Jesus was calling for people willing to be apostles, to carry on his teaching work, not just disciples, studying under him. Or it's the speech a Zealot would give to motivate recruits.

From Bivin, *New Light*, p. 10, "It was only after A.D. 70 that 'rabbi' became a formal title for a teacher, and thus cannot technically be applied to Jesus. A learned teacher of this time period is commonly referred to as a 'sage,' so that term is a very appropriate way to refer to Jesus." I think it's quite appropriate for the gospel diarists, writing after that time, to use the title in use in their day, rather than the title that might actually have been used for Jesus during his lifetime.

Luke 9:27 This is a prediction, in no uncertain terms, that Israel would be free of Roman rule during the lifetime of some in the audience. It didn't happen.

Luke 9:28-36 A common Bible study question around this narrative of what we call the **transfiguration** is why Moses and Elijah were there. That's the wrong question. Why did the author present this scene with Moses and Elijah? Some suggest that they represent the law and



the prophets, respectively. But what role did both of these figures play? Prophet! What did they talk about? That's not the point of this cameo appearance! Portraying Jesus as a peer of Moses and Elijah is a way of saying that you consider Jesus a prophet. Why build booths (tents, tabernacles)? At risk of insulting Peter John and James, the author pointedly tells us that's not the point of the story either! It would likely be interpreted as a reference to the feast of booths (Leviticus 23, Nehemiah 8). Why the reference? If the God of Israel could defeat Egypt, surely he can defeat Rome. The author knows that some people will still miss the point, so he bluntly blurts out the answer. It's not an attribution of deity. The voice doesn't give a Christian message (believe in him). It gives a Jewish message. Listen to him. That's a declaration that he fills the role of a prophet, speaking for God. Jeremiah 10:1, "Hear the word that the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the LORD . . ." and many others like it. In Hebrew prophetic literature, what did this typically introduce? Repent! (change your behavior) Then Elohim/Yahweh can bless you instead of cursing you.

Luke 9:45 another explanation for why the ideas of Christianity were unknown during the lifetime of Jesus, even by his disciples. That it was hidden from them is Luke's preferred explanation.

Luke 9:58 the life of an itinerant rabbi and his students. (Bivin, New Light, p. 25)

Luke 10:1-12 The sending of the 72 is on-the-job training for students preparing to carry on the teaching ministry of a rabbi. The discussion relates mainly to rules of hospitality. It is not clear whether the task includes recruitment to military revolt against Rome.

## **Relocating the kingdom of God**

The message is mentioned several times in this chapter, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." This is a preliminary sign of the relocation of the kingdom of God as presented in Luke. The author extends the idea in 17:20, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed." In 19:11, the author shows Jesus telling a parable "because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately." That's different from the message in Matthew. But then Luke 22 reverts to the timescale of Matthew. See also my notes on Luke 16:19, the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Wright suggests this is also the earliest indication of the idea that the kingdom of God happens in an afterlife, not on earth. Thus the heading.

Luke 10:10-11 refers to a Jewish saying from about 100 years before Jesus, "Let your home be a meeting-house for the sages, and cover yourself with the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily." It's where the sages would hold classes. Mary is described in these terms. To learn from an itinerant rabbi (the norm), you had to travel with him, and be literally covered in the dust of his feet.

Luke 10:21-24 This is an attempt at an explanation for why the 'secrets' of Christianity were unknown during his lifetime. Texts elsewhere use the copout that it simply wasn't the right time for these secrets to be revealed. This was not Jewish thought. It would have made no sense. But

it does sound like the idea that's central to Gnosticism.

Luke 10:25-28 Jesus was answering the question being asked. It's the elevator pitch for Judaism. It doesn't supersede the law, it encapsulates the law. Historically, neighbor meant people like me. In this parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus is expressing the view of Hillel that neighbor should include Samaritans.

from Diaries p. 126:

The Samaritans were Gentiles who had been moved into territory vacated by the northern tribes of Israel seven centuries earlier. 2 Kings 17:24 is the scripture. The Samaritans adopted Israel's God and they accepted the Pentateuch but no other books of the Old Testament. They worshiped on Mount Gerizim and not in the temple in Jerusalem, for the Jewish religious leaders would not allow them to worship at the temple.

Other sources show the Samaritans were Jews not taken captive by Babylon. They were Jews, but the Pharisees of Shammai considered them impure half-breeds and refused to associate with them. They would not consider Samaritans neighbors. The Pharisees of Hillel were much more inclusive, so would reach out to Samaritans, hoping to persuade them to observe Torah according to the understanding of those Jews who had returned from Diaspora. As he typically did, Jesus sided with Hillel. For him, 'love your neighbor' would include Samaritans and sinners (non-practicing Jews). For none of them would neighbor include Gentiles.

Luke 10:38-42 another shock: a woman disciple! Jesus allowed women an unusual degree of prominence. This trend did not continue into early Christianity.

Luke 11:5-8 and 18:1-8 the importunate friend and the unjust judge. "In this case, the exaggerated role reversal of the parables employs the Jewish principle of the light and the weighty (kal vechomer)." The phrase "how much more" (al achat kamah vekamah) often marks the transition between the two. "By giving a comical characterization of what God is not like, Jesus teaches the listeners what God is like." (Young, Parables p. 40) The theme (and the context) of these parables is prayer. The "persistence" is about the avoidance of shame. The friend in the house is flagrantly neglecting his customary duty of hospitality. The neighbors can hear the exchange. He eventually opens the door to avoid the shame of inhospitality. The "brazen persistence" or "bold tenacity" are really the Hebrew word we know as chutzpa, and is generally viewed positively. The introduction to the parable (18:1) appears to be written in Greek by the evangelist, vs. the parable itself in Hebrew. Reference to the Holy Spirit, a later Gnostic idea, is a clear anachronism. This text is Christian writing. But when it attributes sayings and teachings to Jesus while alive, the ideas are Jewish, because that's what Jesus was teaching. Christian ideas take the forefront as the text progresses. They take over completely after the crucifixion narrative.

Luke 11:33-36 the eye as a lamp. I have notes on this somewhere, if I can find them.

Luke 11:37-40 This began with a typical rabbinic difference of opinion about ceremonial hand washing. The Pharisees were moving worship from the temple to the home, democratizing it.

Meals in the home became a form of worship, requiring ceremonial hand-washing as was required of the priests before offering their sacrifices (Rendsburg). But it turns into a diatribe. That it is directed at all Pharisees shows that it represents thought of later Christianity, blaming Jews for persecution.

Luke 11:42 This is one of many examples of peer accountability among the Pharisees. They were willing to call each other to task if they were not properly teaching and obeying Torah.

Luke 12:10 Today, we have no idea what the author of this isolated text meant by these words. The honest interpretation is to admit that, rather than base a doctrine on it. But I have an idea based on the context of earliest Christianity. What was the one and only thing a person could do to prove they were not a Christian? Offer a sacrifice! The author of Hebrews agreed. He threatened his audience that if they ever left Christianity for another religion, they could never return. Sacrifices were the most important part of every other religion.

Luke 12:22-34 Give adequate priority to study of Torah. Working for food need not consume all your time and energy. Interesting that the exhortation of v. 33 is to give to the poor, not to give to missionaries or even to pastors. Is this passage a promise that you will never starve?

Luke 12:29 echoes (and criticizes, showing it from the mouth of the rich fool) the philosophy expressed in Ecclesiastes 2:24 and 9:7. In 1 Cor 15:32, it is shown as a futile philosophy of those with no hope of resurrection. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

Luke 12:35-48 Be ready. An explanation for why bad things happen to good people. When the master is away, it seems that the wicked servant is getting away with it. But the time of reckoning will come. Apocalyptic writing.

Luke 12:49-50 Fire is always associated with judgment. The earth (not Jesus) will be immersed in fire (judgment). He had a purpose to bring judgment, though He didn't relish that part of His job. He had compassion. That's why He wanted everyone to repent instead of to experience judgment. (Bivin)

Luke 13:6-9 The second chance for the fig tree was an explanation for why Rome was not yet thrown out.

Luke 13:10-17 From what I can find, there was never any prohibition against healing on Sabbath.

Luke 13:18-35 mustard seed: I'm calling you into a growing venture. Jesus' audience knew what the kingdom of God meant. David (or Saul) started it. The only reason Herod would want to kill Jesus is if he thought Jesus was a Zealot.

Luke 14:15-24 Parable of the great banquet. If you make excuses, and don't join the fight against Rome, don't expect to join the party later. It's not about salvation. Continuing the context, count

the cost of joining the rebellion. Or, it's about another common theme. If you want to be a top student of a rabbi, you need to commit to it. No one today can be a disciple of Jesus, not as they used the term. It's not about salvation.

Luke 14:26-33 Count the cost of being a student of an itinerant rabbi. (Bivin, *New Light*, p. 25) This might also be a reference to a form of Christian asceticism that became popular among women. It promoted forsaking the pleasures of life, even sex within marriage, because the things of heaven were so much more important. A good example is the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a work in the ancient romance genre written before 190 CE. The pagan forms of the genre took the opposite approach, defending the sanctity of marriage and promoting strong family and society. (Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*)

Luke 15:4-10 This collection represents foundational rabbinic teaching that Torah is a treasure worth seeking. These parables were clearly and often used that way in rabbinic literature throughout the history of Israel, down to the 'present' (the time of Jesus). The background (verses 1-2) is an accusation from the Shammai against Hillel. The lost sheep (and the lost coin) are the lost sheep of the house of Israel. These are the sinners (see the Religious Philosophy section above.). See also Luke 5:27-32.

Luke 15:11-32 The parable of the prodigal son is one of many examples from Jesus, as a rabbi whose teaching aligned quite well with the Hillel school of rabbinic thought (Beit Hillel), making its case in opposition to the Shammai (Beit Shammai) (Moseley p. 107, 147, and others). The Shammai tended to be isolationists, avoiding Gentiles and sinners. The Hillel school tended to reach out to them, thus the emphasis on finding the lost. The sinner, the lost, is someone of the house of Israel who no longer cares about learning and obeying Torah. The message of all of the parables about the sinner and the lost is that there is hope for the sinner who repents and returns to the study and obedience of Torah. (On the subject of divorce, however, Jesus sided with Shammai. (Young, *Meet the Rabbis*, p. 45))

Why try to persuade sinners to repent? So God would stop being upset with Israel for disobedience (echo the writings of all the prophets), and resume blessing. This would bring on the kingdom of God, the good old days, where Israel was an independent nation, the people obeyed God, and the people were blessed.

The opponents of the philosophy of Hillel (those of Shammai, and perhaps also the Sadducees) would feel jealous if Gentiles or sinners (even repentant sinners) got the benefits of Judaism. What the older son said was an expression of this jealousy, as well as the author's excuse for having the father say what he said. The same idea appears in the parable of the laborers.

Luke 16:1-15, often called the parable of the dishonest manager, is, at best, a badly told story, with conflicting messages. Verse 9 is amoral wealth, not immoral. Verse 14 only those Pharisees which were lovers of money were ridiculed. Theologians resort to extreme measures to rationalize this with the kind of person they believe Jesus to have been, as well as with their own moral standards. Thinkers in Israel, including the prophets, criticize the rich, not because they are

rich, but because they are powerful and abuse their power. Of course not all rich people did this. Some, lacking discernment, painted all the rich with the same brush. It still happens today.

The commendation in verse 8 seems incongruous with what I know about Second Temple Judaism. The most likely explanation is that the author of Luke got it wrong. The manager would be acting properly if he were working to resolve bad or problem debts. Even the IRS does this. They will accept less than the full amount due, from someone lacking the ability to pay, to close the issue with at least some return to the lender.

Luke 16 is all one sermon about money. Even the divorce part is about money (the dowry). The rich man was there, not because he was rich, but because he didn't obey Torah. The moral of the story: repent, return to obedience of Torah. That included caring for the poor. Verse 25 says that the rich man already got his good stuff, here and now, on earth. His brothers already have Torah (Moses) and the prophets. The dead can't intimidate the brothers from the grave. So the preacher is doing it for them.

The story of **Dives and Lazarus** in Luke 16:19-31 echoes several themes found in traditional Jewish myths and stories, including some possibly derived from an Egyptian folk tale about Osiris. (Wright, and see <http://evolutionofgod.net/heaven>) These are themes with which his Jewish audience would be familiar. Wright thinks this might be the first appearance of the idea of an afterlife in the New Testament. Unlike Matthew, targeted to a Jewish audience, Luke is targeted to a polytheistic audience. This audience enjoyed a veritable cornucopia of Greek mystery religions. The author may have drawn features from those religions to attract their adherents to Christianity. The stories are exemplary in the same sense a modern preacher might refer to the boy who cried wolf. Dives is not a name, but is a traditional name taken from the Latin Vulgate translation of rich man.

Luke 17:1-4 A rabbi often spoke of his students as his little ones or his children. Verse 6 is hyperbole. Verses 7-10 say just do your job. Obey the commandment (v. 4). Forgive. Verse 11 the lepers stood at a distance, as required by law. Verse 16 the Samaritans had their own priests.

Luke 17:20-37 Once the rebellion against Rome starts, it will be too late to change sides in the midst of the rebellion. Choose Rome, and you're on the losing side. Luke 17:33 "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will nkeep it" compare to Hillel, "Whoever would make a name loses the name... whoever makes use of the crown perishes." But I think it fits better with the 'choosing sides' paradigm.

Luke 18:1-8 the persistent widow. The Jews valued the attribute of chutzpah. She was praying for justice against an adversary. Who might that be? Rome. That's what would have immediately come to the mind of the hearers. Got isn't answering that prayer, but keep asking. It's a parable. It's telling the hearer to do likewise. If you stop asking for justice, you show that you don't have faith that God will answer.

Luke 19:8 I give, I restore, both in the present tense. I already do these things.

Luke 19:28-40 The colt represented a king bringing peace; a king bringing war rode a horse. That is, Jesus wasn't leading a rebellion against Rome. Zechariah 9. The colt could well have been prearranged. Cloaks – Jehu, in 2 Kings 9:13. The time is finally here. John 12:15-16.

Luke 19:41-44 Jesus wept over Jerusalem for its destruction in AD70. The authors didn't understand visitation. Probably the last son of Aaron was killed in AD70.

Luke 20:1-8 Jesus was identifying with the ideology of John the Baptist. Religious leaders of the same ideology wouldn't be asking the question. Here, and in Luke 21:37-38, Did rabbis really teach in the temple? I'm on the lookout for confirming evidence.

Luke 20:9-18 parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants. It includes an allusion to early mistreatment of prophets. I think this is more likely a parable by the author than a parable by Jesus. The contract with the tenants correlates with the contract between God and Israel. If you want the benefits of Judaism, pay your dues (obedience). Psalm 118 human oppression – divine vindication. Verses 15-16 seem more like a parable of this gospel diarist rather than a parable of Jesus. They are ideas from the much later Christianity of Paul and Peter: inclusion of Gentiles, even to the extent of taking it away from Jews, and killing of the son.

Luke 20:20-25 Jesus takes the Fifth Amendment. The Zealots would have been disappointed. What has Jesus been preaching all his life? Give God what's due to fulfill your side of the covenant: obey Torah.

Luke 20:34 marriage in the afterlife: Jesus gives an untestable explanation. The Sadducees rejected the idea of an immortal soul. The Pharisees likely drew their idea from Hellenistic (Greek) thought, originating in this case with Plato.

Luke 20:41-44 Jesus refutes the idea that a messiah must be a descendant of David. A prime example was Cyrus. Jesus will not fulfill a military messiah role. The OT never spoke of 'the' messiah.

Luke 21:1-4 The widow's mite is an extreme story told to make a point.

Luke 21:8 Jesus is asking the people to listen to him instead of to his competition. He wasn't warning about people claiming to be Jesus, but instead, people claiming to fill a role of messiah.

Luke 21:10 Predicting “nation will rise against nation” is like predicting the sun will rise tomorrow.

Luke 22, the passion. The betrayal plot is an explanation of why this peace-loving rabbi was executed. Some say it's also to provide an excuse for anti-Semitism. Melito of Sardis was the first Christian to openly accuse the Jews of deicide. Only John draws the parallel between the passover lamb and Jesus as the **Lamb of God**, though Paul seems to allude to it in 1 Cor 5:7.

Surely someone recognized the problem that the Passover lamb was not a sacrifice for sin. The natural explanation for the use of the upper room is that it was pre-arranged. There's no justification for claiming anything miraculous.

If Jesus had such a wide and influential following among the people, why would it be necessary for someone to identify him?

**Judas** is the Greek form of the common name Judah. Hyam Maccoby, Spong and others suggest that Judas is not an individual person, but a personification of Judah (Israel). It's a way of accusing Israel for betraying Jesus, who came to be their savior. From the ESV notes, "Matt 26:15-16 **thirty pieces of silver**. In the OT, this was the penalty paid by the owner of an ox that gored a slave to death ([Ex. 21:32](#)). Equivalent to about four months' wages for a laborer (about \$7,500 in modern terms), this meager sum suggests the low esteem in which Jesus was held by both Judas and the chief priests."

The passover meal account from Luke 22 is used as the basis of the Christian sacrament of communion. Yet, the practice of that sacrament rarely includes the context of the Passover ceremony. The bread and cup were presented in the form of an object lesson. There's no way his audience would have taken this literally. The main point is that the two elements together represent the life of Jesus being offered as a sacrifice. The cup isn't a second point, but a reiteration of the point. Luke's wording allows for the interpretation that it's not Jesus who is doing the giving. The passover ceremony involved four cups. Luke may be referring to two of them, whereas the other accounts mention only one. The gospel diarists may not have known the details of the Passover observance.

Jesus was asking that next year, when his apostles and/or disciples met together to observe Passover, that they would take time during the observance to remember him. In 1 Cor 11:26, Paul is specific, with "For as often as you eat this bread" referring specifically to the unleavened bread of Passover.

That's a very reasonable thing for a rabbi to ask of his students. Among other things, it would be an annual exhortation to them to continue the life of sacrifice that Jesus had demonstrated during his lifetime. Jesus had been consecrated (Luke 2:22-27) according to Ex 13. I suspect (though I am not yet sure) that most rabbis were first-born males, for this reason.

The theme common to Passover and Christianity is that in both cases, I avoid a very bad consequence simply by believing something and demonstrating it by my actions (blood on the door posts, baptism). The Passover reference was a way of explaining the sacrifice of Jesus.

A sacrifice need not be by death. Ex 13:1-16 speaks of the consecration of the firstborn. If this at one time included human sacrifice by death, that was soon abandoned. I can't tell whether they ever did this, though some ancient societies did. Romans 12 encourages self-sacrifice (though explicitly not the death kind). It can be appropriately said that Mother Theresa gave her life a sacrifice for many.

Luke 22:15-18 It would be crass to call this a hunger strike. But it would be appropriate to see this as one more statement of the belief that the kingdom of God was imminent.

Luke 22:22 The author expressed the idea that to some degree, and in some way, these events were orchestrated by God. The author also tried to preserve the accountability of the perpetrator. As with Pharaoh, this is one of several very problematic situations in which an author is faced with the inevitable conflict between the autonomy and direct involvement of God with the free will (this accountability) of man.

Luke 22:24-30 The “who is the greatest” dispute arose in the context of the kingdom of God, twice mentioned just before. It portrays the disciples as jockeying for power when the time comes for their leader to assume political leadership of Israel after the yoke of Rome is thrown off. Jesus' response is more consistent with his answer to John the Baptist in Matthew 11. I am here to fill the prophetic messiah role, not the political one.

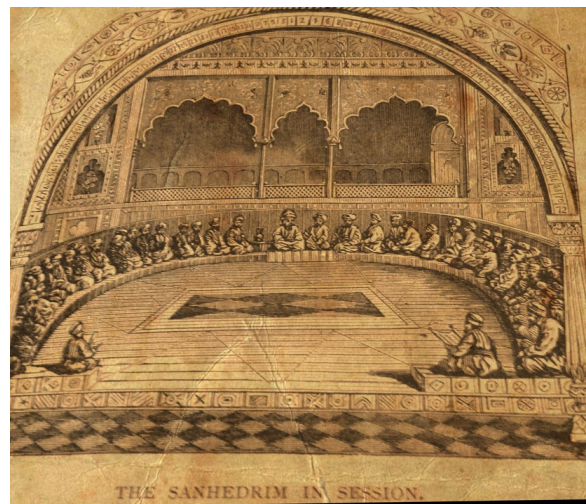
Luke 22:31-34 The author portrays Jesus as predicting Peter's denial, pre-forgiving him, and predicting his leadership. Perhaps this is so that the early church would accept him as a leader. It seems to begin with an address of endearment. Jesus addresses Jerusalem this way in Luke 13:34.

Luke 22:36 People always wonder why Jesus told his disciples to arm themselves. It's the setup for verses 49-50. They had to be armed to cut off the ear.

Luke 22:54-62 Peter's denial is an explanation for why the earliest Jesus movement was so small. A servant girl is the least threatening kind of person one could imagine, a stark contrast to the temple guard with swords and clubs. Someone compared a bungling Peter to Inspector Clouseau of Pink Panther fame.

## Sanhedrin

The Great Sanhedrin was a body of 71 members acting as a judicial tribunal with authority over the entire land of Israel. In the Second Temple period, “The Talmud tractate Sanhedrin (IV:2) states that the Sanhedrin was to be recruited from the following sources: former High Priests, representatives of the 24 priestly castes, scribes, doctors of the law, and representatives of the most prominent families (those whose daughters were allowed to marry priests).” (Wikipedia) Hillel once led that body. [Image from](#)





<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30322758>

Luke 22:66-71 The Sanhedrin asks Jesus if he is the anointed one. His answer is that from now on the son of man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God. This is the position of a king of Israel, God's "right-hand man" to administer God's authority over the nation of Israel. In most places in the synoptics, when Jesus speaks of the son of man, it is not clear whether or not he is speaking of himself. To remove any doubt, they ask if he is the son of God. This is another term commonly used for kings. See 2 Samuel 7:14, speaking of Solomon, and Psalm 2 speaking of the kings of Israel. His answer, 'you say that I am', is "a Greek expression that deflects responsibility back upon the one asking the question" (ESV footnotes). I would express it something like so you say, or that's for you to decide. Apparently that was enough for the Sanhedrin, since the charge they present to Pilate is that Jesus is saying that he himself is anointed a king. As noted below, both Pilate and Herod find him innocent of this charge.

Luke 23 Jesus is accused before the Roman rulers of claiming the military revolt form of messianic role, working toward becoming the future king of the Jews. He is repeatedly found innocent of that charge (being a Zealot). But a key responsibility of Roman officials governing the outlying provinces is to keep the peace, and prevent rebellions and riots of any kind. Thus, Herod and Pilate were well within their authority to execute Jesus. The chief priests and crowds 'were urgent, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.'" Roman governors executed people for much lesser crimes. Crucifixion, however, was generally reserved for slaves, pirates, enemies of the state (treason, sedition) or to demonstrate the low class of the person. What better way to show your protagonist praiseworthy, though executed as a criminal.

The mockings (and beatings/floggings from other narratives) show Jesus suffering. We know that a sacrificial animal was required to die, but was not required to suffer. Why then are we told of sufferings? One reason is to show what people thought of him. But there may be another philosophical motive. The apocalyptic worldview holds that, in the end, good is rewarded, and evil is punished. Apocalyptic literature of the first century describes that punishment in terms of eternal torture in a lake of fire, weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. That's suffering. The Old Testament shows the Jews knowing and making a clear distinction between righteous and wicked people. It's the wicked people who will be punished. Later, Paul is going to say that the class of wicked people is universal (thus, the class of righteous people is empty). The alternative to an eternity of torture (suffering) is no longer righteousness, but instead is belief. If Jesus is to be, not just the sacrificial animal, but the substitution for believers as the recipient of suffering, then Jesus must be shown to suffer. Suffering outside of earth is implied, but limited to at most three days. That leaves suffering on earth. The various mistreatments of Luke 23 are plausible in this respect.

Luke 23:34 "Father forgive them" – Jesus was obeying Luke 6:27, love your enemies. Perhaps this was written (by the same author) to protect the Jews from Acts 2-3. All Israel is guilty, but it is not an unforgivable sin.

Luke 23:35 Jesus was obeying Luke 21:12-18. Also, unlike Luke 5:24, here Jesus is not shown as forgiving sin, but asking the Father to forgive sin.

Luke 23:47 This centurion, who pronounced Jesus innocent of the charges, would surely have known whether Jesus had been promoting insurrection in his territory. That was his main job.

Luke 23:48 beating their breasts, a symbol of grief and repentance.

Luke 24:45 Luke's final explanation for why the ideas of Christianity were unknown during the lifetime of Jesus. He didn't "open the minds" even of the disciples until after his death. See also verses 16 and 31, 9:45, 18:34. The Emmaus road experience was on a road (an unpopulated area) to only two (unnamed) people, with no witnesses. Compare to the Damascus road experience attributed to Paul in Acts 9, witnessed only by unnamed 'men'. Compare also to Moses, who spoke with God face to face, but never with any witnesses. In Acts 28:27, the same author calls them 'dull' by citing Isaiah 6. The author of Matthew does the same in Matt 13:14. The gospel authors likely offered differing plausible explanations because they didn't know why.

Luke 24:48 This is a statement of fact, not a commission. They witnessed what happened. You've seen it for yourself.

Luke 24:52 Worship of Jesus did not happen during his lifetime. The Jews would not tolerate it. Hurtado wrote a very good book researching and discussing how and when this likely developed. He is somewhat misled by his assumption that Christianity developed in Jewish communities, rather than in the Greek communities among which it spread, and in whose language all the Christian texts were written.

## **Acts (volume 2 of Luke)**

Probably written 90-95AD, around the time the church and the synagogue were separating. For further liturgy, instead of the OT Kings and Chronicles, why not chronicle the adventures of the church after the death of its founder? (Spong p. 172)

## **John**

The only non-synoptic gospel of the four included in the Canon, differing from them in so many ways it has been called the rogue gospel. Written considerably later, it reflects later ideas of Christianity, including a much stronger Gnostic influence. The synoptics explain why ideas of Christianity were unknown during the lifetime of Jesus. Instead, John writes those ideas into his bios narrative. Also anonymous, its evangelist author was not associated with a John until probably near the end of the second century. (Miller, p. 196) While it is plausible that Jesus actually said some of the things attributed to him in the synoptic gospels, this is much less likely with John. Unlike the synoptic attributions, most in John are saturated in later Christian thought, rather than the Second Temple Jewish thought of the synoptics.

In his blog post of July 28, 2016, Bart Ehrman writes:

3) Church tradition for centuries has maintained that John the son of Zebedee was the author.

The evidence on the other side of the equation, however, is overwhelming. To begin with, there can really be no doubt that whoever wrote the book of Revelation, it was not the author of the Gospel of John. That's because the writing styles are massively different.

It is hard to show this without appealing to issues related to the Greek language in which both books were written, so let me just put it like this. If you were to take any random page from a novel of James Joyce and then any random page from a novel of Stephen King, and ask yourself whether they were written by the same author, you would have zero problem realizing that they were by different authors.

It's the same with the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation. Their writing styles are wildly different. Neither book is highly sophisticated in its writing style. But the Gospel of John is at least written by a native Greek speaker. The book of Revelation appears to be written by someone who does not have Greek as his first language. Scholars have long suggested that his native tongue was a semitic language – probably Aramaic. One of the most striking things about his prose is that his Greek is very rough. More than that, he actually makes grammatical mistakes. It is a very strange book indeed to read in Greek.

The Greek of the Gospel of John on the other hand is easy and basic, but correct and flowing, even beautiful in places. It was not written by the same hand.

This is not some kind of new claim by crazy liberal biblical scholars. It has long been recognized. Already back in the third century there was a Christian scholar from Alexandria Egypt named Dionysius who wrote a treatise explaining that Revelation could not have been written by the author of the Gospel of John. His arguments were stylistic, and they were right on the money. He saw clearly the books were written by different people.

He argued this because he wanted to show why Revelation could not be accepted as part of the New Testament canon – its author was not an apostle. But even though no one could really refute Dionysius's argument, he lost it. The book came to be included in the New Testament because church leaders argued that, despite the differences of style, the book was written by the disciple John.

As of 2005, the earliest known Greek manuscript is  $\mathfrak{P}52$ , Rylands Library Papyrus P52, a fragment with a few verses of John 18. That fragment is dated to the early second century. (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, p. 88). The dating has been intensely debated, with most estimates in the range of 100-150 CE but some outside that range. The style of the Hadrianic script suggests 117-138 CE. The library maintains that 100-150 range, and 125 CE is typically used in standard reference works.

John reflects the increasingly virulent relationship between Christians and the rest of (mainstream) Judaism. This is probably around 70 years after the death of Jesus. John's tone is more reflective. By 200 CE, it was called the "spiritual gospel", because it told the story in

symbolic ways, unlike the synoptics. John has Jesus on the cross while the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. The others have the crucifixion the following day. (Frontline) The purpose of John is evangelistic and apologetic, John 20:30-31.

Within John there is no mention of the church, church leadership, Eucharist, or baptism.

## Logos (λόγος)

λόγος

The word itself had a broad set of meanings. From the Liddell-Scott Greek Lexicon, “*explanation, statement of theory, argument, rule, law, reason, inward debate of the soul, scientific knowledge.*” English words ending in -ology all derive from this root. The Holman Bible Dictionary gives its narrower usage in Greek philosophy. “Among the Greek philosophers, especially the Stoics, *logos* came to mean the rational principle that gave order to the cosmos.” This is how the word is used throughout Johannine literature.

**Logos** was a very popular concept of Greek philosophy. A brief overview can be found in Wikipedia. It began with Heraclitus (ca. 535-475 BCE) as a principle of order and knowledge. Aristotle used it for reasoned discourse, or the 'argument' of rhetoric. Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (20BCE-50CE) was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher. He tried to harmonize Greek philosophy and Judaism, including the Greek (Alexandrian) concept of logos (the word) as God. This brief Wikipedia excerpt explains it well.

Philo ... used the term Logos to mean an intermediary divine being, or [demiurge](#). Philo followed the Platonic distinction between [imperfect matter](#) and perfect Form, and therefore intermediary beings were necessary to bridge the enormous gap between God and the material world. The Logos was the highest of these intermediary beings, and was called by Philo "the first-born of God." Philo also wrote that "the Logos of the living God is the bond of everything, holding all things together and binding all the parts, and prevents them from being dissolved and separated."

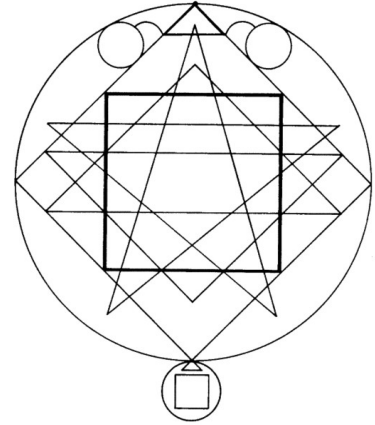
[Plato's Theory of Forms](#) was located within the Logos, but the Logos also acted on behalf of God in the physical world. In particular, the [Angel of the Lord](#) in the [Hebrew Bible \(Old Testament\)](#) was identified with the Logos by Philo, who also said that the Logos was God's instrument in the creation of the universe.

Gnostic Christianity paired Logos with Sophia (wisdom) as a syzygy (a pair of aeons). Also from Wikipedia, “[Valentinus](#) c.100 – c.160 was said to be the first to introduce the 'Three Hypostases' of [Platonism](#) into Christianity and identified them with the Father, Son and Spirit. The Logos was fully identified with the Son and [Christ](#).”

The author of John refers to Philo's ideas, and adds that this principle of cosmic reason became incarnate on earth as Jesus. Much of Philo's work was widely published by the mid-20's. See also [Memra \(at JewishEncyclopedia.com\)](#). His idea, “the Logos of the

living God is the bond of everything, holding all things together.” is cited in Colossians 1:17. If Philo's Logos had actually appeared on earth, wouldn't Philo have heard about it and written about it? Thus the most plausible explanation is that the author of John is applying Logos philosophy to Jesus. The self-revelatory aspect of Logos is seen in John 8:12, portraying Jesus as the light of the world.

While John associates Jesus only with Logos, Valentinus and others associate him with both Logos and Sophia, eventually fusing the two. The author of Colossians goes farther. In 2:9, he says the the entire Pleroma (πλήρωμα, fullness, totality) dwells in Jesus, not just Logos and/or Sophia. This diagram of the Pleroma by Valentinus is from [By Valentin - \[1\], Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12450310](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12450310) .



The expression, “God is love,” appears only in Johannine literature, and then only in 1 John 4. As the diarist associated logos with God, and then with Jesus, so this author associates God with the ideal Platonic form, the idealized concept, of love.

Only John attaches metaphysical significance to “son of God”, see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=964&letter=S&search=sons%20of%20god> Also, from that source, 'At all events, the data of the Synoptic Gospels show that Jesus never styled himself the son of God a sense other than that in which the righteous might call themselves "sons" or "children" of God.'

Hurtado explains the Jewish idea of “son of God”. “We may understand this ancient Jewish religious outlook as constituting a distinctive version of the commonly attested belief structure described by M. P. Nilsson as involving a 'high god' who presides over other deities. The God of Israel presides over a court of heavenly beings who are in some measure likened to him (as reflected in, for example, the Old Testament term for them, 'sons of God'.” (Hurtado, p. 129) “In Greco-Roman Jewish belief, however, the high god is known as the God of Israel, whose ways and nature are revealed in the Scriptures of Israel.” (Hurtado, p. 130) I suspect the author of John simply didn't understand this.

The introduction to John draws an exact parallel between Jesus as Logos and the Memra philosophy of early Jewish theologians (mainly Philo), with all six attributes clearly enumerated in the first chapter of John. (Moseley pp. 133-134)

If the author was the apostle John (rather than John the Elder or some other John), he would have been around 80 years old, much older than the average life expectancy of 20-30 years (Wikipedia), writing 50-60 years after the crucifixion. 28 years for subjects of the Roman Empire (Gawande p. 32). (Over age 100, according to Spong p. 68) “I know of no reputable

scholar in the world today who would support the accuracy of the claim that this gospel [John] was the work of that 'beloved disciple'." (Spong p. 68)

John omits most of the inflammatory statements of Jesus which, in the earlier gospels, aroused anger in Jerusalem. (Diaries p. 170 and others)

"To base theology on the literal words of John is to erect the most fragile of structures. The first cause for suspicion is that there is hardly a word attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel that was recorded in any of the earlier Gospels. More and more scholars acknowledge that most of the words attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel were actually shaped by conflicts in the ninth and tenth decades of the Christian era." (Spong, p. 13)

"John was a sophisticated symbolizer." (Spong p. 180)

John is evangelistic writing which reflects thought of at least one school of Christian thought (the Johannine community) in very late first century. It opens with Philo's Logos philosophy. The followers of Jesus were said to be a sect of Judaism. But it seems to me that if they at any point considered Jesus to be God, they would no longer be allowed to meet in the synagogues. This gospel was written around the time this sect was expelled from the synagogues in Jerusalem (90-95AD). The hypothesized Council of Jamnia condemned those who thought the Messiah had already come. Their condemnation would have been much stronger against anyone claiming Jesus was God. The distance between the religion of John and the religion of the synoptics is far greater than the distance between that of the Protestant and that of the Catholic. The Johannine writings contain the greatest concentration of Gnostic ideas. See also the writings of Father Raymond Brown.

I think only John speaks of eternal life. The idea of eternal life was at home in Greek Platonic and Gnostic thought, but foreign to Jewish thought until Philo worked to syncretize the philosophies. As used in the synoptics, that phrase refers to a resurrection of the righteous at the apocalypse. It was expected to be a return to mortal life on earth, though perhaps never again to end in death.

Should we compare Jesus coming down to earth (incarnation) to Moses coming down from the mountain with the law?

John 1:32-34 resembles an account of a magical rite of deification (Morton Smith p. 104). "The Johannine story of Jesus' turning water into wine (2:1-11) was modeled on a myth about Dionysus told in a Dionysiac festival celebrated at Sidon." (Morton Smith, p. 120). See Jesus as Magician on page 31.

John 1:41, "'We have found the Messiah' (which means Christ)." It would be unnecessary to explain this to a Jewish audience! Few, if any, of the Gnostic Christians had been Jews. Not until Philo were any significant Greek philosophical ideas incorporated into Judaism.

John 2 Why six jars for turning water into wine? Seven is widely used as a number of completion. That would fit with the "My time is not yet come." Some have suggested the 'no wine' represents the barrenness that Christians thought permeated Judaism of the day. Or it could fit in with the popular apocalyptic worldview of the day. Israel has no joy because we are dominated by Rome. As an agent of apocalypse, Jesus would fix that, either as a preacher (convincing Israel to repent therefore God would evict Rome) or as a Zealot (defeating Rome by military action). In context, this would be his formal announcement that he would act in this role. That's supported by "And his disciples believed in him." They were now officially part of a team that would bring about the apocalypse.

John 3 What would Nicodemus be expected to know or understand? Was this an allusion to the baptism of John the Baptist? Should he have recognized Gnostic ideas, already popular in Greek thought but perhaps not yet in Jewish? This one would be the *palingenesia* (rebirth). "In Gnostic literature, the experience of rebirth are described as being born into a higher state of knowledge or purity as well as dying or the passing away of the past life and the sins of ignorance of God." (Gnostic Visions, Luke A. Myers) To fill a role as a messiah, a Pharisee would look for a prophet, not for a Zealot.

In John 3:16, the word for world (**κόσμον**) is the same word the same community uses in 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world". Christians try to call this the world system and call it a bad thing. Yet the gospel of John begins by identifying Logos with the creator and then with Jesus.

John 4, the Samaritan woman, see notes on Luke 10.

John 8:1 This account of the woman taken in adultery is found only in John. Further, the entire section from 7:53-8:11 is absent from the oldest manuscripts. The oldest ms to place this account here is Codex Bezae from around 400 CE. Other late ms place it in John 21 or in Luke. The Mishnah (Moed 3:11) states that a golden plaque with the warning against adultery was placed between the temple court and the door to the sanctuary. That makes the temple a natural place for this encounter. This was the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:9-14), and probably Sabbath. Ryan Carothers notes that writing in the dirt was not considered work, so was legal on Sabbath. Even if the Jews had still practiced stoning as a punishment for adultery, Roman law would not permit them to impose capital punishment. This likely was a trick question. If Jesus said to stone her, he would rightly be accused of barbaric brutality. If he said not to, he could be accused of not upholding Mosaic law. If not a trick question, it could simply be a debating point or an object lesson between the philosophies of strict interpretation of Torah (Shammai) versus loose interpretation (Hillel). Table 9.6 of Roman Law, "Putting to death... of any man who has not been convicted, whosoever he might be, is forbidden." This was simply their way of rationalizing disobedience to that part of the law. In truth, their moral standards had already progressed well beyond those codified in Torah.

In John 8:12, the author portrays Jesus as the self-revelation aspect of Logos, the light of the world.

John 8:59 – The verb translated ‘hid’ could be translated in either the active or passive voice, depending on the usage. The verse could be saying that the disciples were actively hiding him, or crowding around him as protection. (Diaries p. 177)

John 9:6 Magicians commonly treated patients with a salve made from spittle. (Morton Smith, p. 128)

John 10 – Were this section on the good shepherd told in a synoptic gospel, I would interpret it in the same vein as the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Instead, the author is probably saying that Jesus was talking about Gentiles in verse 16.

John 11 – Only John includes the narrative of the raising of Lazarus. It seems inconceivable that no synoptic author would mention it. Or that no historical record of it exists, especially given the persuasive power claimed for someone rising from the dead.

John 13:34-35 John may be portraying Jesus as announcing a coming change. Torah will be replaced by the Golden Rule.

John 14:16 The paraclete was a speaker for the defense in a court. Someone who had to defend himself in court would want to be possessed by a good spirit. It would speak for you, and would do a better job than you. (Morton Smith, p. 127) I think this same idea appears in Matthew 10:19-20.

John 14:34, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” – Only the Johannine community refers to this as a new commandment. I wonder if the author is referring here to the idea that his religion (Judaism) will be replaced by Christianity.

John 14:27 – my shalom I give to you – Jesus was answering the question of verse 22. No, I am not going to fulfill your expectations of a messiah. I will not free Israel from Roman rule.

John 16:32 Jesus died alone. (Spong p. 237)

John 17:21 One with us. Gnostic ideas like this plausibly arrived from Eastern Mysticism.

Only John shows Jesus claiming who he is, and using miracles to support that claim. In the synoptics, Jesus shuns miracles. (Ehrman audiobook, History of the Gospels)

## **Thomas**

Though the early church knew of a Gospel of Thomas, they had no copy of it. The first (and perhaps only) complete text (a Coptic translation of the (probably Greek) original) was discovered in the Nag Hammadi Library of Egypt in 1945, long after the Canon had been chosen. It is a sayings collection, not a narrative, and would not necessarily have a singular author. Such collections were common at the time, and would be similar to Proverbs. Authorship was



attributed to Thomas, perhaps as an attempt to assert the reliability of the tradition. It is written in the logoi sophon (“sayings of the wise”) genre, used by the Wisdom tradition of first century Judaism. The religious background is the Gnostic tradition, featuring the deprecation of the world and the flesh. (Miller, p. 301) It is widely considered authentic by modern scholars (Jenkins, p. 4)

## ***Barnabas***

The Gospel of Barnabas is mentioned as early as the 6th century. I think the earliest manuscripts are from the late 16th century. “some academics suggest that it may contain some remnants of an earlier apocryphal work (perhaps Gnostic, Ebionite, or Diatessaronic), redacted to bring it more in line with Islamic doctrine.” (Wikipedia) Suggestions of much earlier origin are presented at <http://www.barnabas.net/index.php/how-the-gospel-survived>, a Muslim source. I will also review the material I have to be sure I am not confusing any parts with the Epistle of Barnabas, <http://carm.org/epistle-of-barnabas>. My notes include the ideas that Christians are the true Jews, and that OT law was figurative, never intended to be taken literally. Sabbath meant that earth was intended to last 6000 years (Epistle of Barnabas 15).

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