

Study Guide

The Bible: An Introduction by Jerry Sumney

Chapter 1 - The Bible: A Gradually Emerging Collection

Summary

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six separate writings, with some written in Hebrew, others in Hebrew and Aramaic, and others in Greek. They were collected by communities of faith that came to view them as authoritative for their communities' beliefs and practices. The Exiles of Judah began to compile texts as authorities that developed into the Hebrew Bible. This collection was mostly complete by the beginning of the first century CE and its boundaries secured by near the end of that century. The earliest church accepted the Jewish community's Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) as its authoritative text, even as some people within the church began to write the materials that would eventually make up the New Testament. Looking back, we can see that the early believers in Christ evaluated the newer writings by asking whether they were apostolic, whether they were widely known within the church, and whether what they taught fit with the beliefs the church had already accepted. These selected texts, in turn, helped those early believers shape their views about God, Christ, the world, and the church. It also helped them reject views that ran counter to what the larger body of Christians believed. No one person or council determined what books would be in the Bible; rather, it developed over the course of several hundred years, with minor disagreements remaining even into the modern era.

Key terms

Apocrypha, Athanasius, Babylon, Canon, Constantine, Council of Trent, Dead Sea Scrolls, Deuterocanonical, Exile, Gnostics, Hebrew Bible, Huldah, Jerome, Josephus, Marcion, Muratorian Fragment, New Testament, Old Testament, Pentateuch, Polytheism, Reformation, Second Temple Judaism, Septuagint, Torah, Vulgate

Study questions

- 1.1 What does it mean to call the Bible the "canon"?
- 1.2 Why do groups need a canon?
- 1.3 When did the Hebrew Bible begin to take a relatively firm shape? Why then?
- 1.4 What is the Apocrypha? Why is it not part of the Hebrew Bible?
- 1.5 How did Marcion influence the church to develop a canon?
- 1.6 Looking back, what criteria did the church (sometimes unconsciously) use to identify the books that should be authoritative, that is, should be part of the canon?
- 1.7 How did Jerome influence the stabilization of the canon?
- 1.8 How did Martin Luther influence the formation of the canon?

Chapter 2 - From Then to Now: The Transmission of the Bible

Summary

The primary task of textual criticism is to establish the most accurate form of the Biblical texts possible; that is, to determine, as close as they can, the wording of the author (or final editor[s]) of the text. Most scholars involved in the task think we have recovered the

New Testament text with at least 90% accuracy. This work ensures that the text of today's Bible is substantially what the earliest collectors intended to pass on to believers. There are various types of translations that use different translation strategies. Formal correspondence translations stay as close to the original wording as possible as they move from one language to another. Dynamic equivalence translations are content to try to express the text's ideas in the target language. Most translations fall on a continuum between these two alternatives. The further a translation leans toward a formal correspondence strategy, the more appropriate is its use in careful and detailed study.

Key terms

Chester Beatty Papyri, Christology, Codex, Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, Copyist Dynamic equivalence, Formal correspondence, King James Version, Masoretic text, Papyrus, Textual criticism, Textus Receptus, Uncials

Study questions

- 2.1 How do we know that the text of the Hebrew Bible we have today is much like the text the Jewish community was reading in the first century?
- 2.2 What ancient manuscripts do scholars see as the most important evidence for what New Testament authors actually wrote? Why do they think these are so important?
- 2.3 What are some unintentional changes that came to be part of some copies of biblical texts? What are some intentional changes? Explain how each got into the text.
- 2.4 What are some criteria textual critics use to decide what the original text was?
- 2.5 Tell about translation strategies and give examples of translations that use various strategies.
- 2.6 Why is it important to know that the King James Version relies on the Textus Receptus?

Chapter 3 - Inspiration: The Claim That God Speaks in a Text

Summary

Jews, and later Christians, have been thinking about how God speaks through texts since at least the return of the Judahites from exile in the 6th century. The early church heard God's voice in texts almost from its inception. As Christian texts were collected, they discussed what it meant to say that a text was inspired. Christians of the 3rd and 4th centuries (particularly Origen and John Chrysostom) recognized that the texts the church claimed as inspired contained factual errors. This recognition did not lead them to say the texts were not inspired; rather, they said that the higher significance of the texts is found in non-literal meanings, meanings which sometimes were clearer because of the factual errors. The Reformation's emphasis on Scripture as the sole authority for the church, however, led some Protestants to claim that the Bible had to be correct in all its factual information. More radical versions of this view claim that a literal reading of the Bible has correct history, geography, science, and all other fields. Recent ideas about the inspiration of Scripture from those who think God speaks through them fall into two groups, those that say the Bible contains inspired content (whether facts or theology or ideas about God) and those who say the Bible is inspired when it evokes an experience of God's presence or word. Some think it is possible to combine elements of both of these

views without accepting what is known as the inerrantist view.

Key terms

Allegory, Autographs, John Calvin, John Chrysostom, The Enlightenment, Fundamentalism, Inerrant (understood in different ways), Inspiration, Martin Luther, Origen, Philo, Plenary inspiration, The Reformation

Study questions

- 3.1 When did Israelites begin looking to texts as a prominent place to hear God's word?
- 3.2 How did Christians in the first four centuries deal with the problem of finding historical, geographical, or factual mistakes in the Bible?
- 3.3 What led those who came after Luther and Calvin to begin to redefine inspiration?
- 3.4 Describe the beginnings of the Fundamentalist movement. What moved them to define inspiration as they did?
- 3.5 What is the rationale for defining inspiration in the ways Fundamentalists did in the twentieth century?
- 3.6 What are two basic ways to think about what it means to say the Bible is inspired?

Chapter 4 - The Pentateuch, Part 1: Genesis

Summary

The first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch or Torah, have a long literary history. These books are the work of several writers who incorporated earlier texts and traditions to compose these books. The four primary sources that are incorporated into these books are known as: J (the Yahwist), E (the Elohist), D (the Deuteronomic tradition), and P (the Priestly tradition).

It is singularly important to recognize the genre of anything we read. Only if we properly identify the genre will we be able to understand a text correctly. So it is important to know that the first parts of Genesis are neither scientific explanations nor history. Both known parallels in the ancient world (such as the Enuma Elish) and the stories themselves demonstrate that the stories in Genesis are more poetic and symbolic than historical or scientific. Recognizing their true nature does not make these texts less valuable, but rather allows them to state more clearly what they really intend to express. After all, empirical methods do not suffice when we try to make many kinds of decisions (for example, in the field of ethics).

The stories in the first part of Genesis intend to explain how the good world that the good God made has come to us with so many problems and injustices.

The stories that begin with the call of Abraham tell of the ancestors of the Jewish people. They show how God was with these ancestors even when they showed significant moral lapses. Thus, these stories begin to form an image of God as one who is patient, loving, and forgiving. These stories finally explain how the Israelites came to be in Egypt and so set up the stories of the rest of the Pentateuch.

Key terms

Abram/Abraham, Babel, D source, Documentary Hypothesis, E source, Elohim, Enuma Elish, Epic of Gilgamesh, Esau, Etiology, Fall, Garden of Eden, Genre, Isaac,

J source, Jacob, Jehovah, Joseph, Laban, Leah, Legend, Nephilim, P source, Rachel, Rebekah, Sarah, Sodom and Gomorrah, Yahweh

Study questions

- 4.1 What are the distinctive characteristics of each major source that makes up the Pentateuch?
- 4.2 Why is it important to identify the genre of a document correctly?
- 4.3 Explain how parables can be true and yet not factual. How might this help you read other parts of the Bible (for example, the first chapters of Genesis)?
- 4.4 How are the creation accounts in Genesis and Enuma Elish alike? How are they different?
- 4.5 Why does Genesis include the story of the fall?
- 4.6 In the narrative of Genesis, does the curse after the fall reflect God's will for the world? Explain your answer.

Chapter 5 - The Pentateuch, Part 2: Exodus through Deuteronomy

Summary

The four books of the Pentateuch after Genesis all assume that God has a special relationship with the descendants of Abraham. Continuing to use the literary genre of legend, these books tell of the exodus from Egypt, the wilderness wandering of the Israelites, the giving of the Law, and throughout they emphasize God's faithfulness and graciousness as God deals with people who are constantly unfaithful.

Exodus tells the story of God's rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. When God sees the suffering of Abraham's descendants, God remembers the promises to Abraham and has mercy on them. Through sending plagues on the Egyptians through Moses, the Israelites are given their freedom. This event becomes a central paradigm through which Israel will understand God; God is the one who shows grace and faithfulness by rescuing the oppressed. This book also tells of the giving of the Law and the initiation of the covenant between God and Israel. It also highlights Israel's unfaithfulness to God—even at Mt. Sinai.

Leviticus details the laws priests must follow in their lives and in their religious duties. It also gives instructions about morality for all Israelites. Its constant point is that Israel must be distinct from the nations around it. The authors of this book are convinced that Israel will be able to worship only God if they as a people are so different from the peoples around them that it becomes difficult to have close relationships with those outside their own nation. These distinctions are important because these writers believe that nothing is as important as being faithful to God. Since this book is taking shape while the nation of Judah is in exile in Babylon, its instructions tell readers to remain different from those who worship other gods in that context.

Numbers both gives the results of some censuses and tells stories about the Israelites time in the wilderness. It tells of the Israelites unwillingness to trust that God would give them Canaan and therefore of their required and lengthy sojourn in the desert. While there, they continue to engage in acts of unfaithfulness, that is, they continue to complain about what God gives them and so show a lack of trust in God. But their worst mistakes always involve worshipping other gods.

We must remember that later Israelites tell these stories about their ancestors to explain their own predicament of defeat and exile. As they believe they worship the strongest and highest god, they have a difficult time understanding why their nation has been defeated. The reason these writers give is that they as a people have not been faithful to the covenant they had made with God. Showing that this unfaithfulness has been a part of their people's life from the beginning, helps them maintain their belief in God and call the people to worship only God.

Deuteronomy, the final book of the Pentateuch, has farewell speeches from Moses. The authors of this book have Moses give for a second time (thus the name of the book) many of the laws he had already given the people. The central message of the book is that God will reward faithfulness to the covenant and will punish unfaithfulness. Even in these bad times, however, God remains in a covenant relationship with Israel.

The Pentateuch takes readers from the creation of the world to the brink of their invasion of Canaan. It tells of the origins of the special relationship God has with Israel, the establishment of the covenant with Israel and their receiving of the gift of the Law. It also begins to portray these ancestors as continually unfaithful. This extensive record of turning away from God helps the original readers understand how they, God's chosen people, could have suffered such a dramatic national disaster.

Key terms

Balaam, Cities of refuge, Deuteronomistic History, Exodus, Holiness Code, Joshua and Caleb, Mosaic covenant, Mount Sinai, Passover, Ritual purity, Shema, Tabernacle, Ten Commandments

Study questions

- 5.1 Why might the "eye for an eye" command be seen as an advance in justice?
- 5.2 What is the narrative function of the conversations between God and Moses?
- 5.3 Why was the golden calf story included in the narrative of Exodus?
- 5.4 What do the punishments God brings on Israel say about the covenant relationship between God and Israel?
- 5.5 How does Leviticus relate the commands to God?
- 5.6 Why do the books of the Torah give commands that make Israelites so different from those around them?
- 5.7 How does Deuteronomy say that the fortunes of the nation of Israel are tied to obedience to the law?
- 5.8 How could the people view the Law as a gift from God?

Chapter 6 - The Israelites Tell Their Story: Interpretations of National Disasters

Summary

The Deuteronomic histories tell the story of the Israelites from the beginning of their conquest of Canaan through the end of the nation of Judah and thus of political independence for Israelites for over 400 years. These books do not contain secular or political histories (several such histories are referred to in the narrative); rather, their writers tell their stories through the lens of the perspective set out in the book of Deuteronomy. That is, they give religious rather than political or military reasons for the

things that have happened to the nations of Israel and Judah. They tell their stories to show that when the people worship only God and are faithful to what God wants, they prosper; when they worship other gods, God gives them over to defeat by their enemies. The many minor defeats these books tell of are designed to show that God is gracious. According to these stories, the people had never really turned to worship only God, but God remained with them, in covenant with them, and constantly accepted them back. It is only after this long history of turning away from God and being accepted by God again that the overwhelming disaster befalls their nation.

The book of Joshua tells stories of Israel taking land from the prior inhabitants of Canaan and establishing their own place within the region.

The book of Judges details the trouble the Israelites had in maintaining their place among the other inhabitants of the region. Judges insists that this turmoil is the result of Israel's continual worship of the gods of the peoples around them. When Israel worships those gods, God allows their enemies to dominate them. When Israel asks God for help, God sends a leader to free them from domination. This presentation of stories emphasizes the faithfulness and graciousness of God and the faithlessness of the people.

The other books in this section chronicle the establishment of the nation of Israel and its split into two nations. These accounts trace the fate of both nations to their extinction.

The nation of Israel falls to the Assyrians never to return; these accounts of the political and religious life of Israelites close with the fall of Judah to the Babylonians. Throughout these accounts, the writers evaluate kings by whether they help the people maintain faithfulness to God alone or lead them to worship other gods. Unfortunately, most kings do "what is evil in the sight of the Lord." According to the terms of the covenant, as they are set out in Deuteronomy, this spells disaster. The fall of both nations is what they should expect. By the time Judah falls, the writers want readers to be asking how God could have put off this destruction that long.

While they do not dwell on it, the accounts related in these books assume that God remains in covenant relationship with God's people. They see the fall of their nations as the proper response of God within the covenant. This telling of their national story is a call to turn to God so God will restore them.

Key terms

Ark of the Covenant, Asherah, Assyrian Empire, Baal, Babylonian Empire, Chronicler's History, City of refuge, Dagon, David, Deborah, Deuteronomistic History, Eli, Elijah, Elisha, Gideon, Israel, Jericho, Joshua, Josiah, Judah, Judges, Levirate marriage, Naomi, Persian Empire, Rahab, Ruth, Samson, Samuel, Saul, Solomon

Study questions

6.1 Why does the book of Joshua tell the stories of Israel's conquest of Canaan the way it does?

6.2 How do stories in the book of Judges reflect the Deuteronomistic pattern? How important is this pattern to the central point of the book?

6.3 What is the function of the book of Ruth? What does it say about the Israelites' attitude toward non-Jews?

6.4 According to the interpretation of the authors of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, why do the nations of Israel and Judah fall? What does this interpretation tell readers

about the purpose of these books?

6.5 Why do 1 and 2 Chronicles sometimes change parts of the stories found in 1 and 2 Kings?

6.6 How do the Deuteronomistic writings interpret the destruction of the northern kingdom and the defeat and exile of Judah?

Chapter - 7 “Thus says the Lord . . .”: Israel’s Prophetic Tradition

Summary

The Hebrew prophets were among the early interpreters of the Israelites’ history with God. They begin saying as early as the 10th century BCE that the political fortunes of the people are dependent on their relationship with God. The Deuteronomic outlook depends directly on the preaching of these prophets.

The “classical” prophets of the eighth-century focus much of their attention on the sphere of social and political justice. They oppose social and cultural systems that take advantage of the poor and privilege the wealthy. While this arena of conduct remains central for most of the 8th century prophets, they also demand personal morality. In addition, they demand that the people worship only God (a special emphasis of Hosea). These prophets warn that the Israelite nations will suffer defeat because they manifest unfaithfulness to God in the ways they treat the poor and in their worship of other gods. At the same time, they call the people to repent so they can avoid the catastrophe. Even in the face of defeat, these prophets also proclaim that God will show favor to the people after their punishment and after they repent.

The prophets who speak to Judah after the fall of Israel ask their people to learn their lesson from what happened to Israel. But the people are not yet convinced that their worship of other gods and social injustice are the reasons their nation is in danger. Yet these prophets persist in arguing that until the nations stop their worship of many gods and begin to establish justice for the poor their problems will continue.

Later prophets who speak during the exile encourage their readers to be faithful so God will restore the nation’s fortunes. They predict stunning success for the nation and renew its purpose as a means through which God will be made known to the world.

These prophets set the stage for the interpretation of their people’s history that allows Israel to develop their beliefs about God into an understanding of God that makes God the creator of all things and the one true God who deserves worship. They provide the foundation for the understanding of their relationship with God which develops during the exile that allows the experience of exile to strengthen rather than destroy their faith in the God of Abraham. At the same time, they led the people to recognize that God demands both (social and personal) morality and fidelity to worshiping only God.

Key terms

Amos, Classical prophecy, Cyrus, Daniel, Day of the Lord, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Haggai, Hanukkah, Hosea, Indictment-verdict pattern, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Jonah, Maccabean Revolt, Malachi, Micah, Nahum, Nineveh, Obadiah, Persians, Postexilic prophets, Second Isaiah, Sheol, Theophany, Third Isaiah, Zechariah, Zephaniah

Study questions

- 7.1 How are the eighth-century classical prophets similar to and different from their immediate predecessors (such as Elijah and Elisha)?
- 7.2 Why did Amos find the worship of the temple in Jerusalem unacceptable to God?
- 7.3 What do the names of Hosea's children symbolize? What does their renaming symbolize?
- 7.4 Why do many people say that Micah 6:6-8 summarizes the message of the eighth-century prophets? Is there any major theme missing from this summary?
- 7.5 Why do interpreters think that the book of Isaiah contains material that was written over a span of two to three hundred years?
- 7.6 Why does Jeremiah buy some farmland just as the nation of Judah is about to fall?
- 7.7 What critique does the book of Jonah give to Israelite prophecy and the Deuteronomic History?

Chapter 8 - An Alternative Worldview: Israel's Wisdom Literature

Summary

Rather than looking to large sweeps of history to think about who God is and how God acts, Wisdom literature looks at everyday life. They do not claim to speak for God as the prophets do, but rather to provide careful observations about the way things really are in life. These writers are particularly aware of the ambiguities of life.

The book of Job challenges the prophetic and deuteronomic view of the world by having terrible things happen to a righteous person. The book questions the notion that God blesses the righteous and brings harm to the wicked. Job is a good person and yet suffers horribly. This book offers no good explanation for why God allows good people to suffer, it simply counsels people to maintain faith. After all, in the end Job receives many blessings. This book acknowledges that while it is usually true that good things happen to good people and that immoral living often brings hardship, that is not how it always works. Thus, seeing that a person is suffering is not clear evidence that the person has done bad things.

The book of Proverbs contains a collection of short sayings that are generalizations with which to guide one's life. The writers recognize that these quips work only if you use them at the correct time, just as this is true with all proverbial statements. So readers must wait for the right moment to use any one of these sayings. But when read as a whole, these snippets of advice set out a pattern of living that their authors think will bring more meaning to life.

The somewhat grim perspective of Ecclesiastes comes to expression in its refrain that all life is "vanity" or absurd. He sees an inescapable pattern to life. Yet this rhythm has been set by the good God who cares about the world and proper living. The book ends with the idea that, despite all things, serving God gives meaning to life.

The wisdom books face the complications and difficulties squarely without offering easy solutions. They acknowledge that the deuteronomic pattern does not always work. Thus, they give expression to that knowledge we all have that things do not always work out as they should. Still, they recommend obedience to God, believing that God is just and merciful and that such obedience leads to the best life.

Key terms

Ecclesiastes, Feast of Purim, Job, Proverb, Providence, Satan, Theodicy, Vanity, Wisdom literature

Study questions

- 8.1 What themes that are typical of Israelite literature does Wisdom literature not include?
- 8.2 What ideas about the way things happen in the world does the book of Job challenge?
- 8.3 How do the writers of the wisdom tradition think God relates to the world?
- 8.4 What is the practical purpose of the book of Esther?
- 8.5 What view of the presence of God do we see in Esther?
- 8.6 What do we see about the different ways Jews related to non-Jewish culture through Esther and the later additions to it?

Chapter 9 - Israel's Response to God: The Psalms and the Song of Solomon

Summary

The Psalms are Israel's response to God. They are songs that praise God, question God, ask God for help, and even teach about God. The book seems to have been compiled for use in Israel's worship, perhaps particularly for temple services. In contrast to most other parts of the Bible that intend to speak a word from God to people, these Psalms often are the people speaking to or about God. They show the ways that Israelites had faith in God and depended on God's goodness to sustain them in difficult times and to guide them in good times. Some psalms give expression to some of the darkest thoughts of our hearts. The authors of these statements trust God enough to bring even those worst parts of themselves into God's presence, expecting a transforming response from God.

The Song of Solomon is not part of the Psalms; it is a love poem. Including this work in the Bible indicates that all of one's being is important to God. This loving and sensuous poem has the young couple evade the bound of arranged marriages and find love with one another. Here a work of the Bible celebrates sexuality as part of what it means to be human.

Key terms

Acrostic, Antithetical parallelism, Didactic psalms, Imprecatory psalms, Lament psalms, Parallelism, Psalms of praise, Psalter, Royal psalms, Synonymous parallelism, Synthetic parallelism, Thanksgiving psalms

Study questions

- 9.1 How are the Psalms different from the poetry in the prophetic writings?
- 9.2 Name three kinds of psalms and tell about their distinctive characteristics.
- 9.3 Why do you think the editors of the Psalter included the imprecatory psalms?
- 9.4 What does the Song of Solomon say about human nature?

Chapter 10 - Between the Testaments: From Alexander the Great to the Time of Jesus

Summary

The return of Judahites to Palestine under the Persians did not lead to the immediate emergence of a powerful Jewish state, as some of the prophets had seemed to predict. Rather, they remained under foreign domination. Alexander the Great's defeat of the Persians and young death left Palestine under the control of Alexander's successors—first the Ptolemies and later the Seleucids. Since many Jews of Judea persisted in their rejection of Hellenization, they presented special problems to their overlords. Despite various enticements, many remained unmoved.

Antiochus the IV finally decides to force compliance by defiling the temple and requiring people to do things that violate the Law of Moses. These actions lead to the Maccabean Revolt. This revolt is so successful that its leaders are legitimized by Seleucid rulers.

Over the course of the next 40 years, Maccabean rulers continually gain power until John Hyrcanus declares Judea an independent nation (c. 129 BCE). Unfortunately, they do not remain an independent nation very long. After a series of palace intrigues, both sides of a civil war appeal to Rome. Rome sends Pompey who secures peace and puts the ruler of Judea under Roman authority in 63 BCE.

The political situation in Palestine remains volatile throughout out the next 200 years. Remembrance of political independence and belief that faithfulness will lead to independence make various levels of resistance and revolt commonplace throughout this era. Many look for someone anointed by God to rid them of the Romans and establish an independent Jewish state with its capital in Jerusalem. While riots and minor insurrections are relatively common, a much larger revolt breaks out in 66 CE. This attempted revolution precipitates the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the latter of which has never been rebuilt. When another large-scale rebellion occurs in 132, the Romans respond by refusing to allow any Jews to live in Judea after they suppress the revolt.

The period of Maccabean political power was productive in many ways in Palestine, including the emergence of important religious groups within Judaism. It is within their time that the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes all develop as distinctive ways of practicing Judaism. They had different views on what counted as Scripture, different ways of interpreting what they did call Scripture, and differing views about how God rewarded the faithful. It is in this lively mix of exchanges that Jesus appears with his teaching.

Key terms

Alexander the Great, Amon-Re, Antiochus IV, Bar Kokhba, Diaspora, Essenes, Gymnasium, Hasmoneans, Herod the Great, Judea, Pharisees, Philo, Pompey, Ptolemy, Qumran, Sadducees, Seleucus, Septuagint, Synagogue

Study questions

- 10.1 Why did Alexander and his successors promote hellenization?
- 10.2 What led to the Maccabean Revolt? What was its purpose?
- 10.3 How is the development of various religious parties in Judaism related to the political developments after the success of the Maccabeans?
- 10.4 Why did the people of Judea hate Herod?
- 10.5 Why were there so many revolts in Judea during this period of time?
- 10.6 Compare the origins of the three main religious parties in Palestine.

10.7 Compare what the three main religious parties in Palestine identified as authoritative Scripture and how they went about interpreting those recognized texts.

Chapter 11 - The Gospels: Their Composition and Nature

Summary

The Gospels tell the foundational stories of the church, even though they are not the earliest writings in the New Testament. The Gospels were not written to simply record stories about Jesus, they intend to give interpretations of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that they see as the appropriate beliefs for their churches. They wanted to limit the meanings of some stories and be certain that other stories showed certain things about Jesus that members of the church should believe. Just like the writers of the stories in the Hebrew Bible, the authors of the Gospels (often called the evangelists) write theological accounts that are more interested in the theological point than in historical accuracy. The evangelists assume that their readers know many of the stories they tell. So what they try to do is tell those stories in ways that point to a particular meaning or disallow some other meanings.

Despite the clearly theological nature of the Gospels, some modern scholars try to mine them so they can produce a story of Jesus as he really was. That is, they want to get behind the Gospels to the real person Jesus was and to the real words that Jesus said. Scholars have been attempting this for over 200 years with little success. Philosophers of history now recognize that no one can produce an objective account of an event or a life. The perspective of the historian will always color what she or he decides is historical and what is a later accretion. The lack of objectivity appears clearly in the many radically different supposedly "historical" accounts of Jesus' life that interpreters have produced over the last 200 years; the "real Jesus" most people find when they make this attempt is a mirror image of the beliefs the researcher already holds.

Many who have tried to find the historical Jesus undertake this task with the idea that the Jesus of history is the one who should be the guide for the church's beliefs. The problem with this approach is that it conflates history and faith. Knowing the facts about an event does not tell you what that event means. For the early church, it was not a question of whether Jesus did certain things, but of what it meant that Jesus did those things. That continues to be the real question for people who would be Christians. Most historians would agree that Jesus was known as a healer. The question, then, is not whether he was known as a healer but what does it mean that he did such things. As stories in the Gospels themselves show, some interpreted such power as proof that he was in league with the devil, others that he was sent from God. Knowing the facts does not determine which of these perspectives is correct. So correct historical detail is not what the church needs as the basis of its faith. Rather, the church has always looked to the interpretations of the apostles as the correct way to understand who Jesus was and what he accomplished. The first three New Testament Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are known as the Synoptic Gospels because they are so much alike. They follow the same basic outline and contain many of the same stories about Jesus. In comparison with the Gospel of John (the other New Testament Gospel), their image of the kind of teacher Jesus was and where he spent most of his time during his public career is also very similar.

Most New Testament scholars think the authors of Matthew and Luke read Mark and

used it as the outline for their telling of the life of Jesus. They added material to Mark's account from various sources, but mostly from Q, a written collection of the saying of Jesus. While no one has a copy of this document, most scholars are convinced that there had to be such a collection because the things Matthew and Luke have Jesus say are too similar for them to be relying on oral traditions. The reliance of Matthew and Luke on Mark and Q, and then some independent sources, explains how the Synoptic Gospels can be so much alike and yet so different in other ways.

Key terms

Evangelist, Gospel, Historical Jesus, Kosher, Oral tradition, Q, Sabbath, Synoptic Gospels

Study questions

11.1 Why do the various New Testament Gospels tell the same story about Jesus in different ways?

11.2 Compare the stories the Gospels tell about Jesus to the stories Genesis tells about its important characters.

11.3 What does Matthew 12:22-32 show about the influence of interpretation on how a person tells about and understands an event?

11.4 Which Gospels are called the Synoptic Gospels? Why are they given that designation?

Chapter 12 - Four Views of One Jesus: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John

Summary

The four New Testament Gospels give four different interpretations of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This shows us something of the diversity of the early church. Some of these differences also represent the varying ways that different cultures of the first century used their own backgrounds to try to understand what they believed Jesus had done to bring them close to God.

Writing to an audience composed mostly of non-Jews (that is, Gentiles), Mark focuses on the ministry of Jesus as the place one sees who Jesus is and what he accomplishes. Mark has Jesus spend most of his public career in Galilee, the northern part of Palestine. Mark then gives a good deal of attention to the one trip Jesus makes from Galilee to Jerusalem, the place he will die. Finally, Mark spends one-third of his Gospel telling of the last week of Jesus life. This is clearly the most important part of the story for Mark.

Mark emphasizes that Jesus is the Son of God who brings God's kingdom into the world. Jesus' appearance and his actions advance the borders of God's rule and bring defeat for the powers of evil. Mark presents Jesus as a person of action and power. Jesus possesses so much power from God that he is able to defeat demons and heal diseases more easily than others. Yet, he hides his identity (the messianic secret). When he performs some mighty deed, he often tells the person not to tell anyone. Mark seems to use the messianic secret to help Jesus ensure that people do not misunderstand him. Of the many ways that various Jewish groups defined the messiah, none of them fit what Jesus was. Thus, the church (and perhaps Jesus before them) redefined what it meant to be God's messiah. In one of his most decisive moves, Mark's narrative argues that a person cannot properly

understand who Jesus is or what he accomplishes unless she or he sees the crucifixion as an integral part of the ministry of Jesus. Only by seeing both the power and the suffering of Jesus can one develop the understanding of Jesus that Mark thinks is correct.

As *Matthew* writes for a church that is composed predominantly of Jews, he changes some perspectives of Mark. Matthew adopts the basic outline of Mark, but adds birth stories, a genealogy of Jesus, resurrection stories, and a great deal of teaching from Jesus. Matthew identifies Jesus as the Messiah who will carry out God's purposes. He qualifies Jesus for this role by tracing his ancestors through the kings of Israel. This royal lineage is confirmed by the Magi and Herod who recognize that the infant Jesus is to become a king.

Matthew also makes Jesus the authoritative interpreter of God's Law, the Torah.

Matthew's church, at least its Jewish members, remain Torah observant. Their keeping of the law differs from other Jews only in that they accept Jesus' interpretations as correct. Matthew uses the Sermon on the Mount, the first of the five long discourses of Jesus that he inserts into Mark's outline, to provide examples of the way Jesus interprets the Law. It is important for readers today to note that Jesus never makes the Law easier to keep; rather, his interpretation always makes the commandment more difficult to keep.

One of the most important ways Matthew ties Jesus to Israel's experience of God is through fulfillment quotations. When relating many things that happen in connection with the life of Jesus, Matthew says, "This was done to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet..." Matthew uses this formula to interpret Jesus' life and to connect that life to Israel's hopes of restoration and proper relationship with God. When Matthew says something "fulfills" a Scripture, he does not mean that a prophet predicted a particular event in Jesus' life. Instead, he means that this passage gives a way to understand Jesus. In this way he gives the passage a new meaning. At the same time, that passage helps explain who Jesus is. That he is not thinking of a direct prediction is clear from the places where he quotes an account of a past event (not a prediction about the future) and says it is fulfilled in what happens in Jesus' life. Matthew is finding new meanings that were hidden until they are read by people who believe in Jesus. Like many ancient people, he sees multiple layers of meanings in texts. For Matthew, Jesus is the key to opening those meanings in the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

Through these fulfillment quotations and other devices, Matthew identifies Jesus as the obedient child of God who also calls others to obey God's will. He identifies this obedient one as the messiah, even though he must redefine what it means to call someone by that title. This messiah is the king of God's army who will return to defeat evil by exercising judgment. This exalted position that Matthew gives Jesus makes faith in him necessary for those who want to be counted among God's people.

The Gospel of Luke has its own perspective on the meanings of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Written for a Gentile audience, this Gospel gives a somewhat different meaning to calling Jesus the Son of God and on how the Hebrew Scriptures point to him. Perhaps the most outstanding feature of Luke's presentation of Jesus is the way he has Jesus identify with the poor and oppressed. From its very beginning, this Gospel makes the poor a focus of concern.

Luke demonstrates his concern for the lowly of society in many ways. At the beginning he focuses the story on the women rather than on Joseph and he has shepherds rather than the magi and a king know about Jesus' birth. Beyond these differences in characters in

the story, Luke makes this concern explicit in the stories about Jesus he tells and in the ways he tells those stories. The stories that are unique to Luke (for example, the Good Samaritan and the Rich Man and Lazarus) also pick up this concern.

Luke's attention to the ways Jesus fulfills Scripture is also different from Matthew's. Whereas Matthew has things happen around Jesus that fulfill Scriptures, Luke has Jesus do things on purpose in order to fulfill Scripture. So in Luke, Jesus knows what Scripture says he is supposed to do to accomplish what God wants and he does it. This does not mean that this plan was clear from reading those texts. It is only after the death and resurrection of Jesus that the disciples can look back and think of what happened as a fulfillment of Scripture. Even after the life of Jesus the disciples need God's help to find those meanings (see Luke 24:45).

Luke identifies Jesus as the Son of God in a unique sense that is seen in the stories of his birth and through the way that Jesus obeys his instructions from God, those instructions found in the new readings of Scripture. Because he is God's son and because he is obedient, including being willing to die, God exalts Christ to the highest place, from which he can offer others a relationship with God.

John is very different from the other three Gospels in the New Testament. It has many stories the other Gospels do not tell and it has few that they do tell. While the Synoptics have Jesus make only one trip to Jerusalem, the trip that ends with his death, John has Jesus visit the area around Jerusalem regularly. The biggest overlap between John and the Synoptics is in the Passion Narrative, that is, the story about the last week of Jesus' life. John is the only New Testament Gospel that asserts that Christ existed before being born on earth. John asserts that the pre-existent Christ participated in the creation of the world; saying Christ (the Word) was the one through whom God created everything. This is one of the ways John identifies Christ with God more directly than the other Gospels.

Throughout his Gospel, John has Jesus claim things about himself that are only appropriately said about God. So John wants his readers to identify Jesus with God in an intimate and unique way.

This way of presenting Jesus changes the way John presents a number of things, including the Passion and death of Jesus. In John, Jesus is in charge throughout the trial and execution. Even at his death, he remains in charge: he finds a caretaker for his mother, makes sure he has done all he is supposed to do, and then says, "It is finished." John also presents Jesus as a very different kind of teacher. There are no narrative parables (that is, parables that tell a story) in John and there is little talk of God's kingdom. Instead, Jesus teaches by making an ambiguous statement that the hearer then asks about. Once he has this opening, Jesus gives an extended explanation that John uses to get his ideas about Jesus across to his readers.

The most troubling thing about John is the way he refers to "the Jews." While later readers often understood this to be an indictment against all Jews, this cannot be its meaning in John because the author of John is Jewish, and so are most members of his church. In John, the expression "the Jews" usually refers to the civic and religious leaders in Jerusalem, rather than to all Jews. John expresses his dislike for this group because his church has been expelled from the synagogues. These believers in Christ probably began to make claims about Jesus that moved local synagogue leaders to withdraw their membership. The claims John makes about Christ seem to represent a real problem for those who are devoted to worship only one God. Thus, once these church people refused

to remain silent about these beliefs about Jesus, the synagogue leaders saw no choice but to exclude them from membership. John's church took this hard and viewed the move as persecution. Therefore, John has harsh words for these leaders.

The most important thing we must remember about these words which many have used to support anti-Semitism is that they do not intend to express that point of view. These are words spoken by Jews about fellow-Jews. It becomes clear that John does not intend to express anti-Semitism when we note that he thinks it is still good to be a child of Abraham, another common way of referring to Jews in the first century.

A final distinctive characteristic of John is the space allotted resurrection stories. John has several resurrection stories that are well known. They include the "doubting Thomas" story and the narrative in which Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him. The resurrection stories contribute to the exalted view of Christ to which this Gospel gives expression. For him, this risen Christ is one with God and the one through whom God made all things.

The four New Testament Gospels, then, give us four distinctive understandings of Jesus. Yet they all share the belief that his life gives the world the clearest understanding of God and that attachment to him is the way to relationship with God.

Key terms

Beatitudes, Beloved Disciple, Benedictus Elizabeth, Exorcism, Fulfillment quotations, Gentiles, Good Samaritan, Herod the Great, John the Baptist, Joseph, Kingdom of heaven, Lord's Prayer (Our Father), Magi, Magnificat, Mary, Messianic Secret, Nativity, narrative, Nicodemus, The passion, Pilate, Preexistence, Resurrection appearances, Sermon on the Mount, Son of God, Son of Man (of a human), Transfiguration, The Twelve, The Word, Zechariah

Study questions

- 12.1 Why do the four Gospels give different understandings of Jesus?
- 12.2 What does Mark mean when he has Jesus say that the kingdom of God is "near"?
- 12.3 How did a message of a coming kingdom sound in Roman-dominated Palestine?
- 12.4 Why do some scholars think Mark presents the twelve disciples as such failures?
- 12.5 Why are the genealogies of Matthew and Luke so different?
- 12.6 What are the main things Matthew wants readers to think about Jesus from reading the Sermon on the Mount?
- 12.7 What do Matthew's fulfillment quotations say about the way he reads the Hebrew Bible? Are there parallels among other groups within Judaism?
- 12.8 What does the Magnificat show about Luke's understanding of what the mission of Jesus is about?
- 12.9 Name some stories and sayings of Jesus that point to Luke's concern for the outcasts and the poor. How do these stories make these points?
- 12.10 Compare the ways Matthew and Luke talk about Jesus "fulfilling" Scripture.
- 12.11 What are some of the ways the Gospel of John has Jesus identify himself with God?
- 12.12 Compare the way Jesus teaches in John with the way he teaches in the Synoptics.
- 12.13 Discuss John's use of the expression "the Jews."

Chapter 13 - The Story Continues: The Acts of the Apostles

Summary

The book of Acts tells the story of the beginning of the church in Jerusalem and its spread west to Rome. It is a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke; it is written by the same author and he explicitly connected it to the Gospel. Luke's account of these events is more interested in developing a proper theological interpretation than in providing precisely correct history. His accounts of the speeches and sermons may build on what some who heard them remembered, but they also serve as ways for him to explicate his own theological outlook.

After a few words about appearances of Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection, Luke has the disciples choose a replacement for Judas so that their number is again twelve (and thus symbolically represents the reconstituted tribes of Israel). Luke has the church begin in miraculous fashion on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost. God's Spirit descends on a group of Jesus' followers so that they begin to speak in languages they had never studied. After a crowd gathers, Peter takes charge and interprets these happenings as eschatological events that come through the agency of Jesus. He tells them that the church is now the place of the special presence of God in the world. Acts says that 3,000 accept this message and become members of the church.

The rest of the first half of Acts tells of the spread of the church throughout the area surrounding Jerusalem, to Samaria, and the rest of Palestine. During this time all members of the church are Jewish and remain observant Jews. It is only after the story of the conversion of Cornelius, in which there is a special sign from God that he is to be accepted into the church, that Gentiles become members of the church. To this point in the story, the leading (human) character in Acts has been Peter, the person known as the apostle to the Jews. Peter is the one who baptizes and admits Cornelius into the church. After the Cornelius episode, the focus of the book changes. Luke now tells of the way the church spread throughout the rest of the Mediterranean world and became a predominantly Gentile movement through the mission work of Paul. Paul, the apostle to Gentiles, is the leading character in the second half of Acts. After starting churches in Turkey and Greece, Paul makes a trip to Jerusalem to deliver relief funds from his churches in the wake of a famine in Palestine. The trip does not go as planned. He is arrested in Jerusalem. The Roman authorities take him into custody and he remains imprisoned in Palestine for two years. The book ends with the story of his voyage (which includes a ship wreck) to Rome where he remains under house arrest for two more years. Luke ends his account without telling his readers what the outcome of Paul's trial was. Luke may end his story here because Paul was found guilty and executed. Luke has been careful to have Roman judges always find Christians not guilty. He would not want to change that here. But beyond this concern, he has reached his narrative goal. He began the book by having Jesus tell the disciples to take the message about him throughout the whole world. Reaching the capital of the empire may well have seemed to accomplish this commission.

Key terms

Barnabas, Cornelius, Jerusalem Conference, "Last days," Nero, Paul, Pentecost, Peter, Proselyte, Saul, Stephen

Study questions

- 13.1 How does Luke understand the events on the day of Pentecost that mark the beginning of the church?
- 13.2 Why is the story about Cornelius so important in Acts? How do various elements of the way it is told support the point it wants to make?
- 13.3 Why does Luke in Acts have believers in Christ go on trial before so many Roman judges?
- 13.4 What does it mean to Luke to say that the church is an institution of the “last days”? Why is this important to him?
- 13.5 Why does Luke, writing near the end of the first century, give so much attention to validating the spread of the church to Gentiles?
- 13.6 Why is it important for Luke to have Paul reach Rome and why does Luke stop the story before we know the outcome of Paul’s trial? What does this tell us about Luke’s purposes in writing Acts and about the literary and historical nature of Acts?

Chapter 14 - The Pauline Letters: Apostolic Advice to Early Churches

Summary

All of the writings we have from Paul are letters. As with all the other types of writing we have encountered in the Bible, we must think about what this means for how we read them and how believers appropriate them. Letters are a type of writing intended to address particular people and circumstances. We can think of our reading of them as overhearing half of a conversation. In a real sense, we are reading someone else’s mail. Paul did not know his letters would be collected and read hundreds of years later. He wrote them to address the problems and questions of very particular churches at specific times.

1 Thessalonians - Paul wrote the earliest of his letters, 1 Thessalonians, in about the year 50. This letter addresses two basic issues: the meaning of persecution and whether those who have died will participate in the afterlife. Paul argues that persecution is not an indication that God has abandoned people; rather, it is evidence that they truly are among the people of God because persecution is the result of the forces of evil opposing God’s will. In response to the second question, Paul asserts that believers who die before the end will participate fully in all God has in store for the faithful.

1 Corinthians - Paul composed 1 Corinthians around 53-54 in response to both a letter from them and a verbal report about the situation from those who brought him the letter. The most foundational topic of 1 Corinthians is spirituality. Many people in the Corinthian church thought that being spiritual meant that a person would have a powerful personality and be an impressive person; they would be persuasive speakers or have extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit (such as speaking in tongues) or maybe both. Paul rejects this vision of spirituality and argues that the spirituality appropriate in the church is one modeled on the self-giving of Christ. Thus, true spirituality is seen when people put the good of others before their own good.

In the second part of the letter, beginning in chapter 5, Paul addresses a series of specific problems that came to his attention either from the letter they sent him or from the oral report he received from others in that church. He deals with questions that involve sexual

ethics and marriage, business practices, and conduct in worship. For many of these issues he returns to his teaching about the self-giving death of Jesus and how it sets the pattern for how believers should behave in community. The final major issue he takes up involves the nature of the afterlife. Here he argues that human existence in the hereafter will be bodily existence rather than living as a disembodied soul.

2 Corinthians - Even though 2 Corinthians is composed of multiple letters, all of them were written within the years 55-57. The singular theme of the whole book and all its letters is the nature of leadership, and particularly apostleship, within the church.

Preachers have come to Corinth claiming to be apostles. Their proof of this status is their powerful deeds, impressive demeanor, and commanding presence—and these in addition to letters of recommendation of other churches. These teachers assert that because they have these signs of being apostles, the Corinthians must defer to them religious and socially and must pay them handsomely. Since there were some wealthy members of the Corinthian church, this was possible. Further, these teachers argue that since Paul does not have these signs, he is not truly an apostle. Therefore, the Corinthians should reject his advice and dissociate themselves from him.

In response to this situation, Paul defends and interprets his conduct among the Corinthians and throughout the whole of his ministry. Echoing themes sounded in 1 Corinthians, Paul argues that coercion is not a sign of spiritual leadership. Neither, he says, is demanding deference or having power. Rather, true leadership is seen in being willing to suffer for those you lead. This type of leadership is consistent with the model of leadership seen in Christ's self-giving. Thus Paul's hardships and difficulties are an imitation of Christ and so evidence that he truly is an apostle because his suffering has benefitted others. Paul argues that instead of making a person impressive, the Spirit enables a leader to maintain his or her faith while suffering and being effective in having others accept the message.

Galatians - Galatians addresses the question of whether Gentiles who join the church, and in doing so begin to worship only the God of Israel, must begin to observe all of the Jewish Law just as Jews do. Most see this as the question of whether Gentiles must convert fully to Judaism in order to be members of the church. Written in 54-56, the harsh tone of this letter reflects Paul's frustration after dealing with this issue for twenty years.

In the face of people who argue that Gentile church members need to be circumcised, Paul argues that they must not allow this. Not only does circumcision commit these Gentiles to live by the whole Torah (which they did not seem to recognize), but accepting it suggests that God saves only Jews because all church members must be circumcised. Paul argues that baptism makes a person fully one of God's people and that the coming of the Spirit on Gentile believers is proof of this. Further, he argues that Abraham is already the ancestor of Gentiles because he was chosen by God before he was circumcised. Since he later underwent the procedure, Abraham can be the ancestor of both Jews and Gentiles. Paul's vehemence becomes so fierce that he asserts that any Gentile who allows himself to be circumcised has deserted Christ.

Paul seems to see the universal applicability of his message to be threatened by those who want Gentiles to be circumcised. He believes his message makes all people (regardless of sex, social class, or race) one before God so that however deep the differences are among them, nothing is as fundamental as their identity as God's people

in Christ. For Paul, all people are made right with God through Christ and nothing can supplement that saving act.

Philippians - Since we are not certain where Paul was in prison when he wrote *Philippians*, we cannot be sure of its date. It may have been written as early as 53 or as late as 62. It seems more likely that it was written between 56 and 62. This letter is more supportive and less combative than *Galatians* or the letters to *Corinth*; there are no opponents to defeat, just problems within the church. The *Philippians* have been regular supporters of Paul's ministry and he thanks them for their gifts. He urges them to be joyful because of all God has given them. Yet there is a problem.

Paul does not address the problem explicitly until chapter 4, where he appeals to two church leaders, Euodia and Syntyche, to stop arguing and to get along. This practical purpose of the letter explains why Paul spends so much time talking about humility and putting the interests of others ahead of one's own interests. Those are the characteristics of leaders Paul says are most fitting for church leaders, people who should model their leadership on the life of Jesus.

Two things that are important for understanding the early church are clear from *Philippians*. First, the two leaders Paul addresses are women. This demonstrates indisputably that women served as leaders in Paul's churches. The second important thing about the church that *Philippians* makes clear is that it did not take long for believers to begin to speak of Jesus as exalted by God to the highest possible position and that he existed before coming into the world. Though some scholarly accounts of the early church assert that such ideas about Jesus took several decades to emerge, the hymnic material in *Philippians* demonstrates that some in the church held these views within 15-20 years of the death of Jesus.

Philemon - This shortest of Paul's letters deals with the relationship between a slave (Onesimus) who has become a member of the church and his owner (Philemon) who is already a church member. The slave seems to have committed an offense for which he could be punished. Paul asks for leniency, but it remains unclear whether he also asks Philemon to free Onesimus. Even if Paul does not ask for Onesimus's freedom, he calls on Philemon to significantly reorient his thought about the slave, because he is now "a brother," not just a slave.

Romans - *Romans* is the only letter that is certainly from the hand of Paul which he wrote to a church he did not found and had not visited. Written in the year 57, Paul is about to make his last trip to Jerusalem where he will be arrested and after more than two years awaiting trial, taken as a prisoner to Rome. On this trip to Jerusalem, Paul is taking a collection from his predominantly Gentile churches to the churches in Judea because they are in financial distress.

Paul has multiple purposes in mind when he writes this letter. He wants to claim the church at Rome as one of his own so that the collection he takes to Jerusalem can represent a gift from all Gentiles in the church. To do this he must introduce himself and clarify what they have heard about his teaching. At the same time, this introduction is also intended to gain their support for his further mission work. After Jerusalem, he plans to visit Rome and go from there to a new mission area, Spain. Of course, since he is arrested in Jerusalem and probably never get out of prison, he does not make this trip to Spain. He does, of course, end up in Rome but as a prisoner. Paul's third purpose in writing this letter is to address some disputes between Jewish and Gentile believers in

Rome.

Paul's attempt to accomplish all these purposes leads him to give an explication of his teaching that he thinks will convince the Roman church to accept all he is asking of them. He begins by presenting a lengthy argument to demonstrate that all people are guilty before God. He then argues that God does not condemn all because the death of Christ intervenes, providing a not guilty verdict for believers in Christ. After using this judicial metaphor through the first 4 chapters, Paul switches to a relational metaphor to talk about the meaning of Christ's death as a means of salvation. Here he says that humans had made themselves God's enemies, but God draws them back through the death of Christ. His third image pictures humans as beings who are captured by evil and cannot escape. Here Christ rescues believers from the clutches of evil and frees them to be the people of God and to live as the people of God because they are empowered by God's Spirit.

After giving these differing ways to think about the meaning of the death of Jesus, Paul turns to the question of the place of Israel now that the church has come into existence. This is an important question because the trustworthiness of God is at stake; if God revokes the covenant with Israel, then God cannot be trusted not to do the same thing to believers in Christ. But Paul remains puzzled because he is convinced of two things that seem irreconcilable: 1) God must be faithful to Israel and 2) all salvation is in Christ. After discussing the matter for two long chapters, he concludes with a doxology (a poetic praising of God) that acknowledges that God's wisdom in this matter is beyond his understanding. Thus, he retains these two beliefs without understanding just how they make sense together.

Three of the last four chapters of Romans deal with Christian morality. Paul asserts that believers should understand their lives to be completely dedicated to God, just as sacrifices at the temple are dedicated to God. After some more general explanation of what a life dedicated to God should look like, Paul turns to address issues that are causing problems between the Jewish and Gentile members of the church in Rome. He urges each side to recognize the faithful expressed in the way the other lives for God. He does not tell them to all do the same thing, only to know that the conscience of the other is different and that this difference is acceptable to God.

Key terms

Circumcision, Communion, Ecstatic experience, Edict of Claudius, Election, Eucharist, Euodia, Justification, Letters, Literary epistle, Lord's Supper, Onesimus, Parousia, Persecution, Philemon, Reconciliation, Redemption, Speaking in tongues, Syntyche

Study questions

- 14.1 What are some of the reasons it is difficult to understand clearly the message of an ancient letter?
- 14.2 How does recognizing that some writings within the New Testament are letters influence how you think about the advice they give?
- 14.3 Why does one Pauline letter give advice that seems to contradict what he says in another letter?
- 14.4 Why did it create problems when people in Paul's churches stopped worshipping

gods other than the God of Israel?

14.5 How does Paul interpret persecution for the Thessalonians?

14.6 What kind of definition of spirituality does Paul give the Corinthians?

14.7 How does Paul describe the afterlife for believers in 1 Corinthians?

14.8 How can you tell that 1 Corinthians was not as convincing to its recipients as Paul had hoped?

14.9 Describe the problem that Galatians addresses. What is Paul's basic response?

14.10 What does Philippians demonstrate about the place of women in the earliest Pauline churches?

14.11 What does Philippians show about how long it took for the church to begin to make rather exalted claims about Christ?

14.12 What combination of purposes leads Paul to write Romans?

14.13 What does Paul think the justice of God demands as a response to people doing evil?

14.14 What does Paul say about the election of Israel in the time after Christ?

Chapter 15 - The Disputed Pauline Letters: Continuing Advice in Paul's Name

Summary

Most scholars think that some of the letters in the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul were actually written after his death. In the ancient world, it was not so unusual for associates or disciples to write in the name of their mentor after his death. Such writings intended to honor and extend the influence of the cherished teacher. Some early Christians adopted this method and wrote in the name of Paul. Scholars argue that these letters are not from the hand of Paul because their style and theology are somewhat different from his. Furthermore, they sometimes seem to reflect problems that developed only after Paul's time.

2 Thessalonians - A slight majority of New Testament scholars think Paul did not write 2 Thessalonians. This letter urges its readers to reject a teaching known today as over-realized eschatology. This title applies to a view that claims to possess more of the blessings God will give believers at the end of all things than the writer thinks people can have while still in this world. That is, these people claim a measure of the Spirit and release from the problems that plague others because they say they are living in God's kingdom more fully than other believers. In addition to making these claims about their experience of God, those 2 Thessalonians opposes also assert that the church should recognize them as its leaders and support them financially.

The writer of 2 Thessalonians assures his readers that the Second Coming of Christ will be a cosmic event, not an individual spiritual experience. Thus, these teachers are wrong about their claims. Furthermore, the writer reminds the readers that the tradition tells them that certain things must take place before the End comes, and they know those things have not taken place. Finally, he tells them not to give these teachers money. Rather, the teachers must return to their former occupations and stop disturbing the community by trying to insert themselves into leadership positions. Throughout 2 Thessalonians, the author encourages the recipients to hold onto the teaching they had received from Paul.

Colossians - Again, a slight majority of New Testament scholars think Colossians was

written after Paul's death. This letter opposes a teaching that says that unless a person has certain visionary experiences they have not been forgiven of their sins and so do not have the proper relationship with God and remain outside the people of God. Colossians positions Paul as the most trustworthy teacher and then asserts that believers do not need these mystical experiences to be right with God; rather, identification with Christ through baptism assures them of their place with God and of their forgiveness from God. While this author rejects the idea that mystical experiences are required, he argues that proper ethical behavior is a necessary part of being one of the people of God.

Ephesians - Ephesians was probably written some time after Colossians because it seems to build on the language and thought of Colossians. Ephesians is a much more general letter than any other in the collection of Pauline letters. It does not address specific issues or problems in the ways other Pauline letters do. It is a more general appeal to unity, specifically unity between the Jewish and Gentile sectors of the whole church, not just in a particular city or region. He argues that the unity created by faith in Christ is deeper than any differences of social status or ethnic identity.

Pastoral Epistles - An overwhelming majority of scholars argue that Paul did not write 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. They seem to come from a later era than the genuine letters. While these three short letters share a number of similarities, they each seem to address a somewhat different situation. 1 Timothy addresses the question of how Gentile believers should use the Hebrew Bible. Paul had engaged this question throughout his career, and this letter shows that it is still an issue. The author of 1 Timothy, like Paul, acknowledges the goodness of the Law, but tells Gentile church members that they are not to adopt those practices that would identify them as Jews.

The letter of 2 Timothy opposes some form of over-realized eschatology. It remains unclear whether they simply claim to possess some extraordinary experience or if they also deny an afterlife to believers. This author uses examples as a primary means of convincing the readers to adopt his view. He highlights the example of Paul and urges the recipients to imitate the way Paul lived and what he believed. If they do this, he believes they will reject the (in his view) errant eschatology.

The letter to Titus returns readers to the issue of whether Gentile church members must obey some central parts of the purity regulations of Judaism. Like the other Pauline letters, Titus tells Gentiles not to adopt these regulations. Like the other Pastoral Epistles, Titus sees a tightening structure of church organization as a way to keep wrong teaching out of the church. Thus, he gives instructions about who should hold such positions and how the church should listen to those chosen leaders.

Key terms

Angelic worship, Baptism, Body of Christ, Cultic purity, Day of the Lord, Deutero-Paulines, Eschatology, Man of lawlessness, Pastoral Epistles, Pseudonymity, Second coming, The "widows"

Study questions

15.1 What did it mean when the people 2 Thessalonians opposes said, "The Day of the Lord is here"?

15.2 When is it most likely that the "man of lawlessness" lived? What makes you think so?

- 15.3 What meanings does Colossians draw out of the ritual of baptism?
- 15.4 How does Colossians say one's spiritual life comes to expression?
- 15.5 What is the basic topic of Ephesians? What do the tone and perspective of this discussion tell you about the date of the book?
- 15.6 How did the position of the "widows" influence what 1 Timothy says about women in roles of leadership?
- 15.7 How does 2 Timothy use examples of good people and bad people?
- 15.8 Why does 2 Timothy think various members of society should conform to cultural expectations?

Chapter 16 - Hebrews and the General Epistles: Messages for Broader Audiences

Summary

The Catholic or General Epistles address a larger audience than the other letters we have seen. Their writers wanted to speak to a large segment of the church when they wrote. These letters claim to be written by apostolic leaders, but they are written after the deaths of all the apostles.

Hebrews - Though Hebrews is not one of the Catholic Epistles, this seems the best place to discuss it. Hebrews is anonymous, but has often been wrongly attributed to Paul. This work is more like a theological article or a sermon than a letter. This book gives Christ an exalted position and makes him the mediator of all salvation. A major way it attributes this position to Christ is by comparing the good things a person receives by being in the Mosaic covenant with what one gets from being in the church. Of course, the writer always argues that it is better to be in the church than within Judaism. He makes this argument, it seems, because some people in the church are thinking about joining or re-joining the synagogue. The writer wants to make that as unattractive as possible. Even so, his comparisons show that he thinks there are great blessings associated with membership in the Mosaic covenant.

James - James, which claims to be written by Jesus' brother, is a collection of ethical exhortations. Some of these instructions are broad; others are very specific. The author is particularly concerned that people in these churches treat the poor as well as they treat the wealthy. James is best-known for the statement, "faith without works is dead" (2:17). This assertion probably intends to counter a misunderstanding of some of Paul's teaching. While Paul argued that Gentiles do not keep all of the Torah commands to be saved, some people were saying that Paul meant that believers did not have to live by any rules of conduct. James rejects this view, as Paul would have. Most emphatically, James says that ethical living is a necessary part of being a member of the church.

1 Peter - The author of 1 Peter, who claims to be the apostle Peter, describes the life of believers as the life of exiles, people who are not in their native land. He thinks the values and beliefs of the church as so different from those of the people around them, that it makes those in the church feel like foreigners. Throughout this writing, the author sets out stark differences between those in the church and the rest of the world. The churches this letter addresses are also experiencing some form of persecution; it probably comes mostly in the form of social rejection and economic isolation—people refuse to associate with them and won't do business with them.

The writer encourages his readers to remain in the church in spite of the problems they

are encountering. He interprets their suffering as a sign that they are truly God's people and since the world is controlled by the forces of evil, it will try to harm them. But believers must remain faithful because God gives them rich blessings, even if many of them are received after life in this world.

2 Peter - The letter of 2 Peter is written as something of a farewell address from Peter, even though it was probably composed 50 years after Peter's death. This is one of the latest writings in the New Testament. The letter's main point is to assure readers that the Second Coming of Christ will happen. After nearly 100 years of waiting, some Christians had begun to doubt that it would ever happen. This letter warns of dire consequences of losing belief in that event. He argues that losing belief in it will lead people to be immoral and bring on God's condemnation.

To help them retain their belief in a Second Coming he reframes the time they have been waiting by arguing that according to God's standards 100 years is not very long. He also echoes what other New Testament writers do in the face of questions about why there has been such a long delay; he says that the timing is not important, only the certainty that it will happen.

Jude - The author of Jude claims to be the brother of the apostle James. He writes to all Christians, urging them to be faithful to God's Law. He seems to write from the perspective of those Jewish members of the church who remained Torah observant. He accuses those who do not remain faithful of gross immorality and warns them of God's coming judgment. This writer represents a very different perspective than what we see in Paul. While Paul tells his Gentile believers that they must not adopt some elements of Torah observance (for example, keeping the Sabbath), Jude tells his Jewish Christians that they must keep the Torah. Paul probably thought it was good for Jews to remain observant under most circumstances, but Jude is far more strident. Having both Jude and the letters of Paul in the New Testament shows us the kind of diversity that existed within the early church.

1 John - The book of 1 John comes from the same community that finished the Gospel of John. It is not really a letter, but more like an essay. This work is written in the wake of a split in the author's church. Some have broken off to form a separate group, probably because they accepted the teaching of docetism (the belief that Jesus did not really have a physical body). The author of 1 John not only tells its readers to reject docetism, he also accuses the other side of lacking love for God and their fellow-Christians. At the same time, he emphasizes the importance of having love for one another as an indication that a person is one of God's people. Perhaps this instruction was particularly important in the context of a fierce debate. Overall, John tells his readers they need to believe the right thing about Jesus and live an ethical life—and he believes these two things are related.

2 John - John "the elder" writes this short letter to emphasize two things: rejecting docetism and loving fellow-Christians. While he tells them how important it is to love one another, he also tells them not to allow anyone who teaches docetism to use their homes as a base from which to spread that teaching.

3 John - The same John "the elder" writes 3 John. This shortest writing in the New Testament gives us a glimpse of how disputes within the church looked. The Elder is writing because leaders of a different congregation have refused hospitality to some messengers he had sent. Basically, those leaders treated John's messengers the way 2 John told people to treat docetists. John commends the person who is delivering his letter

and gives his support to another church leader in the city to which he is writing.

Key terms

Dispersion, Docetism, “The elder,” Exhortation, Gnostics, Sacrifice, Second coming,

Study questions

16.1 Discuss the literary form of the book of Hebrews.

16.2 Why does Hebrews evaluate the Mosaic covenant as it does?

16.3 Compare what James means by the word faith with what Paul means when he uses the term.

16.4 How does 1 Peter envision the way that members of the church relate to the world around them?

16.5 How does 2 Peter try to help readers believe in a second coming of Christ?

16.6 How is the perspective of Jude different from the Pauline letters?

16.7 What arguments does 1 John provide to lead his readers to reject Docetism?

Chapter 17 - Revelation: John’s Apocalyptic Vision

Summary

Revelation is the only New Testament book written in the genre of apocalyptic. All the other New Testament writings share the outlook of Revelation and some have passages written in this style (for example, Mark 13), but only this book is written entirely in this style. Such writings have a heavenly messenger reveal until now unknown things about the world and how God will act to set things right. Apocalyptic writings emerge in crisis situations, when communities think evil has gotten so bad that God must act soon to reclaim the world from those evil powers. Because the power of evil seems so insurmountable, apocalyptic literature uses exceedingly dramatic imagery to describe the destruction of evil and the reward for faithfulness. The basic purpose of apocalyptic literature is to assure those suffering that God truly is more powerful than evil and that God will not let their suffering be the last word. This literature defends belief in a God who is just, powerful, and loving in the middle of conditions that show that the world is unjust and cruel. This literature says that God hates what is going on as much as you do. Furthermore, God will act to punish wickedness and injustice and to reward those who are faithful to God’s will. Thus, suffering experienced because you are good will be worth it.

The author of Revelation is a Jewish Christian teacher known to the churches in western Turkey whose name is John. It was probably written in the decades of the 60s or 70s in the first century. John wants to convince his readers to remain distinct from the world around them, even though that means they will suffer persecution. He tells them to avoid compromises that might make their lives easier because they would also participate in the evil around them and so come under God’s judgment. He also wants to assure them that Christ will return as the agent of God’s judgment. At the same time, he needs to offer some interpretation of God’s delay in coming.

The primary manifestation of evil in Revelation is the Roman Empire. John sees evil working through it to entice others to do evil and to punish those who refuse. Its images of beasts and powers who abuse God’s people and lead others to do evil all represent

Rome. John's writing cannot predict things about the world 2,000 years later because he thinks the end is coming soon. His characters and images do not represent people of the 21st century; he wanted his initial readers to see people and institutions they know in those images. If John's message for his readers is that they should remain faithful because God will act soon so they do not have to suffer much longer, everything he refers to must refer to things of the first century. It would bring no comfort to his readers who are suffering if he tells them not to worry about it and to hold on because God is going to act to defeat that evil that inflicts pain on them—they just need to hold on for about 2,000 years! That message would not have been helpful for those readers who want God to act soon.

At the same time, John must deal with the question of why God has not already acted. Why this delay? John approaches this matter in various ways. One is that he makes the delay a manifestation of God's patience and love. John says that the bad consequences that follow from evil deeds should show people they need to repent.

Unfortunately, he does not think many will take advantage of this chance or even understand it as a sign of God's judgment.

Another way John deals with the delay of Christ's return is by the way he structures his narratives. In places where it seems the end is almost to come, John will say there is silence in heaven for a while or that there is an unexplained delay. So while he says the end will come soon, he also inserts these unexpected delays that mirror the experience of his readers. They think the end is about to come, but then it doesn't. John's narrative factors in that delay.

But John does not want to predict a future that is hundreds or thousands of years away, and he is not writing a chronological map readers can follow to predict when the end will come. Instead, his narrative runs in cycles. His seven seals and seven trumpets follow the same pattern of action, delay, and change of scenery. Furthermore, if the book were a chronological account, it would end at chapter 11 because that chapter tells of the end and God's day of judgment. But rather than ending, John just picks up in chapter 12 with another way of talking about the evil in the world and how God will eventually deal with it. Then there is a second climax and account of the judgment at the end of the book. There is a progression to much of the narrative, but John did not write this book to give clues that readers who were clever enough could use to know just when the end was coming.

John's real purpose is to encourage people enduring problems because of their faith. He assures them that God is just and loving, so they can trust God to repay them for their faithfulness. At the same time, God will act to punish those who are wicked and have abused God's people. His images do not need or intend to give a specific date. He does want to depict the faithfulness of God and assure his readers that they are on the right side. No matter how difficult things become, they can be certain of this: in the end, God wins.

Key terms

Anti-Christ, Apocalyptic, City of Seven Hills, Cognitive dissonance, Domitian, Ex eventu prophecy, Numerology, Patmos, Pseudepigrapha, Relative deprivation, Slaughtered lamb, Theodicy, Twenty-four elders

Study questions

- 17.1 What is the basic purpose of apocalyptic literature?
- 17.2 Why do apocalyptic writings use ex eventu prophecy?
- 17.3 Why does apocalyptic use such strange and extravagant imagery? How hard do the writers think this will be for their intended readers to understand?
- 17.4 What kind of persecution did most of the original readers of Revelation probably face?
- 17.5 What does the series of sevens (seals, trumpets, bowls) tell you about the way the narrative of Revelation works?
- 17.6 What characteristics of God does Revelation bring to expression in judgment? Why does the author welcome the exercise of those characteristics?
- 17.7 What are the functions of the image of Jesus as the slaughtered lamb in Revelation 5?
- 17.8 Why does John use such veiled images to deliver his message in Revelation?
- 17.9 What is the central message of Revelation?