# Invitation to the New Testament

Second Edition

FIRST THINGS

Ben Witherington III

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## First Things

Second Edition

BEN WITHERINGTON III

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Los Angeles artist John August Swanson is noted for his finely detailed, brilliantly colored paintings and original prints. His works are found in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, London's Tate Gallery, the Vatican Museum's Collection of Modern Religious Art, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

*This book is dedicated in loving memory and honor of our daughter Christy Ann (1979–2012), who was born in Durham, England, and studied Shakespeare at Oxford. Christy loved books of all kinds, especially British ones. I think she would have really enjoyed this one, produced by Oxford University Press.*

# BRIEF CONTENTS

# CONTENTS


Augusta (Augsburg)
Carnuntum
RAETIA
NORICUM
Aquincum (Budapest)
Aquileia
Pavia
PANONIA
ILLYRICUM
DACIA
Drobrta
Danube R.
MOESIA
Tomis (Costanza)
Black Sea
Odessus (Varna)
Apollonia (Sozopol)
Sinope
Trapezus (Trabizond)
Arretium
Ancona
Perusia
Salonae (Split)
DALMATIA
ITALIA
Rome
Capua
Brundisium
Tarentum
MACEDONIA
THRACIA
Doriscus
Byzantium
Thessalonica
EPIRUS
BITHNIA-PONTUS
Halys R.
Nicomedia (Izmit)
GALATIA
Ankyra
CAPPADOCIA
ARMENIA
LESBOS
Pergamum
Smyrna
Sardis
Psidian Antioch
Nyssa
Iconium
Thebes
Corinth
Athens
CHIOS
Ephesus
Tralles
Aphrodisias
Lystra
COMMAGENE
Samosata
ACHAIA
SAMOS
Alabanda
Aspendus
Tarsus
Cyrrhus
Zeugma
Messana
Catana
SICILIA
Agrigentum
Syracuse
Carthage
Sparta
Xanthus
Side
CILICIA
Aleppo
Tigris R.
Hadrumentum
Thapsus
BYZACENA
MELITA
MALTA
RHODES
Antioch
Salamis
Laodicea
Apamea
Euphrates R.
MESOPOTAMIA
CYPRUS
Paphos
Citium
Curicum
CRETE
SYRIA
Palmyra
Berytus
Ballbek
Dura Europos
Damascus
Mediterranean Sea
Tyre
PHOENICIA
Bostra
Ptolemais
Apollonia
Oea
Leptis Magna
Sabratha
Cyrene
Barca
Berenice (Benghazi)
Joppa
Gerasa
JUDAEA
Jerusalem
Gaza
Alexandria
Pelusium
Masada
CIRENAICA
AFRICA
TRIPOLITANIA
LIBYA
Memphis
EGYPT
SINAI
Petra
ARABIA
Nile R.
Red Sea
0 km 125 250
0 miles 125 250

# FOREWORD

The second edition of *Invitation to the New Testament* differs from the first edition in the following important respects:

- Much of the more complex historical and contextual coverage has been reduced or simplified and more essential discussion of the content of the New Testament itself has been added, making the book more accessible for freshmen students taking the survey course.
- The greater focus on the content of the New Testament itself is now woven throughout the narrative in section-by-section content outlines; summaries of events and teachings; and reflections on theological interpretation.
- A revised and expanded Part Three (now including five rather than four chapters) provides more comprehensive coverage of Paul's letters. The chapters on Paul's letters are now divided in a more accessible way (earlier letters, capital epistles, pastoral epistles, and captivity epistles) allowing for more thorough coverage of each letter.
- A glossary at the end of the text defines key terms.
- Revisions and streamlining throughout the text make for a more accessible overall presentation.

Many thanks should be given to the seven reviewers who have helped make this second edition a more accessible and useful college textbook.

Thanks are also in order to Joy Vaughan, my teaching assistant at Asbury, who has labored tirelessly on the second edition of this manuscript, simplifying things and adding proper definitions. I owe her a considerable debt for her attention to the details of this manuscript.

Last, I want to also thank Robert Miller my editor (and fellow lover of the Tar Heels!) who has been patient with me and the whole process of getting this book into its most useful shape for the audience he knew this book would serve well.

EASTER 2016

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This book could not have been completed without the considerable help of many people. Here, I wish to give special thanks to those who granted me permission to use either pictures or edited forms of some of my previous publications.

First and foremost, I must thank my colleague and friend Mark Fairchild for permission to use a large number of his excellent pictures of the Biblical World. These are sprinkled throughout the text and each one is credited to Mark Fairchild.

Second, I must thank my longtime illustrator Rev. Rick Danielson for the reuse of various of his pen-and-ink sketches.

Third, any unidentified pictures or images in the text are my own.

Fourth, a special thanks to the creators of the *St. John's Bible* for permission to use a variety of their wonderful illustrations from the latest and one of the finest illuminated manuscripts to ever have been created. These too appear throughout the manuscript and are identified at each juncture.

Fifth, a profound thanks to InterVarsity Press for permission to reuse small and edited portions of several of my previous commentaries and theology volumes, namely, from *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Volumes One and Two,* and *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians* (2006–2008), and from *The Indelible Image, Volumes One and Two* (2008–2009). A further thanks to my various other publishers including Baylor U. Press, Eerdmans, Smyth and Helwys, Westminster/John Knox, and Cambridge University Press for allowing me to write commentaries for you and allowing me to continue to use this material in other forms in other books. Some of the material in this book you will find is a simplified version of some of the things I wrote for your fine publishing houses.

Sixth, I wish to thank Rev. Laverna Patterson and Teachhearts.org for permission to use the colorful map of Biblical Sites.

Also, many thanks to all of the reviewers:

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# The PLAN of THIS BOOK

This *Introduction to the New Testament* has 21 chapters (and two appendixes), some shorter and some longer, depending on the needs of the subject matter. In these chapters, you will find an explanation of the origins and character of each of the 27 books of the New Testament insofar as we can discern them, discussing the usual subjects of author, audience, date, and structure of these documents in addition to other issues. You will also find throughout a reconstruction of earliest Christian history based on the clues we find in these same books. One of the distinctive features of this book is that you will also find an analysis of the social and rhetorical dimensions of the New Testament books. To get the most benefit out of this book, it is best to read the New Testament book with its corresponding chapter here. In the case of the Pauline letters, which are covered in four chapters, I would suggest reading all of the Pauline letters with the first two Pauline chapters, except the pastoral epistles, which one should read in tandem with the third Pauline chapter.

In the right-hand margin, you will find a box at the beginning of each chapter (after the four Introductory chapters) called "At a Glance," which summarizes some of the basic conclusions and points of the chapter. This will let you know where the chapter is going and what its focus will be. You will also find some sections called "Core Samplings," which give a detailed look into a particular sample passage from the New Testament book in question. There are also a few "A Closer Look" sections, for example, about the crucifixion of Jesus, for those who want to explore the material in more detail.

The text of this book is geared to entry-level college courses in the New Testament, but some of the supplemental materials will help more advanced students to go beyond what they already know, students who may nonetheless be required to take the entry-level course.

In the margins, you will find key definitions of terms, and you will also find a variety of quotations from Greco-Roman writers of the period under the heading "Clues from the Culture" to give you a flavor of what the cultures the Christians lived in were like as they tried to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to a very diverse, and very non-Christian world.

At the end of most chapters, you will find the following sections: (1) "Implications" of the material discussed in the chapter, (2) "For Further Reading"

containing suggestions for additional study, and (3) "Study Questions" that arise from the chapter itself.

Throughout, you will benefit from various maps and charts, the many pictures by Mark Fairchild and others, the beautiful paintings done for the St. John's Bible, and the wonderful line drawings of Rick Danielson (who has done drawings for several of my books). It is my hope that through the collective impact of all this material you will not merely learn a lot about the New Testament but that you will get excited about studying one of the most important and influential documents ever produced in human history.

# INVITATION to the NEW TESTAMENT

PART I

# BACKGROUND and FOREGROUND

The temple mount looking through the window at Dominus Flevit Chapel.
*(© Mark R. Fairchild, Ph.D.)*

CHAPTER

# 1

# The TEXTURE of the TEXT of the NEW TESTAMENT

LOOK CAREFULLY AT the picture of the ancient manuscript in Figure 1.1. What do you see? Notice both what we would call the paper and also the writing on the paper.

What you are looking at is one page of the Greek New Testament, written in all capital letters with little or no spacing between words, sentences, or paragraphs; little or no guides to punctuation; and definitely no headings or chapter and verse markers. If a modern person copying a New Testament document did it like this, we would think he or she was crazy. We might complain, "It's impossible to read the document like that! Who knows where the words start and stop, much less the sentences!"

Figure 1.1 All ancient manuscripts were written on either papyrus, from the papyrus reeds in the Nile, or on animal skin, parchment.

**CLUES FROM THE CULTURE**

I Zolius, son of Horus, have written this contract for Ptolemaeus, because he is illiterate.

—Apprenticeship Contract (*Oxyrhynchus Papyri* [P. Oxy.] 275)

Perhaps you know the famous example in English of what a continuous flow of letters looks like—JESUSISNOWHERE. What do those words say or mean? They could mean "Jesus is nowhere," but they could also mean "Jesus is now here." The first act of interpreting an ancient document with a continuous flow of Greek letters is to figure out where the words start and stop.

You may be surprised to learn that what you are looking at is a *typical* ancient manuscript page of the New Testament, and it reminds us of something critically important—the past is indeed like a foreign country, and they did things differently then and there. If we want to understand the New Testament and its world, we have to enter into that world and begin to think as they thought. So let's explore why that manuscript looks like it does.

## THE MATERIAL USED

By far, in the world of the earliest Christians, the most common material used to write on was papyrus. What is papyrus? It is a reed with a long, triangularly shaped stem found in the marshes in the Nile River in Egypt. The stem is harvested, then cut into long thin strips. These strips are laid horizontally and then vertically at right angles, and then they are rolled and hammered together, with the natural sap of the stem gluing the strips together. The resulting individual pages or portions are hung up and allowed to dry. After drying, the papyrus is polished with a smooth stone or sometimes with a bone. Although the manuscript in Figure 1.1 is yellowish in color, originally it would have been very white and quite flexible, so it could be rolled up. While commonly only one side of the papyrus was written on (as it was quite thin, and the writing would bleed through and be visible on the other side), sometimes both sides would be used because papyrus was very expensive, as was ink, and the labor of the scribes or secretaries who composed the documents was expensive as well.

It was expensive not merely because the materials were expensive but also because the historical evidence suggests that only 10 to 20 percent of the ancient world could read or write, and actually those were two different skills. More people could read than could write with accurately formed letters in straight lines. The document in Figure 1.1 was copied by a professional scribe in a "fair hand." In other words, it took skill in writing, skill obtained by training and education, which only a minority of people had access to, and that minority was usually from the socially more elite and wealthy members of society. The copier of the document in Figure 1.1 was not merely literate, he was skilled. While it is true that graffiti found at Pompeii and elsewhere in the ancient Roman world reminds us that many people could read or even write a few brief phrases in Greek, that is very different from having the ability to compose any of the documents we find in the New Testament, especially the longer and more complex ones.

The average papyrus sheet was about 11 inches high by 8 inches wide, although this could vary. What would normally happen is that pages would be glued together side by side, making rolls. Sometimes those papyrus rolls could be enormous, stretching some 20 feet long or more at times. Imagine carrying around a New Testament in a roll that was 30 feet long or more! It makes you appreciate Kindle technology. In fact, more than 20 sheets glued together was usually about the maximum because any more than that became much too bulky and cumbersome.

Our longest Gospel (by word count), Luke's Gospel, contains about the maximum number of letters and words that one could get on 20 papyrus sheets glued together. Because the papyrus was so thin, even 20 sheets glued together could be rolled up into something that looked like a large baton or stick several inches thick. When a document was produced for a library, whether a personal or a public library like the famous one in Alexandria, Egypt, it would often have a tag sewn to one end bearing the title of the work. Ancients were like us in this regard—they did not tend to rewind the scroll they read, so sometimes the tags would be at the end, not the beginning, of the document!

There were pluses and minuses to using papyrus for composing documents. Compared to parchment, which is the scraped skins of animals, papyrus was much more lightweight and flexible, and thus easier to carry around. It was not, however, as durable, particularly in a wet climate. Papyrus is vegetable matter, and so in a wet locale, it will rot. If you are wondering why so many ancient Jewish and Christian papyrus scrolls have been found in Egypt or the desert region of Judea at the Dead Sea, it is because of the arid, or very dry, climate. By contrast, Galilee, in the northern part of the Holy Land, and Mediterranean countries like Turkey, Greece, and Italy, have a considerable rainy season from November into the late spring. One main reason so few papyrus documents have been found in those places is not because no one was literate but due to the climate.

Another virtue of papyrus is that you could wash it, wash off the ink, and reuse the scroll. Usually, however, after washing, the scribe would wisely use the other side of the scroll. It was much more difficult to scrape the words off an animal skin because the ink would penetrate the skin's surface. And as expensive as a papyrus roll might have been, it was always cheaper than a parchment roll composed of several different animals' hides.

## WHY A CONTINUOUS FLOW OF LETTERS?

On one hand, there was a very good reason why ancient documents almost always had a continuous flow of letters—economics. The less papyrus used, the cheaper the document was to produce. There was another reason as well. Ancient documents were not normally produced for the general public but for

patrons, or clients, or libraries of and for the wealthy. The general public (1) could not afford to buy such documents, as most could not read them anyway (they had enough trouble just reading short inscriptions on tombstones and public proclamations of the Emperor); and (2) reading and writing had been the provenance of the wealthy, in particular of royal courts and temples since time immemorial. There was no concept in antiquity of "the general public's right to know"—or to be educated, for that matter. The very use of a continuous flow of letters suggests an insider talking to another literate insider, and this brings up an interesting point.

The earliest Christians were evangelistic to a fault. They believed it was their job to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with all and sundry, from the least, last, and lost to the foremost, first, and found. Their message was not just for the cultured or wealthy or literate. Yet, in the production of their documents, they also used the continuous flow of letters, presumably for practical economic reasons. And many of their documents were written to whole groups of people—the church in Corinth or Philippi, for example. They were *public* communications in ways that many ancient documents were not, and they were public communications for the whole spectrum of society from the elites right down to the slaves and children. These were ethnic and gender inclusive documents as well, not just written for literate males. But how did Christians with their evangelistic zeal make these documents accessible to the widest possible audience, including the illiterate?

The answer is they used literate readers, who already knew the document and would read it out to a whole congregation. Today we might call such a person a **lector**. Two examples from the New Testament make my point.

**LECTOR**

A literate person trained to read an important manuscript (a sacred text, a public proclamation) to an audience with appropriate feeling, pauses, and insight.

In the last document in the New Testament, the Revelation of John of Patmos, we find the following at Rev. 1.3: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it." John of Patmos was the author of the document, but he was in exile on the island of Patmos off the west coast of modern Turkey. He would not be the person who read these words out loud to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, and elsewhere. No, that would be the job of the lector, who, with scroll in hand, and with an advance knowledge of its contents, would be able to read the continuous flow of letters and perhaps explain some things along the way. The *hearers* in Rev. 1.3 are clearly distinguished from the reader of the document. And notice that the word *reader* is in the singular here.

We find the very same Greek phrase and phenomenon in Mark 13.14. In the midst of a discussion about the defiling of the temple in Jerusalem by what is called "an abomination which makes desolate" (using a phrase from an Old Testament prophetic book called Daniel), the author inserted the parenthetical remark "let the reader understand." Notice that the word *reader* is again in the singular. This is because while Mark's audience was a group of people, they were

merely the hearers of the document. The singular reader of the document was the lector sent to undertake the job of reading it out loud, and perhaps explaining it, to the many hearers who could not read it themselves. This brings us to a further crucial observation.

## THE ORAL AND RHETORICAL WORLD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

*All of the ancient cultures of the Biblical world were oral cultures, not cultures based on texts!* Whereas in our culture, we tend to think of texts as primary sources of information, and oral conversations or proclamation as secondary, it was just the opposite in the world of the Bible. The oral word was primary, and documents were entirely secondary. There is a reason that Jesus said to his disciples "let those with two good ears hear." The oral word was given pride of place, not least because of the low literacy rate. Not only was the oral word the dominant form of ancient communication, the oral nature of the culture shaped the way people wrote and read documents—they were oral documents, meant to be read out loud.

By this I mean the New Testament documents, like so many other ancient documents, reflect oral speech—they have rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and various aural devices. Especially when a person wanted to persuade someone else about something, they would seek to make what was said pleasing, interesting, intriguing to the ear, and not merely memorable but even memorizable.

Early Christianity was an evangelistic religion, so the early Christians produced documents that could be proclaimed or used for the persuasion of nonbelievers, documents that were meant to be heard in the original Greek, not primarily read silently in private. There is a renowned anecdote about two very famous early Christian thinkers named Ambrose and Augustine. Augustine once said that he found Ambrose to be the most remarkable man he had ever met because *he could read a document without moving his lips or making a sound.* This was highly unusual in Augustine's view. Almost all ancient reading was done out loud, even if you were only reading to yourself! Libraries in antiquity must have been very noisy places.

Precisely because the earliest Christians were part of such an **oral culture**, and precisely because they so deeply wanted others to believe in Jesus, they took care to compose their documents in ways that would be aurally effective, and indeed persuasive. Later in our study of the New Testament, we will have occasion to discuss ancient rhetoric (the art of persuasion and speaking well in public) and its use in the New Testament; but here it is enough to say that the earliest Christians used all the oral and rhetorical tools available to them to try

**ORAL CULTURE**

A culture in which a large part of the communication takes place by the spoken word rather than by written text.

to convince, convict, and convert people to the following of Jesus Christ. Some of the implications of what we have been discussing in this chapter are enormous as we try to understand the New Testament, and we must explore some of them here as we draw this first chapter to a close.

## IMPLICATIONS OF WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

We are all familiar with the phrase "some things get lost in translation." This is definitely true. If you have ever studied any foreign language at all, you know that some words in one language have no one-to-one corresponding term in another language; and some phrases in one language would not have the same meaning if simply literally translated into another language—some things do get lost in translation. This is why, ideally, if you really want to understand the New Testament, you need to read and study it in the original Greek, not in English. For most of you, this is not possible, so rest assured that this textbook was written only after I studied the New Testament in its original language for many decades. What you will hear in the following chapters is not based merely on one or another interpretation of one or another popular English translation of the New Testament. It is based on the original Greek text of the New Testament.

Obviously, one of the things that absolutely gets lost in translation is all the poetic devices—rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration, for example, cannot be simply produced—and so to a large degree, we lose the oral and aural effect of the words of the New Testament by hearing or reading it in translated languages. We will do our best to compensate for that as we go along, but it would be wise for you, the reader, to use a good modern translation of the New Testament. Several can be recommended: the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Today's New International Version (TNIV), the New Living Translation (NLT), or the Common English Bible (CEB) are all excellent choices. The New (or Old) King James Translation is acceptable for most passages, but not always, so it would be better if you used one of the four recommended translations.

There is another good reason why this Introduction is based on the Greek New Testament rather than on some particular English translation. *Every English translation is already an interpretation of the original Greek text.* In other words, translators cannot avoid making decisions about the meanings of various Greek words that have no direct equivalent in English, or have multiple meanings in Greek, or are frankly ambiguous Greek terms. Once a decision is made about the choice of an English term, this already slants the meaning of the English text in a particular direction. What you will get in this Introduction is an interaction with the Greek text as it is, not on the basis of later English translations. One illustration must suffice.

### CLUES FROM THE CULTURE

For what man among you would pardon me one **solecism** or condone the barbarous pronunciation of so much as one syllable? But you subject every word I utter to the closest examination.

—*Apuleius* Florida 9

**SOLECISM**

A grammatical mistake or error.

Let us take a particularly popular verse, Hebrews 12.2, which reads literally "fixing our eyes on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith." Unfortunately, there are many English translations that render the verse "fixing our eyes on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of *our faith*." Yet the original Greek text of this verse does not have the word "our." It is nowhere to be found, and the context of Hebrews 12.2 does not favor this translation either because Jesus was being presented as the climax of a long list in Hebrews 11 of people who exhibited exemplary faith in God. The whole context suggests that Jesus is portrayed as the paradigm and paragon who exhibited great trust in God, modeling it for his followers. There are many more such examples, but this one is sufficient to show the importance of dealing with the original language, not merely a translation, however helpful and accurate. In chapter 2, we must begin to discuss the various types of literature found in the New Testament—ancient biographies, historical monographs, letters, sermons, and a book of prophecies.

## KEY TERMS

Lector
Oral Culture
Solecism

## FOR FURTHER READING

Gamble, H. Y. *Books and Readers in the Early Church.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.

Houston, G. W., *Inside Roman Libraries. Book Collection and Their Management in Antiquity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

Millard, A. *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus.* Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

Take a few minutes to look over the first chapter about the nature of ancient texts. What is an oral culture? How do texts function in an oral culture? How does this differ from how texts function in our modern culture? Why is this important for the study of the New Testament?

Ancient papyrus was often subject to mold and rot, hence holes and tears. See the picture above.

CHAPTER

# 2

# The LITERATURE of the NEW TESTAMENT

THE NEW TESTAMENT IS A COMPENDIUM—not a single book but rather a collection of 27 books. These 27 books are not all of one sort either. Four are Gospels, one is some sort of history (called the Acts of the Apostles), 21 are either letters or sermons or discourses, and the last book of the New Testament is a book of some sort of prophecy. In other words, we have at least five different kinds of literature in the New Testament, if we are talking about whole documents. Within these documents, there are various other kinds of literature—for example, the parables of Jesus. This is important because different kinds of literature are written according to different kinds of literary conventions, and what you can expect out of them is in part determined by what sort of literature it is. C. S. Lewis once stated it this way:

> The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is—what it was intended to do, and how it is meant to be used![1]

**GENRE**

From French: *genre,* "kind" or "sort"; from Latin: *genus* (stem gener-); from Greek: *genos,* the term for any category of literature or other forms of art or culture, and in general, any type of discourse, whether written or spoken, auditory or visual, based on some set of stylistic criteria. Genres are formed by conventions that change over time as new genres are invented and old ones are discontinued.

This assertion is especially true when it comes to dealing with literature. Different types of literature have different ***genres***, a French word meaning a literary type. Different genre of literature convey different kinds of information in varying ways. For example, you would not go to a dictionary to look up someone's phone number. That is a category, or genre, mistake. Similarly, if you come to the reading of the New Testament without understanding what sorts of information these documents are trying to give you, you are bound to misread the text.

It is important at the outset to discuss briefly each of the differing types of literature in the New Testament and figure out exactly what they are, so we can understand how to properly read them. Let's start with the Gospels.

## WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS (AND ACTS)?

On the surface of things, the Gospels may simply appear to be stories about Jesus. That is true so far as it goes, but if we look more closely, we will notice that the four Gospels differ from one another in noticeable ways. One Gospel begins with a genealogy (Matthew); one Gospel begins with a sort of thesis statement ("This is the beginning of the Good News about Jesus"—Mark); one Gospel begins with a historical preface ("Inasmuch as many have undertaken to give an account of the things which have happened among us"—Luke); and one Gospel begins with a theological prologue ("In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"—John).

**BIOGRAPHY**

A written account of a person's life history.

Figure 2.1 A Gospel lectionary.

Beginnings of documents are especially important in the case of ancient documents because, as we saw in chapter 1, documents were written without headers or paragraphing or even separation of words usually. The only way to figure out what sort of document you were looking at was by reading the first few lines of it. Normally, the genre signals would be given at the outset of the scroll.

Scholars and laypeople have long debated what sort of literature the Gospels are. Some have even seen the Gospels as modern history or modern **biography**. Modern biographies, however, tend to be womb-to-tomb chronicles of someone's life, usually in chronological order, like Carl Sandburg's massive book on the life of Abraham Lincoln.

Even a brief scrutiny of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John reveal that they are not like that. For one thing, the Gospels are very selective in their presentation. Only two Gospels really tell of Jesus' birth and infancy (Matthew and Luke), and only one Gospel says anything at all about Jesus as a youth (Luke—in only one story—Luke 2.41–52). All four

Gospels focus on the last one to three years of Jesus' life. *In fact, a third or more of each of these Gospels is devoted to only the last week of Jesus' life.* This is hardly the way people write biographies today. Imagine a modern biography of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy that spent a full third of its verbiage on the last week of his life. It would be accused of being grossly out of balance in its coverage, even though the week he was assassinated deserves detailed attention. In fact, this is what happens in our Gospels, as they are really **passion narratives** (33% spent on the last week of Jesus' life) with long introductions.

**PASSION NARRATIVE**

A term that is commonly used to refer to the narrative of Jesus' suffering and death.

And for those who are keen on chronology, even a brief study of the four Gospels in the New Testament reveals that the Gospel writers must have felt some freedom to arrange their material in ways other than strict chronology—for example, while in all four Gospels Jesus cleanses the temple in Jerusalem only once, in John, this is recounted near the beginning of the story (in John 2); whereas in the other three Gospels, the temple account is part of the more detailed chronicling of the last week of Jesus' life. Some principle of arrangement of material other than strict chronology must apply at least for John's account.

Or consider works of modern history—for instance, some of the accounts of the American Civil War. Bruce Catton's famous chronicle is incredibly detailed and comprehensive, as is the more literate approach of Shelby Foote. Both authors seek to show how the particular events of the American Civil War relate to larger historical events before, during, and after it. When we look at the four Gospels, only Luke shows any interest at all in linking the macro-history of Judaism or the Greco-Roman world with the micro-history of Jesus and his followers. The other three Gospel writers show little or no interest in this at all. *A fair-minded person should conclude on the basis of such facts and comparisons that the Gospel writers were not writing according to modern conventions for biographies or* ***historical monographs****.*

**HISTORICAL MONOGRAPH**

A written account of a certain period within history. For example, Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are a two-volume ancient historical monograph which document the life and death of Jesus and the growth of the New Testament church.

This does not mean, however, that the Gospels are not like some sort of biographies or historical monographs. In fact, as we will see when we examine each of these Gospels individually, three of them are written according to the conventions of ancient biography writing (Matthew, Mark, and John); and one author decided to write a two-volume ancient historical monograph, which today is called Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Occasionally, however, some scholars have suggested that the Gospels have very little historical substance or interest at all because they are written more like ancient legends or myths. Let's consider those suggestions for a moment.

The problems with these sorts of suggestions are many. First, the Gospels were written within the lifetime of some of the **eyewitnesses** of the ministry of Jesus, or at least the lifetime of some of those who knew and consulted the eyewitnesses. Notice, for example, that Luke 1.2 says that the author is passing on information that he received *from the original eyewitnesses and servants of the Word* (presumably the original preachers of the story of Jesus).

**EYEWITNESS**

A person who is present to witness an event personally and is able to present an account of the event from his/her own perspective.

**CLUES FROM THE CULTURE**

As for necessary reading, Homer comes first and in the middle, and last, in that he gives to every boy and adult and old man just as much as each of them can take.

—*Dio Chrysostom (Or. 18.8)*

Legends, such as we find, for example, in Homer's *Odyssey* or *Iliad*, although they have some small amount of grounding in historical fact, were in fact written centuries later, after the stories had outlived the people they chronicled. They were written at a time when there were no historical constraints, such as eyewitnesses who could object to the account where it went wrong, for expanding the stories in legendary ways. In fact, the Gospels do not have anywhere near that long a gestation period. The vast majority of scholars believe that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were all written in the first century A.D. *The Gospels then are not like ancient legends.*

Nor are the Gospels like ancient mythological stories, for example, about the Greek gods Zeus, Athena, or Apollo, and the like. Such stories focus on the activities of the gods themselves, including their various squabbles on Mount Olympus and elsewhere. The Gospels, however, are telling a tale about a historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, and about other historical persons who met and interacted with him. While the person called God the Father certainly plays a role in the Gospel stories, the story in the main is not his story, but rather the Gospels tell the tale of the redemption of human beings, focusing particularly on Jews and Israel.

**CLUES FROM THE CULTURE**

O Queen of heaven, whether you be bountiful Ceres, or heavenly Venus, or Phoebus, or dreaded Proserpina—by whatever name, with whatever rite, in whatever image it is right to invoke you, defend me now!

—*Apuleius (Met. 11.2)*

No ancient person picking up the Gospels would have mistaken these works for Greek or Roman mythological tales. This is especially true because the hero Jesus, in all four forms of the Gospel story, dies the most shameful form of death known in antiquity—crucifixion. You will look in vain for ancient legends or myths about a human and yet divine figure who suffers the ultimate humiliation of crucifixion. If you wanted people in the ancient Greco-Roman world to believe in a figure called Jesus, you would not make up a story about his dying on a cross. This is not the stuff of which legends or myths or heroes are made in antiquity.

In the coming chapters, we will have occasion to examine Mark, Matthew, Luke–Acts, and John (in that order), but here we stress that *the Gospel writers were following the ancient biographical and historical conventions and genre of their day in writing about Jesus.*

## WHAT ABOUT THE "LETTERS" OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?

It is in some ways very surprising that we have 27 New Testament texts of some sort from the earliest followers of Jesus, much less that some 21 of them have been called letters. When it comes to ancient letters, they were mainly viewed as poor substitutes or surrogates for face-to-face conversations with a person or group of persons who could not be present to have such a conversation. In fact, ancient letters are often nothing more than transcripts of what a person would have said orally if he or she had been there in person. Letters are to a large extent

"oral texts"—texts meant to be read out loud and heard, as an expression of the living voice. They are not meant to be read silently, thus missing all the cadences, rhythm, assonance, and alliteration of oral speech.

What did an ancient letter actually look like? Most of them are very ordinary and brief. For example, consider the following document written at about the same time as one of the earliest New Testament documents (1 Thessalonians) was being composed.

> Mystarion to his own Stoetis: Greetings. I have sent Blastus to get the forked sticks for my olive groves. See that he does not loiter, for you know I need him every hour. Farewell.
>
> *(written September 13,* A.D. *50)*

Most ancient letters were about this length or only a little longer. The only two New Testament documents that are as succinct and short as this letter are 2–3 John. All the rest of the New Testament "letters" are much longer, and once you get past the initial or closing greetings and addressor/addressee parts, they hardly look like ancient letters at all. In fact, they are far more like **rhetorical discourses** than like ancient letters when it comes to the vast majority of the content of these documents.

**RHETORICAL DISCOURSE**

A discourse that employs rhetoric in order to persuade an audience.

It was only from the time of Cicero (in the first century B.C.) forward that letter writing took on something more like a literary function and at times had more literary pretensions. And it was only from the time of Cicero on that there began to be educational training in the skill of writing letters well. In other words, the conventions of letter writing were not well developed before the time of Cicero. But the art of speaking well, or rhetoric, had been a staple of education for centuries before the time of the writing of the New Testament.

My point in mentioning this is that the so-called letters of the New Testament owe far more to oral speech conventions than to letter-writing conventions, as we shall see. Some of them, such as 1 John, can hardly be called letters at all, as they have no letter features. Some of them, such as Hebrews, appear to be long sermons, but sermons sent from some distance, so they have letter features only at the close of the documents (the end of Hebrews 13). What 19 of the 21 so-called letters are NOT is like ordinary ancient letters. They are not like the perfunctory note we quoted earlier from Mystarion.

**CLUES FROM THE CULTURE**

You have so many delightful spectacles to behold: Orators, writers, poets, and like gorgeous peacocks, sophists in great numbers, men who are lifted aloft as on wings by their fame and their disciples.

*—Dio Chrysostom (Or. 12.5)*

## IN THE END, APOCALYPSE

Perhaps no book in the New Testament has been more debated when it comes to both form and content than the book of the Revelation of John, the last book in the whole Bible. Is it a book of real prophecy, about both the present

and future, or is it like other early Jewish *apocalyptic* documents?[2] Early Jewish apocalyptic documents tended to be **pseudonymous**, which means a document with a person's name appended to it that was not actually the name of the author of the document.

For example, the **Testament of Abraham** was written long after the death of Abraham, and the parables of Enoch were written long after the time of Enoch. What is actually going on in such **apocalyptic literature** is that history is being written up as if it were prophecy by putting it in the mouth of an ancient luminary of the faith. Thus, it is not really prophecy at all but rather historical commentary disguised as prophecy. This, however, is precisely *not* what is going on in Revelation. We know the actual author's name, John, because he identifies himself at the outset of the first chapter of his book (Revelation 1), and he is literally speaking about his and his audience's own present, and their eventual future, including the final future when Christ returns.

For this reason, scholars have usually concluded that Revelation should be called apocalyptic prophecy or prophecy with apocalyptic images, set within an epistolary framework (see Rev. 2–3 and Rev. 22 on the letter elements in the document). In other words, the last book of the Bible is of mixed genre, that is, it reflects the conventions of several different kinds of literature. In fact, one could make the case that this final book of the New Testament sums up all the different kinds of literature that came earlier in the New Testament: It is one part story, one part history, one part visionary prophecy, one part letter, and one part exhortation or sermon—all of which are presented with the use of amazing apocalyptic images and symbolic numbers.

**PSEUDONYMOUS**

A book falsely, and usually deliberately, attributed to a famous person as if he or she authored it.

**TESTAMENT OF ABRAHAM**

A Jewish work written sometime during the 1st or 2nd century A.D. about events surrounding Abraham's death.

**APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE**

A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality that is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.

## WHAT IS THE STORY THE NEW TESTAMENT SEEKS TO TELL?

It is one thing to describe what kind of literature we find in the New Testament. It is another matter entirely to ask what is the foundational story that not only the Gospel writers, but also all the writers, of the New Testament are seeking to tell or assume to be true?

In one sense, the New Testament story is part of an ongoing and much larger story, the story of the whole Bible from Adam to Abraham to Moses to David and so on. The New Testament joins the storytelling a long way into the story. Jesus appears in this larger Biblical story some thousands of years after it began. And we are constantly having quotations, allusions to, or echoes of these earlier stories in the New Testament itself. The very first New Testament book, the Gospel of Matthew, begins with a genealogy that runs from Abraham all the way to Jesus, connecting him directly with the royal line of King David, the most famous of all Jewish kings. None of this would have obvious meaning to someone who knew nothing of the contents of the Old Testament. The New

**CLUES FROM THE CULTURE**

The manner of her prophesying was not that of many other men and women said to be inspired: She did not gasp for breath, whirl her head about or try to terrify with her glances.

—*Dio Chrysostom (Or. 1.56)*

Testament was largely written by Jews who became followers of Jesus, and so it is not a surprise that they do their best to connect the story of Jesus with the larger story of Israel and its major figures, and thus with the Hebrew Scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament.

It is not just that they tried to connect these stories to the Jesus story, it is that the writers of the New Testament all agreed that the stories found in the Old Testament are inspired stories, sacred stories; and so "they are Scriptures" suitable for learning the truth about God and for training in righteousness as well. The Old Testament then is seen as foundational for the beliefs and practices of the earliest Christians, and they told their stories about Jesus in ways that show he is the culmination, the climax, and the fulfillment of all these previous stories. Indeed, they insisted that Jesus is the person to whom all these earlier texts were pointing. It may surprise you to realize that the only Bible the earliest Christians had was the Old Testament; so, for example, when we read in 2 Timothy 3.16 that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for a host of educational purposes, the term "Scripture" refers to what we call the Old Testament.


Figure 2.2 The glorified Christ in a ceiling mosaic at the Chora Church, Istanbul. (© *Mark R. Fairchild, Ph.D.*)

All of the writers of the New Testament documents were committed followers of Jesus, and thus the New Testament documents were not attempts at objective newspaper-like reporting of the story of Jesus. Nevertheless, these writers insisted that their interpretations of the Jesus story were correct ones, correct drawings out of the true implications of who Jesus was, and what the historical and religious significance was of what he said and did. They are all in agreement that "his story" is true "history"—indeed, the most important history of all, a history that changed and is changing the world. It is the story of how God came in person, the person of his Son, to redeem his lost creatures—all of humanity.

Sometimes, the story of Christ is on the surface of a New Testament document, such as in the Gospels, or in the sermon summaries in Acts (see, e.g., Peter's sermon in Acts 2). Sometimes, the story is briefly quoted, as we find in 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul quotes a portion of the Last Supper story from the life of Jesus; or in Revelation 12, where we hear of the birth of Jesus and his ascension. Sometimes, the story is retold in hymnic fashion, as in Philippians 2.5–11. Sometimes, we merely hear echoes of the Jesus story or of his teachings or deeds. For example, in James, we have some 20 or more partial uses of Jesus' teachings found in Matthew 5–7: the so-called Sermon on the Mount.

The point is, all the New Testament writers assumed that the story of Jesus is foundational for Christian belief and for all that they were trying to say and do. There is a unity to the story of and stories in the New Testament, as they all are grounded or grow out of the story of Jesus. Indeed, people like Paul keep stressing that it is the believer's job to imitate Christ (1 Cor. 11.1), but you have to first know the ways and story of Christ in order to do that. This is why, after this short introduction, we start by examining the Gospels to see if we can get Jesus' story straight first. Before we do so, we need to make some final comments about the sort of history writing in the New Testament and talk some about the social context of the New Testament and about Jesus himself.

## WHAT SORT OF HISTORY IS THIS?

When a modern person picks up and reads the Gospels and Acts, and indeed, the rest of the New Testament, almost immediately the question arises—is this a historical story, and if so, what sort of historical story is it? Modern history seldom spends time recounting miracles or stories of divine interventions. In this respect, modern history writing is very different from ancient history writing. For example, Herodotus, the father of all history writing, was perfectly comfortable with talking about the role of the divine—this god or that—in human affairs, including history. The New Testament writers all agreed with this broader and more open-minded approach to history writing. They don't exclude the divine part of the story from the outset like most modern historians

do. For this reason, I would argue that we should call New Testament history *theological history telling*. Not theology without history, or history without theology, but rather the two together. Indeed, it can be said that the whole Bible is the story of God's dealings with and relationship with human beings.

There is, however, an even more important reason to say we have theological history writing in the New Testament. All the writers of the New Testament believe and assume the truth of what we find in John 1—namely, that God the Son took on flesh and became a human being, and he walked among us for a span of time. If, as the writers of the New Testament believe, Jesus was both divine and human, then even just telling the story of Jesus requires that we take into account both divine and human history, both God's dealings with humanity and human beings' attempts to relate to God. It is not in one or the other, but in both, that we find undergirding and overarching the whole New Testament, hence the term theological history writing. The great English cleric, John Donne, contemplating the grandeur of the story of humanity in its relationship with God, put it eloquently:

> *'Twas much that man was made like God before,*
> *But, that God should be made like man, much more.*

The poignancy of these lines expresses well the view of the New Testament writers—they not only believed that human beings are made in the image of God, they also believed that the Son of God came down and took on the image of humanity in order to redeem humanity from its sins and sorrows, from disease, decay, and death. With this sort of worldview, the only kind of history that made sense to the earliest Christians was theological history.

Lest we think, however, that the New Testament writers were just historians who liked dwelling on the past, we need to remind ourselves that they also believed that Christ's history is the believer's destiny. By this we mean that the story of Jesus is being recapitulated in his followers' lives, such that one day they too will experience resurrection as Jesus did. Whatever else you say about this belief, it led to the writing of documents that are not only about the past, and the writers' present, but about the future of humanity as well, and they scarcely suffered from being dull.

The writers of the New Testament were saints standing on tiptoe eagerly waiting for the author of the human drama to come on the stage once more and conclude the story, for they believed that the future was as bright as the promises of God. Whether this is part of your faith or not, in order to understand the New Testament, you need to enter into the world of these writers sympathetically and give their writings a fair hearing. Above all, if we want to understand the most influential person in all of human history, Jesus, we need to undertake such a task. To that end, we will turn first to Jesus, then to the Gospels and Acts, and then to the rest of the New Testament.

## IMPLICATIONS

Sometimes, it is necessary to divest oneself of certain ideas, presuppositions, and feelings before reading an important document. Think for a moment of a time when you received an e-mail from a person who had deeply wounded you. You were predisposed to expect this to be another nasty and unpleasant exchange, and all your negative feelings were aroused just from seeing the return address on the e-mail. You might not have even wanted to open the e-mail and read it. For many people, they already have strong feelings about the Bible, either negative or positive, and sometimes this gets in the way of reading the text fairly and with an open mind. It is my hope that you will be fair and open-minded as you read this textbook.

For those for whom the Bible is already familiar territory, I promise you will learn some things you never knew before. For those for whom the Bible is like an unknown land, there will be many more surprises. It is the necessary presupposition of any good or fair reading of a text that one approach the text without prejudice. Indeed, it is better to approach the text with curiosity, sympathy, and willingness to learn, and then be surprised, giving the writers the benefit of the doubt as you read.

There is a famous saying of Johannes Bengel—"Apply yourself wholly to the text [i.e., give it your full attention], and apply the text wholly to yourself." Even if you must wrestle and struggle with some of the content and concepts in the New Testament, if like Jacob wrestling with the angel, you stay at it long enough, you will come away not just with more knowledge, but with a blessing, and not just with information, but with inspiration.

### KEY TERMS

Apocalyptic Literature
Biography
Eyewitnesses
Genre
Historical Monograph
Passion Narrative
Pseudonymous
Rhetorical Discourse
Testament of Abraham

### FOR FURTHER READING

Hubbard, Moyer V. *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World.* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010.

Witherington, B. *New Testament History: A Narrative Account.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003.

Witherington, B. *The New Testament Story.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

The literature found in the New Testament comprises various genres. What does the term *genre* mean, and why is it important to know the genre of literature when you examine it? How does this help us understand the New Testament better?

## NOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1942), 1.
2. See the full definition of apocalyptic on p. 16.

The Porch of the Maidens on the Acropolis opposite the Parthenon. *(© Mark R. Fairchild, Ph.D.)*

CHAPTER

# 3

# JESUS of NAZARETH in his EARLY JEWISH SETTING

*Whoever he was or was not, whoever he thought he was, whoever he has become in the memories since and will go on becoming for as long as men remember him—exalted, sentimentalized, debunked, made and remade to the measure of each generation's desire, dread, indifference—he was a man once, whatever else he may have been.*
*And he had a man's face, a human face.*

—Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus*[1]

HAVE YOU EVER READ THE GOSPELS, looking for a description of what Jesus looked like? Have you wondered if he perhaps looked like the picture of the **Pharisee** in Figure 3.1? You will look in vain, for unlike our image- and appearance-obsessed culture, outward appearance did not matter nearly as much as reality in Jesus' world. It was your character, not the color of your eyes, that

### PHARISEE

This term seems to derive from the Hebrew root *prs*, which means either "separate" or "interpret"—probably the former. The Pharisees were the "separate ones," probably because of their attempt to distinguish themselves in the careful observance of the law from less-observant Jews and from Gentiles. It is possible to say that Pharisees were a holiness movement that believed that the way to purify the land was not by violence but through a more detailed attention to the Levitical laws. The Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, believed that oral traditions were passed on by Moses since Mt. Sinai and were as binding on a Jew as the written traditions in the Old Testament. They used these oral traditions to meet new dilemmas and situations. The Sadducees, by contrast, were for strict adherence to the letter of the Old Testament, particularly the Pentateuch.

### JOSEPHUS

A Jewish historian who lived during the first century A.D. and referred to Jesus in his writing. Key writings include *The Jewish War, Antiquities of the Jews* and *Against Apion*.

Figure 3.1 A Pharisee was identifiable by his religious attire, including the prayer shawl. *(© Rick Danielson)*

mattered. What we have in the four Gospels is four portraits of the character of Jesus, not descriptions of his physical appearance.

I emphasize the word *portrait*, for the Gospels are not like modern digital photographs. Rather, they are like beautiful portraits, inherently interpretive and presenting Jesus from various angles of incidence, various vantage points. The basic difference between an ordinary photograph and a portrait is that the latter is indeed an interpretation of the subject, not merely a physical representation of the subject. We have no real idea what Jesus looked like, but we do know who he was, what kind of person he was.

In a sense, the ancient Gospel writers already knew and affirmed the dream of Martin Luther King Jr., a dream of a day when a person would be judged not on the basis of the color of their skin (or any aspect of their outward appearance) but rather on the basis of the content of their character. The Gospels are character sketches, portraits, and they are not merely "true to life": they are true, too true for mere surface descriptions or outward impressions to be allowed to get in the way.

Like other ancient biographers and historians, the Evangelists decided to take an indirect approach to revealing the character of Jesus, what manner of person he actually was. It is the words and deeds of Jesus that are used to reveal his person and character. Substance is preferred over form, and reality over a physical account of his image. Using this indirect method of portraiture, the Gospel writers reveal what they want us to know about Jesus. Interestingly, they do so without a lot of side commentary or explanation. Yes, there are a few parenthetical comments in the Gospels (see, e.g., Mark 7.11, 19; John 4.2, 9), but surprisingly few; and most of those comments by the Gospel writers simply explain foreign terms or customs, they do not usually attempt to explain the meaning of Jesus' teaching, much less the meaning of Jesus himself. The Gospel story is allowed to carry the weight all by itself.

## DID JESUS EVEN EXIST?

In our own cynical and skeptical age, there are even some persons who have doubted the very existence of Jesus. No responsible historian of antiquity takes this view for the very good reason that we have more evidence for the existence of Jesus of Nazareth than for almost any other comparable figure from that era. We have Jewish, Roman, and Christian evidence that he was a real person. The Jewish historian **Josephus**, even if we eliminate possible later additions to his text by Christians, certainly refers to Jesus, just as he does to John the Baptist (see "Clues from the Culture: Josephus on Jesus"); and the Roman historian **Tacitus**, who like Josephus also lived in the first century A.D., refers to Jesus who was crucified on a cross by Pontius Pilate. Then there are myriad of early Christian testimonies to the life and death of Jesus from the first century, much of which we find in the New Testament itself. Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and perhaps even Paul all knew or had seen Jesus and knew directly about his crucifixion.

This is but a passing reference, and something Josephus certainly could have said. Portions of the other passage may well have some Christian insertions in them, which I have highlighted in bold.

> Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, **if it be lawful to call him a man,** for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. **He was the Christ,** and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; **for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him.** And the tribe of Christians so named from him are not extinct at this day.
>
> —Antiquities *20.9.1* (bold added)

Josephus lived in the Holy Land during and after the time of Jesus and was in a position to know something of Jesus' story, although Josephus was not a follower of Jesus. If he inclined to any one Jewish group, it was the Pharisees. The majority of scholars of whatever stripe accept some edited version of the preceding paragraph as being penned by Josephus himself. I agree with that judgment.

This report (see "Clues from the Culture, Tacitus on Jesus") comes from an important Roman senator and historian who had access to official documents from provinces like Judaea, which is presumably where he got the information about Jesus' death. He likely wrote this late in the first century A.D. as he was compiling and drawing on his own memoirs.

### TACITUS

A Roman historian who lived in the first century A.D. and referred in his writing to Jesus who was crucified on a cross by Pontius Pilate. Key writings include his *Annals* and his *Histories* which report historical events contemporaneous with his lifetime.

### CLUES FROM THE CULTURE
#### JOSEPHUS ON JESUS

*There are two passages in Josephus's* Antiquities of the Jews *that refer to Jesus. The first is affirmed as authentic by historians of all sorts and is not really under debate. It reads as follows:*

But the younger Ananus who, as we said, received the high priesthood, was of a bold disposition and exceptionally daring; he followed the party of the Sadducees, who are severe in judgment above all the Jews, as we have already shown. As therefore Ananus was of such a disposition, he thought he had now a good opportunity, as Festus was now dead, and Albinus was still on the road; so he assembled a council of judges, and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, whose name was James, together with some others, and having accused them as lawbreakers, he delivered them over to be stoned.

—Antiquities *20.9.1*

**CLUES** FROM THE **CULTURE**

TACITUS ON JESUS

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. 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, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against humankind.

—Annals *15.44*

We may then put aside extreme skepticism about the existence of Jesus. The evidence is stronger for his existence than even for a figure like Julius Caesar; and in terms of ancient manuscripts, we have more copies of very ancient Christian manuscripts referring to Jesus than manuscripts referring to any other comparable historical figure.

## WHAT MANNER OF MAN WAS HE?

Perhaps the first thing to say about Jesus is that he was a Jew, and as a Jew he lived in a highly Jewish environment in Jewish ways. You may not need this reminder, but it would be **anachronistic** to say Jesus was a Christian, although he certainly is the source and focus of the early Christian movement, and I would stress that Jesus had an exalted and messianic view of himself. We will say much more about that later in this textbook.

Jesus was born somewhere between 2 and 6 B.C. This should strike you as odd, and it is all because a monk called Dionysius the Short reckoned that Jesus was born at or just before 1 A.D. He was off by a few years, but the modern calendar that makes this year 2017 is based on Dionysius's errant calculations.

What we know with some certainty is that Jesus was born while Herod the Great was king over all of the Holy Land (see Matthew 2). Herod the Great, however, died somewhere between 1 and 4 B.C. Ergo, Jesus has to have been born before then. Luke 3.23 tells us that Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. If we count backward from the date of his death, which was probably A.D. 30, this means his ministry probably began about A.D. 27 (lasting about 3 years), which in turn means he was likely born somewhere around 2–3 B.C.

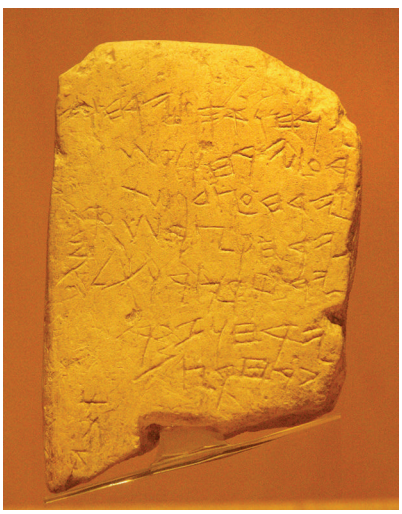

Figure 3.2 The Gezer Calendar, shown in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, may be one of the earliest examples of Hebrew writing.

As a Jew, Jesus had many discussions about the Law of Moses found in the first five books of the Old Testament, and we find him debating things like laws of clean and unclean, appropriate behavior on the Sabbath, what the greatest commandment of that Mosaic Law was, and so on. The contrast between Jesus' discussions and arguments with other Jewish leaders, such as the Pharisees, and Paul's discussion at the **Areopagus** (see Acts 17.16–34) with Greeks, in which he quotes Greek poets and philosophers, could hardly be more

Figure 3.3 The Court called Areopagus is thought to have stood on Mars Hill by some, but more likely it was in the agora below the hill. *(© Mark R. Fairchild, Ph.D.)*

dramatic. Jesus lived and died in a very different world from the world of some of the earliest Christians, especially the Gentile ones who had never set foot in the Holy Land. As different as our 21st century world is from all of the ancient world, even within the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds of the New Testament, one culture often differed from another as much as, say, modern American culture differs from Afghanistan's culture today. In order to understand Jesus and the earliest Christians and their writings, a person needs to begin to understand the character of the world, the cultures, and the ethos of the first century A.D.

The second major thing to say about Jesus is that we don't know nearly as much about his life as we would like to know. For example, we know next to nothing about what he was doing between the ages of infancy and when he began his public ministry at about the age of 30. We can assume he had a normal early Jewish life—his family was composed of devout Jews. He attended synagogue. Joseph and Jesus himself practiced a trade, namely, they were artisans (the Greek word *tekton* refers to those skilled in working in wood and stone).[2] The family went on religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem like many other Galilean Jews (see Luke 2.41–52). We can assume he had a normal early Jewish diet—eating fruits, nuts, grains, bread, and not much meat except during a feast or festival occasion.

### ANACHRONISTIC

The description of a term, concept, idea or event that does not fit accurately into the time in which it is being discussed. In other words, the usage is chronologically incorrect. For example, it would be anachronistic (or an anachronism) to refer to the use of cell phones in the first century A.D.

### AREOPAGUS

This word literally means Mars Hill and refers to a locale in Athens. It is debated whether the reference is to a little knoll in the shadow of the acropolis and the Parthenon, or if in fact Acts 17 is referring to the court in the stoa or marketplace below which Paul was tried for preaching new deities.

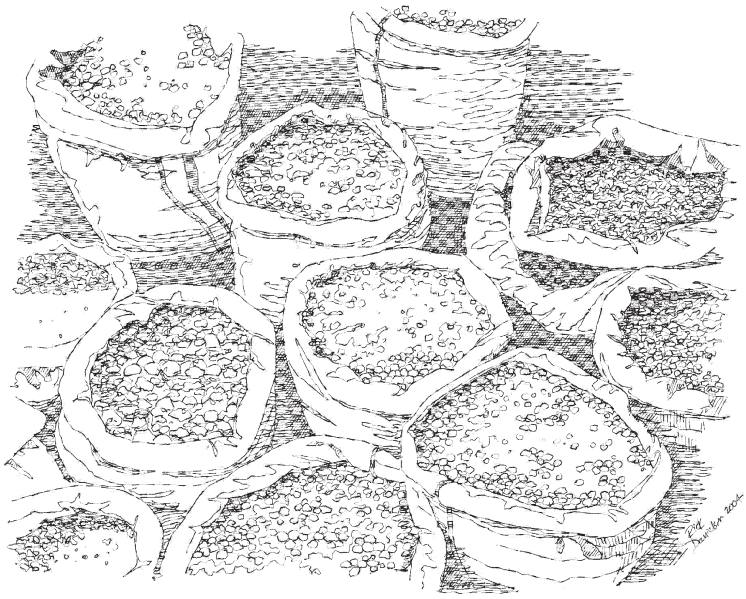

Figure 3.4 Grain was the most precious of commodities for survival in the Ancient Near East, as there were often famines. *(© Rick Danielson)*

**PEASANT**

A class of people who lived in an agrarian society. Peasants were part of the lower class, often illiterate and were not landowners.

What we *cannot* assume, despite the assertions of some scholars is that (1) Jesus was a **peasant**. First of all, the New Testament depicts him as an artisan, working in wood and stone, and it depicts his family as having a home in Nazareth. His family is neither without property, nor are they tenant farmers. (2) The evidence as we have it indicates that Jesus could read (see Luke 4). Persons who could not read the Torah were not allowed to teach the Torah in early Jewish synagogues. Jesus was not illiterate. (3) Southern Galilee was not a monolingual region. Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic were all used in this region, with Aramaic being the dominant language spoken. Greek was necessary because of the cities of the Decapolis, which were either actually in this part of the Holy Land (i.e., Scythopolis) or very nearby and visited regularly by Jews like Jesus (i.e., Caesarea Philippi—see Mark 8.27–30, or Gadara). We will say a good deal more about how much Greek culture had influenced this region long before the time of Jesus later in this study. See chapter 15 on Jude (p. 293), the brother of Jesus, and Galilee in their day.

What set Jesus apart from the ordinary was controversy, and the controversy does not seem to have begun until Jesus actually began his ministry somewhere around A.D. 27 or 28. What seems to have prompted Jesus' ministry as much as anything else was the earlier ministry of his cousin, the man we know as John the Baptizer. We will say much more about that as we examine the Gospels themselves.

Here it is enough to say that Jesus was born, lived, and died a Jew within his Jewish environment; so far as we know, he almost never left the land of Israel at all, except for small excursions across the borders near to the Sea of Galilee and points north. Nor do any of the earliest followers of Jesus suggest that he ever wrote anything down, such as his own teachings. But some of Jesus' disciples certainly began writing down things he said and likely did so at an early juncture. Jesus was well known by friend, foe, and the indifferent as a remarkable teacher and healer who drew considerable crowds clamoring to hear and be healed.

The all too brief life of Jesus came to an abrupt halt in about A.D. 30, when the Roman authorities, chiefly Pontius Pilate, had him crucified on a wooden

cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem. He was no more than about 33 years old when this happened. It is fair to say that we would have probably never heard of Jesus at all if crucifixion was in fact the historical end of his story. One of the great problems for modern historians in dealing with Jesus is explaining *why* a movement of Jesus followers, and even Jesus worshippers, arose after the crucifixion of Jesus, if in fact crucifixion was the dead end to which his life and story came.

Crucifixion was considered the most horrible and shameful way to die in antiquity. Ancient people tended to believe that a person's origins and birth and how a person died revealed their character. This is one reason why various writers of the Gospel spent so much time on Jesus' origins and death, especially his death. In Jesus' world, a death by crucifixion would be taken as proof that Jesus was a wicked person, even that Jesus was a person cursed by God, because few early Jews could imagine that God would allow a special prophet or king, much less God's son, to die a hideous, shameful death like that. If Jesus was crucified, so went the logic, then at a minimum he couldn't be anyone good, anyone important, anyone that God had anointed. To the contrary, crucifixion proved that he was a false prophet and someone God never endorsed, or at least that God in the end abandoned him. Some have even pointed to the last words of Jesus on the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" as proof that he was no one special (see Mark 15.34).

Figure 3.5 The modern Via Dolorosa, or way of the cross, which Christian pilgrims take from the Antonio Fortress to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, seeking to follow the path Jesus took to the cross. *(© Rick Danielson)*

Indeed, even Jesus' sympathizers and various of his followers had given up hope he was anyone special once he was crucified, and they were prepared to abandon their belief in Jesus. Look at the story in Luke 24 of the two followers of Jesus who are leaving Jerusalem with their heads down once Jesus was crucified. Notice what they say to the "stranger" they meet on the road as they leave town—"But we had *hoped* (past tense) that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24.21). Clearly, the hope was gone now that Jesus had died on a cross. Even knowing that the tomb was found empty and that some women claimed to have had a vision of angels who told them he was alive again did not prevent these disciples from abandoning hope in Jesus.

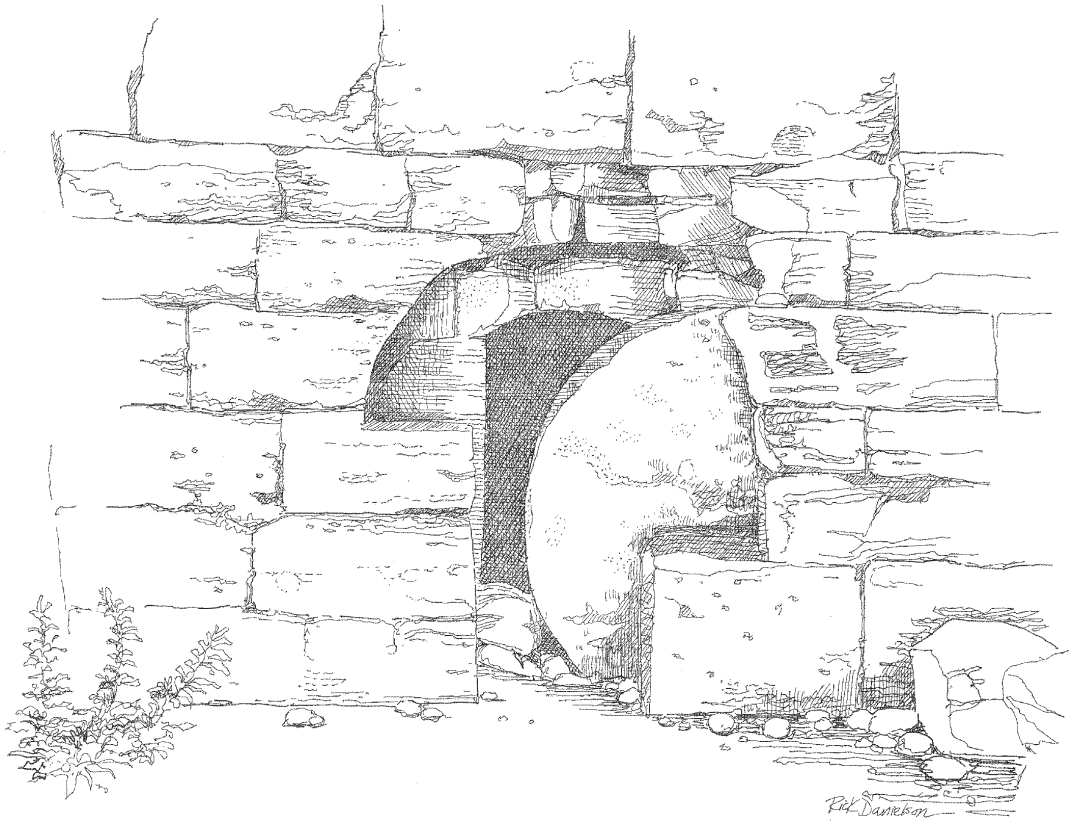


Figure 3.6 An image of a garden tomb that is empty with the stone rolled back. *(© Rick Danielson)*

It is for this reason that something dramatic and historic had to have happened to Jesus after his crucifixion and death to change the crushed hopes of the earliest disciples into joy, devotion, and a lifelong commitment to following Jesus, proclaiming Jesus, worshipping Jesus, and even dying for Jesus. They would not do all that for a lie, for a person they believed was cursed by God and simply died on a cross, ending an otherwise interesting, helpful, and healing three years of ministry.

There were plenty of famous early Jewish, and for that matter Greco-Roman, teachers who lived normal lives and died normal deaths, not on a cross, and none of them spawned evangelistic movements that have endured for 2,000 years and continue even now to grow. Even the secular historian has to explain how we get from a crucified Jesus to the early Christian movement; and as Martin Dibelius once said, the *X* that one puts in the equation between those two historical facts has to be large enough to explain why the latter events happened after the former event of crucifixion.

I would suggest that the earliest followers of Jesus were telling the truth when they claimed they saw Jesus alive again after his death, and they walked with him, talked with him, supped with him, and even touched him after he had died. In other words, a miracle happened to the miracle worker himself after his crucifixion. The story of Jesus cannot be adequately told or explained without the miracle. Indeed, the story of Jesus is full of miracles—miracles that he performed and miracles that happened to and for him at the beginning and end of his human story.

## WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

If you look up the dictionary definition of a miracle, you will find something like this:

> 1. A surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is considered to be divine. 2. A highly improbable or extraordinary event, development, or accomplishment.

In the old days, you sometimes even heard a definition that suggested a miracle was something that "violated" the laws of nature, but this was shown to make little sense because if there is a God who set up the laws of nature in the first place, what sense would it make to say he then violated them? Hence, we have definitions such as the ones just given. What these definitions rightly suggest is that miracles in the proper sense are out of the ordinary happenings, and often they are not explicable on the basis of our current knowledge, scientific or otherwise.

A fair-minded person will admit there are many things that happen in this world that are currently inexplicable. Even the most committed scientist, if not given over to hubris, has to admit that we do not actually know the limits of what is possible in this world, and we do not even fully know the parameters of the laws of nature. Whatever those parameters are, however, it was the conviction of the writers of the New Testament that *God can and does on occasion go beyond the known laws of nature, without going against*

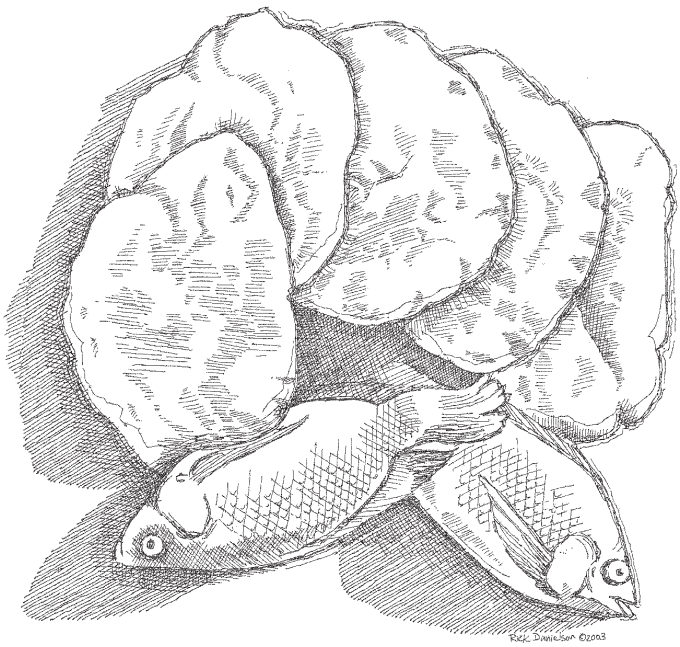


Figure 3.7 Loaves and fishes were the most basic food stuffs in Galilee. (© Rick Danielson)

*them.* This is miracle with a capital *M,* something that will probably never be fully explicable on the basis of normal processes of causation or natural law.

For a modern person who has grown up in the scientific era, it is important, of course, to evaluate claims about miracles critically, but at the same time with an open mind. Open-mindedness does not mean that one has to be gullible or easily duped about things. Some claims about miracles are false, but some, I would suggest, are true. I like the dictum of my grandmother—"Don't be so open-minded that your brains fall out." At the same time, you should not be so close-minded that you assert dogmatically that "miracles don't happen because they can't happen." In fact, no one knows enough to be able to make that dogmatic statement—no one.

I am stressing this at the beginning of our exploration into the New Testament because as you read the New Testament, you will find one report about a miracle after another after another. You will not be able to fairly evaluate these stories and these documents unless you approach them with not only an open mind but also some good, careful, critical thinking. Faith is not the opposite of knowledge. No students of the New Testament should ever be asked to check their brains at the door in order to believe what the New Testament says about Jesus or various other topics. Indeed, the mind is a gift from God, just as faith is. This introduction seeks to do justice to both reason and faith when it comes to Jesus and the New Testament, not just one or the other.

When it comes to miracles then, while it is possibly true that some of the miracle stories in the New Testament (such as the healing of a person who seems to be having an epileptic fit) may reflect primitive ideas about disease and unclean spirits that today we would describe in more scientific and natural terms, it is not the case that we can explain *all* the miracles in the New Testament, or even all the miracles performed by Jesus, in purely naturalistic terms. Dead men tell no tales, and they do not rise from actual death without a miracle. To an important extent, you need to be open to the possibility of miracles if you are going to try to understand Jesus and the writings of the New Testament, never mind if you want to embrace Jesus and these documents as important to your own faith journey. Ironically, you can only fully know and understand the historical Jesus and his words and deeds and life if you allow that he just might be more than an ordinary historical person. And you can only fully appreciate the writings of the New Testament if you approach them with an open mind. Once you admit the possibility of divine activity in the human sphere, then you have opened yourself up to the question of the relationship of the historical Jesus to the exalted Christ of faith.

Mark Allan Powell frames the issue this way:

> There is one passage in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus says to his disciples, "You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (26.11). Then [only a little] later in Matthew's