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# Inter-textual Discrepancies in the New Testament and Their Implications for Historians of the First Century

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## DIGEST

The New Testament is especially conducive to inter-textual analysis. Many of its important components (Pauline Epistles, Gospels, etc.) emerged within fifty years of one another. At the same time, they yield differing, even contradictory, accounts of the same events. All four Gospels, for example, as well as Paul, make conflicting claims about the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Similarly, while the Acts of the Apostles portrays Paul's mission to Jews and Gentiles, a firsthand account of Paul's ministry is also available in his genuine epistles – and the two portrayals sharply contrast with one another up and down the line.

Rendering these disparities all the more glaring are the known relationships among a number of the books in the New Testament. Thus, there is virtual agreement among scholars that Matthew and Luke knew and extensively drew upon Mark. Additionally, the three Synoptists (Mark, Matthew, Luke) could have had knowledge of, or even depended upon or reacted to, Paul's epistles (if not to the texts themselves then at least to awareness of them or knowledge about them). Most scholars posit a Q document shared by Matthew and Luke; others insist that the author of Luke knew of, and used, the Gospel of Matthew. With so many interrelationships possible, the disagreements among these writings become all the more remarkable.

This thesis will explore the degree to which critical comparisons among these writings could yield important clues about the historical Jesus, the historical Paul, and the history of the early church. Aside from a close reading of primary texts and the researching of the relevant secondary scholarship, this thesis requires exercise of critical reasoning and deductive logic to weigh and explain the kind of anomalies to be

noted. New Testament texts are combed to identify contradictions, lacunae, gaps, etc. These assembled examples are then classified according to types or categories of relative importance. Selected problems are then explored in depth and their possible implications for historians, and for the modern day, probed and, where feasible, explicated.

Beyond analyzing the scholarship in this field, this work will emphasize those insights that could benefit Jewish-Christian relations and dialogue. For example, were comparison of Paul with the Synoptics to suggest that the Gospel writers exaggerated the Jews' role in executing Jesus, or that the betrayal of Jesus by Judas (allegorically, the "Jews") is a post-Pauline fabrication, modern Christians themselves could be induced to reframe the age-old anti-Jewish slant of traditions of Jesus' Passion. Or were such comparisons to suggest that the identification of the Last Supper with a Passover meal is a post-70 association, this could materially impact the way modern church groups perform and apply their Maundy Thursday "Seders."

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While the following study reflects a year's worth of my own hard work, I am indebted to many others for their assistance and inspiration in helping bring this project to fruition. First, I would like to thank all of my teachers in the department of Religion at Duke University, and specifically, Frank Crouch and Dale Martin. Dr. Crouch first introduced me to critical study of the New Testament; Dr. Martin sparked my interest in the scholarly quests to reconstruct the historical Jesus. Both started me on an intellectual path that has ultimately led to this thesis, and hopefully well beyond.

I am also grateful for the skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm for learning instilled in me by the faculty of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. In particular, I must thank David Aaron, Jonathan Cohen, Nili Fox, Richard Sarason, and Mark Washofsky. Each has helped to improve my facility with biblical and Rabbinic texts and thereby to illuminate the ancient world. Dr. Aaron especially has impacted my approach to ancient texts, and helped me to develop the kinds of reading strategies and methodological thinking evident in this project.

One paragraph hardly suffices to express my appreciation for my thesis adviser, and mentor, Dr. Michael Cook. His guidance and support were invaluable to the completion of this study: he pointed me to sources when I was lost; provided ideas when I was stymied; and offered encouragement when I was unsure. He also improved the clarity and effectiveness of my writing through tireless proofreading and editing. It has been a joy to work with him, and his efforts have made the writing of this thesis the best possible learning experience.

# CHAPTER 1

## OVERVIEW OF PREDOMINANTLY ACCEPTED CONCLUSIONS IN NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

### Interrelationships amongst Documents in the New Testament

While the term "Synoptic Problem" only came into scholarly parlance in the 19th century, students of the New Testament had long before considered the possibility that Gospel writers may have been familiar with one another's work. As far back as the 4th century CE, St. Augustine suggested that the order of the Gospels within the canon reflects their relationships of dependence as well. Thus, Matthew was the first Gospel to be written, and each successive Gospel drew upon its predecessor(s): Mark upon Matthew, Luke upon both Mark and Matthew, and John upon all three. Many years later, J.J. Griesbach similarly proposed Matthew as the original Gospel, though he contended that Luke was the first to draw upon Matthew, while Mark was a later distillation of the two.[1] And yet, while advocates for the priority of Matthew do still exist, the consensus among contemporary scholars is that Mark was the first written Gospel, and that Matthew and Luke[2] knew, and drew extensively, upon it. In fact, the priority of Mark has become accepted as so fundamental that some scholars have gone so far as to call it "a cornerstone of the modern

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[1]Raymond E. Brown. *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 113.

[2]The latter of whom, by most accounts, penned the Book of Acts, as well.

scholarship of the gospels."[3] The popularity of this position as the means for resolving the Synoptic Problem is best explained by the fact that, as Raymond Brown notes, "it solves more problems than any other theory."[4] In accordance with scholarly consensus, this thesis accepts the assumption that Mark was the first written Gospel, and served as a source for both Matthew and Luke.

But proposing Mark as a source for Matthew and Luke is not without its pitfalls. After all, there are numerous pericopes in which Matthew and Luke agree, often verbatim, against Mark. If Mark were the only common source for Matthew and Luke, then these instances of close correspondence require explanation. Accordingly, any proponent of Marcan priority must also account for what is called the "Double Tradition"– that is, those passages in which Matthew and Luke agree against Mark. The most obvious explanation for the Double Tradition is that either Matthew or Luke knew of, and drew upon, the other. To be sure, there are a number of contemporary scholars, especially among those still maintaining the Griesbach hypothesis, who argue that Luke did indeed draw upon Matthew. Yet this theory is fraught with major problems. If, for example, Luke knew Matthew, why is Luke's placement of the material in the Double Tradition sometimes so different from that in Matthew (especially considering that Luke followed Mark's order so meticulously)? Why did Luke utilize a birth narrative that is essentially irreconcilable with that of his predecessor, Matthew? Why did he report an entirely different fate

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[3]Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover. *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* p. 12.

[4]Brown, *Introduction*, p. 115.

for Judas in Acts 1:18-19 than Matthew 27:3-10 had offered?[5] Why did he fail to replicate so many of the modifications that Matthew made to Mark (e.g., Matt. 12:5-7)?

These difficult questions have led most scholars to reject Lucan dependence upon Matthew. Instead, they account for the Double Tradition by postulating the existence of a sayings gospel utilized by Matthew and Luke. That document, referred to as Q[6], becomes a second primary source for Matthew and Luke in what is known as the Two-Source Hypothesis. It should be noted, however, that there is little *positive* evidence for the Q source, as essentially the case for Q may be predicated primarily on the weaknesses of the case for Lucan dependence on Matthew. After all, if Luke did not know Matthew, then a second independent source (such as Q) becomes the most reasonable explanation for the Double Tradition. True, the Gospel of Thomas indicates that a "gospel" composed primarily of sayings (as the Double Tradition tends to be) was a known form in Christianity, but such evidence may be much later than the 1st century – and even were it early enough (e.g., mid-1st century) it would merely confirm the possibility of a Q document rather than actually establish its existence.

As matters stand now, the clear majority of scholars favor the Two-Source Hypothesis, though a number of respected scholars still maintain Lucan dependence upon Matthew.[7] This study will not depend exclusively on one position or the other, because neither hypothesis offers a definitive solution given the evidence. The case for Q is strong – probably stronger than that for

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[5]Ibid., p. 114.

[6]While it is generally thought that Q was chosen to denote the German word *Quelle*, some scholars suggest that this was not the case. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 1:50.

[7]Some scholars even postulate both, such as Robert Gundry. See Meier 1:52, n. 12.

its alternative – but it is not so compelling as to confirm that a document not extant did indeed once exist. By the same token, the theory of Lucan dependence upon Matthew shows enough weaknesses that it, too, seems insufficiently compelling. The Synoptic Problem is still very much a problem, and this thesis will treat it as such.

And yet, even after one accounts for the Double Tradition, there is still further difficulty in accounting for the material that is separately native to Matthew on the one hand, and Luke on the other. One explanation for this phenomenon is that Matthew and Luke possessed their own unique source or sources, and that they drew upon this material in addition to Mark. Though none of these sources has yet been discovered, scholars are in overwhelming agreement that Matthew and Luke made use of them. Matthew is said to have drawn upon the "M" material, and Luke upon "L." These privy sources include important parables not known to Mark or to the Double Tradition, including the Good Samaritan (L), the Prodigal Son (L), the Vineyard Laborers (M), the Treasure (M), and the Pearl (M).[8] In addition to these sources, however, Matthew and Luke undoubtedly generated some of the material in their Gospels *de novo*. While the evidence is clear that Matthew and Luke made use of sources – Mark, M, and L, for certain, and probably Q – there can be no doubt that both of them, as well as Mark before them and John after, augmented their source material with additions suited to their own interests. Some of this material may have come from oral traditions native to their own community, while some probably originated with the authors themselves. This is not to say that the Gospel writers necessarily attempted to mislead readers by intentionally fabricating history. Perhaps they were devious, often or at times, but it is

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[8]Funk and Hoover, p. 14.

more probable that the Gospel writers, being faithful Christians, simply wrote their "histories" from a theological perspective. In so doing, as many ancient "historians" did, they probably included material in the Gospels which they figured must have happened in light of their beliefs about the risen Christ.

Moreover, the theological and apologetic aims of each Gospel writer probably affected his decisions about which parts of his sources to include, and about how that material should be altered or embellished. Even a quick glance at the Synoptic Gospels in parallel reveals that in some instances Matthew or Luke retains Mark where the other does not, and that Matthew and Luke often change Mark's material (a little or a lot) in accordance with their respective interests. The rise of Redaction (or Author) Criticism in the 20th century has placed great emphasis on the fact that the writers of the Gospels "creatively shaped the material they inherited."[9] Redaction Criticism comes to show that while the differences amongst the Synoptic Gospels derive to some extent from the different sources available to each evangelist, the biases of the individual authors are also responsible for such discrepancies. A willingness to accept that the Gospel writers were creative authors, in addition to transmitters of tradition, will be important in later chapters of this thesis.

The relationship amongst the Synoptic Gospels is only a part of the puzzle, however. The way in which those Gospels relate to the Gospel of John is another question entirely. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was largely assumed that John depended upon the Synoptics, but over time most scholars have come to favor Johannine independence.[10] In short, John's divergence

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[9]Brown, *Introduction*, p. 23.

[10]Meier, 1:44.

in such important features as Christology, language, order of events, and the nature of Jesus' teaching, makes it difficult to believe that John drew upon the Synoptics. This is not to deny significant similarities between them. On the contrary, John and the Synoptics share many traditions in common, sometimes showing agreement even in the minor details of an account.[11] Most scholars agree, however, that the "strange mixture and erratic pattern" of such similarities suggest that they are more likely the result of shared streams of tradition than direct dependence. After all, two putative accounts of Jesus' ministry will inevitably have some material in common, even if composed independently. In the end, while some scholars still contend that John knew one or more of the Synoptics[12], the prevailing opinion is that John's Gospel is independent.

Scholarly conclusions about the interrelationships amongst the Gospels can thus be summarized as follows: Mark was written first. Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark. Luke may have drawn upon Matthew, or both Luke and Matthew may have utilized a sayings source called Q. Additional material, oral as well as written, was likely private to Matthew and Luke, respectively. John was probably written independently from the other three. All four writers, moreover, may have had personal interests and preferences, possibly leading them even to create certain traditions *de novo*.

There is also general consensus regarding the dates of completion for the Gospels. Most scholars place Mark between 68-75, depending on whether or not Mark's failure overtly to

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[11]Brown, *Introduction*, p. 365.

[12]Some contend that a later redactor of John knew one or more of the Synoptics, while the original evangelist did not. See Brown, *Introduction*, p. 365.

mention the destruction of Jerusalem is considered to be significant. Matthew, which must post-date Mark if dependent upon it, is usually dated between 80-90. Luke(-Acts), which must also follow Mark, is thought to have been penned between 85-100. Those who suggest Lucan dependence upon Matthew to account for the Double Tradition must likewise, of course, place Luke after Matthew. John was the last of the canonical Gospels to be written, probably between 90 and 110.

Unfortunately, each of the four Gospels is anonymous, despite early church attempts to identify the authors.[13] The same is not true of many other documents in the New Testament, however. Most scholars agree that during the 50's the apostle Paul himself authored I Thessalonians, Galatians, Philemon, I and II Corinthians, Philippians, and Romans. While it is generally maintained that these genuine Pauline epistles were not known to the Gospel writers, a number of scholars argue that Mark, Matthew, or Luke may have drawn upon them – if not the texts themselves, then at least awareness of their existence and general content. This thesis will entertain the latter possibility, against the grain of contemporary scholarship.

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[13]Funk and Hoover, p. 20.

**Indices to Historicity in New Testament Documents**

What criteria do scholars commonly employ for determining the historicity of sayings and events in the New Testament accounts? The following is a list of selected[14] criteria, although scholars often disagree over the relative emphasis that should be placed upon each:

THE CRITERION OF EMBARRASSMENT determines that those sayings or events occasioning embarrassment for the early church are more likely to be historical since such material would probably not have been fabricated. For example, a sinless Jesus seeking baptism at the hands of an inferior prophet would prove a disconcerting theological problem for the transmitting church. According to this reasoning, persistence of such a tradition suggests the tradition's historicity. Similarly embarrassing episodes include Jesus' execution on a cross, his betrayal by Judas Iscariot, and his denial by Peter. Caution must be exercised in employing this criterion, however, as some presumably embarrassing episodes may, in fact, have so well-served church interests that one could argue against their genuine occurrence. Could not a tradition that Jesus had been denied by his own disciple prove comforting to those Christians who felt compelled to do the same toward Jesus on account of Roman persecutions or the delay of the *parousia*? Would Jesus' betrayal by a member of his own intimate circle not resonate with Christians themselves delivered up by their closest friends and family? The criterion of embarrassment can be of great value for

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[14]Other criteria, although not universally subscribed to, include the "Usage of Aramaic," "Palestinian Environment," "Vividness of Detail," "Developing Synoptic Tradition," and "Historical Presumption." See discussions in Meier, 1:178-183, and in "Jesus Christ," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:776-777.

reconstructing history so long as it is employed prudently, and with an awareness of the complex dynamics that faced the early church.

The CRITERION OF DISCONTINUITY (or dissimilarity) favors historicity for those words or actions of Jesus that are discontinuous with both Palestinian Judaism and early Christianity. Examples often cited include Jesus' prohibition of oaths (Matthew 5:33-37), his rejection of fasting (Mark 2:18-22 and parallels), and his prohibition of divorce (Mark 10:2-12 and parallels).[15] Just as with the previous criterion, however, one must employ the criterion of discontinuity reservedly, and with full awareness of its limitations. Morna Hooker[16] describes two of its most glaring weaknesses: first, though it probably yields a collection of sayings authentic to Jesus, such sayings may not be representative of Jesus' teaching as a whole, and may even serve to distort it. Second, it presumes a comprehensive knowledge about both the Judaism of Jesus' day and the Christianity that came after him. Despite these drawbacks, however, it seems that the criterion of discontinuity does, in the least, give the scholar a small corpus of material that is probably authentic to Jesus. How one goes about interpreting that data is an altogether different question.

The CRITERION OF COHERENCE confers greater probability for historicity on any material that is coherent with a saying or account judged historical on the basis of embarrassment

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[15]Meier, 1:171-172.

[16]Morna Hooker, "Christology and Methodology," pp. 481-482.

or discontinuity. This criterion, though not "independently cogent," can nonetheless be effective for "marshaling cumulative and convergent evidence in favor of historicity."[17] As a secondary index for historicity, however, the drawback of this approach is obvious. The addition of coherent material can serve to magnify any mistake or distortion generated by the previous criteria.[18] Accordingly, the aforementioned imperfections in those criteria now assume even greater consequence, for slight errors may be amplified into a potentially gross misrepresentation of the historical Jesus. This criterion is therefore fundamentally risky. While it does serve as a convenient means for expanding an "already established data base,"[19] its application is at times likely to distort the very picture that it seeks to enhance.

The CRITERION OF MULTIPLE or MULTIFORM ATTESTATION favors historicity for material that is found in more than one independent source, or in more than one distinct literary "form" (e.g., in both a parable and a narrative), on the grounds that such material could not have penetrated such a broad sweep of Christian literature had it been invented by the early church. Thus, most scholars accept that Jesus spoke about a "kingdom of God," for it finds mention in so many independent sources and genres. But this criterion relies upon three assumptions that are not necessarily valid. First, it presumes that scholars can isolate independent sources with a considerable degree of confidence, when, as we saw above, this is not always such an easy task.

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[17]"Jesus Christ," *Anchor Bible*, p. 776.

[18]Hooker, p. 483.

[19]Meier, 1:176.

Second, it rejects the possibility that a piece of tradition created by the church could have resonated so strongly, or been promulgated with such forcefulness, that a number of communities and strands of tradition incorporated it. Third, it may eliminate from consideration what may be a genuinely historical Jesus tradition on the grounds that it achieved too infrequent attestation. E.g., the Parable of the Good Samaritan, while found only in Luke, is deemed by many genuinely to derive from Jesus.[20]

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[20]This includes even the otherwise ultra-skeptical Jesus Seminar. See Funk and Hoover, pp. 323-324, 549.

## CHAPTER 2

## CATEGORIZING DISCREPANCIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

One need not possess the erudition of a scholar to recognize that multiple discrepancies manifest themselves amongst the various New Testament writings. Even the most cursory reading of these documents reveals numerous contradictions and gaps in testimony. One well-known subject spawning prolific scholarly and religious debate, especially each December, is the litany of inconsistencies in the birth accounts offered us by Matthew and Luke, differences which W. Barnes Tatum succinctly designates "many and obvious."[1] Thus, only Matthew tells of the *magi*, the star, and the massacre ordered by Herod; only Luke relates the birth story of John the Baptist and presents the shepherds, the census, and an event of Jesus' youth in Jerusalem. So, too, do the itineraries for Joseph and Mary in these stories disagree up and down the line. Matthew notes a flight from Bethlehem to Egypt, and in the end to Nazareth, while Luke describes a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, then to Jerusalem, and back to Nazareth once more. Despite the many pious attempts to harmonize them,[2] the birth accounts of Matthew and Luke are fundamentally incompatible.

And yet, the problem with the birth narratives does not end with this disagreement between Matthew and Luke. Further discrepancies are inevitably noticed. Matthew and Luke never again

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[1]W. Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus*, p. 153.

[2]Most often, the claim is made that Matthew's account reflects Joseph's perspective, while Luke's reflects that of Mary. In terms of the annunciation, in Matthew an angel appears to *Joseph* (albeit in a dream), while in Luke the angel appears to *Mary*.

mention Jesus' virgin birth after the opening chapters, and Jesus never once uses that remarkable event as grounds for a messianic claim. Mark and John never even mention a birth story at all, and Paul's comments[3] make it seem as if he believes that Jesus was born in a most ordinary manner. Nor do the early creeds in the New Testament epistles betray any awareness of the events of the infancy narratives.[4] All in all, then, the birth accounts in Matthew and Luke generate inter-textual discrepancies within *individual* Gospels, between and among Gospels, and between the Gospels and the Epistles.

But to *note* such discrepancies is merely the work of a perceptive reader and a skilled detective. The task of the historian is not only to note discrepancies, but ultimately to determine which discrepancies can yield useful facts about history, and which cannot. This chapter will note many inter-textual discrepancies in the New Testament as a whole and catalog them on the basis of their value to the historian in determining facts about the historical Jesus, the historical Paul, or the history of the early church. While some are likely indeterminative (at least about history), others are possibly determinative of meaningful conclusions, while still others do generate definitive conclusions.

### Discrepancies Likely Indeterminative

The following discrepancies within and among the New Testament accounts are ultimately of no value to the historian. This is not to say that all of the statements or events described below

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[3]Gal. 4:4.

[4]Meier, 1:209.

are unhistorical, but rather, that the nature of the discrepancies prevents the historian from determining which are historical, and which are not. By and large, this category includes statements that conform to the apologetic aims of an author; blatant inter-textual contradictions for which neither account, if either, can be proved historical; and weak arguments from silence.

**About the Historical Jesus**:

1. *Conformance to the Law* – Luke is unique in presenting numerous events in the life of Jesus that cast Jesus and his disciples and other followers as conforming to Jewish law. Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day and is redeemed as a firstborn; decades later, Jesus teaches regularly in the Temple, and spends the Sabbath in the synagogue, "according to his custom."[5] The women who come to anoint Jesus' corpse themselves first rest on the Sabbath "according to the commandment."[6] Following Jesus' execution his followers continue to attend the Temple regularly.[7] Other Gospels do not have these and many other details about conformity to Jewish law. While some readers might be tempted to say that Luke includes these details because they are historically accurate, others might claim that Luke fabricated them in order to whitewash Jesus' antinomian preaching. The only genuine significance of these details, however, is as a demonstration of Luke's tendency to portray Christianity as the natural embodiment of and further advancement of the core of Judaism. Luke, more so than the other Gospel writers, wanted Jesus' ministry to appear rooted in

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[5]Circumcision, Lk. 2:21; redemption of firstborn, Lk.2:22; "teaching" in Temple, Lk. 2:46, 19:47, 20:1, 21:38; "custom," Lk. 4:16.

[6]Lk. 23:56.

[7]Lk. 24:53; Acts 2:46, 3:1.

Jewish custom and law, and he painted Jesus' image accordingly. In the end, Luke's unique details may be historical, or they may not be: this discussion, accordingly, remains indeterminative for the historian.

2. *Pacifist or Militant* – While Jesus often appears pacifistic,[8] at other times he seems militant[9], and this ambiguity leaves the historian to wonder which position Jesus actually maintained. Jesus is reputed to have made statements such as "love your enemies," "turn the other cheek," and "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's," and the ultra-skeptical *Jesus Seminar* has suggested that each of these expressions is likely historical.[10] But it is hard to ascribe historicity to these sayings when they perfectly conform to the apologetic aims of Gospel writers coping with the embarrassment of the cross. True, Jesus may very well have said these things, but there also would have been tremendous motivation and incentive for Mark or Matthew to manufacture them outright with the aim of placating Roman officials by showing Jesus to have been no subversive. Moreover, why would a man who makes such peaceful overtures end up crucified as a seditionist? Is militance not to be inferred from the very nature of Jesus' demise?

At the same time, however, those who argue that Jesus expressed militant sentiments encounter equal difficulty. If Jesus did present a veritable threat to Rome, why

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[8]According to S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*, the most oft cited verses are Matt. 5:9, 39; 26:52; Luke 6:27-29; Mark 12:17. See pp. 20-21.

[9]According to Brandon, Matt 10:34, 21:12-13; Luke 12:51, 19:45, 22:36; Mark 11:15-16. Ibid.

[10]The Jesus Seminar argues that sayings such as "Render unto Caesar" are so crisp and witty that Jesus must have said them. But were there no early Christians capable of a crisp and witty aphorism?

did they not arrest or suppress his followers after the crucifixion? Moreover, why is there little to no militance revealed in the early church by Paul or Acts? The historian is left to wonder: Jesus may have advocated pacifism; he may have advocated militance; he may have advocated some intermediate position; or, as E.P. Sanders suggests, he may have predicted a radical rearrangement of the social and political order, but one initiated by divine intervention rather than Jewish militarism.[11] Unfortunately, the textual evidence does not allow for definitive conclusions in any of these ways.

3. *Ancestry* – The genealogies of Matthew and Luke conflict to a considerable degree, especially over names in the post-exilic era, and most notably over the name of Jesus' grandfather. While some of the relationships advanced are correct, each list contains numerous errors. In the end, all one can say is that Matthew's list reflects the author's intention to show Jesus as the scion of David, while Luke's means to portray him as the "son of God."[12] Little if anything, then, can be said about Jesus' ancestors. It will be shown below, however, that Matthew's genealogy in particular may be quite instructive about the history of the early church (at least in Matthew's community).[13]

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[11]E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 231.

[12]For a comparison of Matthew's and Luke's lists, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pp. 84-94.

[13]See below, p. 40.

**About the Historical Paul**

1. *Knowledge of Details of Jesus' Ministry* – Paul never mentions a number of important elements surrounding Jesus' death and ministry. He fails to mention, for example, most details about the passion week, save that Jesus was delivered up (to death) on the night when he last broke bread,[14] and that Jesus was crucified.[15] There is no mention of the Temple incident, a Sanhedrin trial, the role of Herod or Pilate, or even Jerusalem as the location in which it all took place. Paul is also silent about Jesus' miracles and, by and large, his teachings, except for the prohibition on divorce.[16]

A number of possibilities come to explain Paul's general silence about the historical Jesus. Perhaps Paul simply did not know many details about Jesus' ministry or the circumstances of his death? Granted, one must admit that Paul knew at least a few things about a historical Jesus, as he mentions the crucifixion, the alleged resurrection, and the teaching on divorce, but maybe this represented the extent of his knowledge? Three phenomena might support Paul's apparent unawareness about the events of Jesus' life. First, operating as he was in the Diaspora, limited amounts of historical Jesus material may have reached Paul during his ministry. Second, a good deal of the reputedly historical details of Jesus' life may have come into existence after Paul's own lifetime. Third, details of Jesus' life may simply not have constituted matters directly relevant to Paul's theology,

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[14] 1 Cor. 11:23.

[15] 1 Cor. 1:23, 2:2, 2:8; 2 Cor. 13:4; Gal. 3:1.

[16] 1 Cor. 7:10.

or to the contents of his communications to the various churches with whom he corresponded.

In this last regard, it is possible that Paul knew a great deal about the historical Jesus, both his deeds and his statements, but never had cause to mention them. Perhaps he simply assumed that recipients of his epistles already knew this material, or maybe the purpose of his letters – addressing *ad hoc* problems in various churches – never called upon him to refer to the historical Jesus? As Samuel Sandmel notes, it is even conceivable that Paul knew much about the historical Jesus, but intentionally muted that information so as not to enhance the credentials of those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry.[17] Each aforementioned conclusion is plausible, but in the end there is not sufficient evidence to confirm any of them. Paul's silence regarding most of the events in Jesus' ministry does not allow the historian to make any determinative conclusions regarding the nature and extent of Paul's knowledge about the historical Jesus.

That being said, however, we will see below that Paul's silence on a few specific points – namely, the virgin birth, the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, and the empty tomb – may well prove instructive about the history of the early church.

2. *Self-Image vis-à-vis Other Apostles* – In 1 Cor. 15: 9, Paul claims that he is "the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because [he] persecuted the church of God."

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[17]Samuel Sandmel, *The Genius of Paul*, p. 110.

In 2 Cor. 11:5, however, he insists that he is "not in the least inferior to those *huperlian apostoloi*" – "super apostles."

There can be no doubt that Paul faced challenges to his authority as an apostle, as this can be inferred from many of Paul's own remarks.[18] But reconciling Paul's apparently contradictory statements about his own conception of his apostleship is difficult. A number of possibilities present themselves. According to Sandmel and others, Paul's low estimation of his own standing is essentially an expression of false humility. Paul, in fact, considered himself the greatest of the apostles, uniquely chosen by God to bring the new covenant to the gentiles.[19] Others might suggest that Paul actually felt as if his not knowing Jesus personally, or as if his previous persecution of the church, did detract from his credentials, and in an effort to combat this reputation he showed false bravado, saying "my apostleship is from God, and I am inferior to no one." Then again, perhaps the "super apostles" to whom Paul refers in 2 Cor. 11 are altogether different from the apostles to whom he feels inferior in 1 Cor. 15. Could the latter be the original disciples of Jesus, while the former are leaders in Jerusalem who claim authority over Paul even though they, like Paul, had not known Jesus personally?

Possibilities abound, but the historian can arrive at no definitive conclusion regarding Paul's own conception of his apostleship vis à vis his counterparts.

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[18]See especially 1 Cor 9:1-6, over and against the description in Acts which presents Paul as "ordained" by the authorities in Jerusalem.

[19]Sandmel, p. 104.

3. *Turning to the Gentiles* – In Matthew, Jesus instructs the disciples to go nowhere amongst the Gentiles (10:5), and he explains that his mission is only to the Israelites (15:24). But if this was truly the position that Jesus held, how did Paul come by the notion that *he* had been entrusted with a mission to the Gentiles and, as importantly, how did this ministry gain authorization from the leaders in Jerusalem?

On the one hand, we could say that Paul simply turned to the Gentiles once he realized that little progress would be made amongst the Jews. This, too, would have been the case for the early church as much as for Paul, as evidenced by the universalistic commission in Matthew 28 and the passages in Luke-Acts that include, and at times extol, the Gentiles in contrast to the Jews.[20] Along this line of reasoning, Jesus' ethnocentric statements might be historical, while Paul's ministry and the later apologetics of the early church were meant to cope with the perceived stubbornness of the Jews and reflect the church's retaliatory rejection of them. To some extent, this determination is probably true.

But perhaps Jesus' ministry did include some Gentiles, and perhaps, as did the Hebrew Prophets, Jesus made messianic predictions about a redemption that included both Jews and Gentiles? If this is true, then it would only make sense that an early Christian church with eschatology on the mind would extend overtures to the Gentile community, regardless of how the Jews responded. As for Matthew's more ethnocentric statements, they might be ascribed to a later Judaizing segment of the church that was

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[20]Lk. 10:29-37; Acts 15:19, 28:28.

uncomfortable not with the fact, but with the extent, to which the Christian community had become Gentile in character.

In the end, the historian can achieve no definitive conclusions here. Jesus may well have made ethnocentric statements, he may well have made universalistic statements, or he may well have made both. By the same token, each of those sentiments might also have been fabricated by early churches in response to their own demographic or ideological needs. The same can be said of Paul as well: he might have turned to the Gentiles out of frustration, or on account of a vision, or he might well have taken his cue from Jesus, who had predicted that Gentiles would be a part of the eschatological community.

**About the History of the Early Church**

1. *Location of Jesus' Post-Resurrection Appearances* – In Mark, the disciples run away after Jesus' arrest, presumably to Galilee where they eventually see the resurrected Jesus.[21] But Luke fails to mention the flight of the eleven remaining Apostles, and has the resurrected Jesus appear first to two men on the road to Emmaus, and then to the eleven in Jerusalem.

   Unfortunately, the historian cannot determine whether either evangelist's report is reliable. Mark's having the disciples abandon Jesus is in accord with his tendency to

[21]Matthew also records the disciples' desertion (Mt. 26:56), and does have Jesus appear to them in Galilee (28:16).

portray them as delinquent, while Luke's keeping them in Jerusalem suits his own mission to establish the center of Christianity in Jerusalem. Seeing as Paul never locates the earliest appearance reports, and John has appearance narratives in both Jerusalem and Galilee,[22] it seems impossible to determine whether either Mark's or Luke's description of events is accurate.[23]

2. *Existence and Prominence of "God-fearers"* – Acts makes eleven references to "God-fearers," groups of Gentiles informally initiated into Jewish circles, yet "God-fearers" find no mention in the New Testament outside Luke-Acts, including in the letters of Paul (who, according to Luke, had much contact with them). To be sure, Luke's apologetic aims are served by the God-fearers, as they enable him to show how "Christianity had legitimately become a Gentile religion without losing its roots in the traditions of Israel."[24] It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that Luke fabricated their importance in the early years of the church, if not their existence altogether. But it is also quite possible that such a class of people did exist, especially in the Diaspora, and there is considerable evidence that by the

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[22]John's appearance narrative in 21:1-25 is said explicitly to be in Galilee, while one is left to infer that the scenes in 20:19-28 take place in Jerusalem. See Brown (*The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John, xiii-xi*) who says that in v. 19 John "probably thinks of a house *in Jerusalem* (where 'the Jews" would pose a threat')...."

[23]Note the disagreement among scholars. Some claim that the alleged appearance to the disciples occurred in Jerusalem, others say Galilee. Some even claim that it took place on the road from Jerusalem to Galilee! See Brown, *Anchor*, p. 1085.

[24]Robert MacLennan and Thomas Kraabel, "The God -Fearers–A Literary and Theological Invention," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, p. 52.

3rd century, at the latest, these "semi-Jews" were indeed present in Jewish communities.[25] But were these God-fearers present in the Diaspora synagogues that Paul might have visited, and did they truly have the importance that Luke accords them? The historian simply cannot know the extent, if any, to which God-fearers genuinely played a role in the emergence of Christianity out of Judaism.

**Discrepancies Possibly Determinative**

Discrepancies are judged to be possibly determinative when they yield conclusions about history, but lack sufficient corroborative evidence to assert those conclusions with full confidence. This category generally includes conflicting statements, in which one statement conforms to evangelistic interests, while the other runs counter to the authorial bias. In such situations, the embarrassing statement has better claim to historicity, but without further evidence the claim to historicity must be tentative. Also included in this category are "relevant" arguments from silence, in which an author's silence is difficult to explain in light of his own project or motives.

**About the Historical Jesus**

1. *Jesus' Last Words*– Jesus' final words on the cross differ amongst Matthew/Mark, Luke, and John. Mark and Matthew both agree that Jesus' final words were from the opening

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[25]See Robert F. Tannenbaum, "Jews and God-Fearers in the Holy City of Aphrodite," and Louis H. Feldman, "The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers," *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

verse of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[26] yet Luke records words from Psalm 31 that are far more uplifting ("Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit"). John's rendition is different still (here Jesus simply says, "it is finished"). Do these discrepancies result merely from selective memory, or reporting, by a given Gospel writer, or are these instead deliberate omissions or substitutions by given writers intended to address theological dilemmas of a later day? If the latter, what dilemmas, and why were they important?

Surely one could argue that Mark gave his version of the last words to Jesus only because the rest of the passion was modeled on Psalm 22. But perhaps the reverse is true? Was the passion modeled on Psalm 22 precisely because Jesus was known to have quoted from it in his final moments on the cross? After all, it is reasonable to assume that a Jewish man dying on the cross might choose those very words to express his agony and sense of abandonment. Furthermore, in light of the less than hopeful portrayal of Jesus effected by the words, it is difficult to understand why Mark would ever have invented them. Remember that the cross was not only an embarrassment for Christians in the face of Rome, it was also detrimental to their claim to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. Psalm 22 was, moreover, hardly exhortatory but, rather, demoralizing. Luke's replacement of Mark's defeatist phrase with the more uplifting cry from Psalm 31 could reflect the early Christians' attempt to transform the cross from a symbol of disconcerting

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[26]Matthew and Mark differ slightly in the Aramaic rendering of Psalm 22:1. For analysis, see W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Matthew*, p. 350; and Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Mark*, p. 650.

defeat into one of great triumph. John's version, too, makes the cross into the appropriate conclusion for the Christ's earthly ministry rather than the huge disappointment it might originally have seemed.

2. *Jesus' Baptism* – Matthew and Mark each suggests that John the Baptist baptized Jesus, while Luke says only that "Jesus had been baptized" without ever mentioning before whom. The Fourth Gospel does not record any such event, and appears to portray Jesus and the Baptist as rivals in their own time. Acts (18:24-19:1-7) suggests that this rivalry continued well into their respective disciples' generation, and that Apollos, a man credited with speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, "did not even know or teach that John had borne witness to the unique vocation of Jesus."[27] No less peculiar is Matthew 11:2, in which John inquires as to whether Jesus is the Messiah, when at the baptism scene eight chapters earlier he immediately apprehends Jesus' identity!

The very fact that Mark mentions a baptism at the feet of John the Baptist leads many scholars to accept the historicity of the event by the criterion of embarrassment. They argue that the early church would never have invented a story in which Jesus required baptism from another prophet. Matthew's and Luke's manipulation of Mark's account supports that conclusion, as those evangelists go far in trying to mitigate the embarrassment caused by the scene. Matthew has John expressing reluctance, while Luke has Jesus

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[27]S.G.F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church*, p. 25.

baptized after John's imprisonment, creating ambiguity as the whether Jesus was baptized by John at all. Moreover, in both Matthew and Luke, the "Christological moment" when Jesus could first be recognized as divine, is shifted roughly 30 years earlier, i.e., from the baptism back to the conception.

But asserting the historicity of the baptism must be done with reservation. The evidence from John, Acts 18, and Matthew 11 makes real the possibility that Jesus and John were competitors – as were their followers in ensuing generations – and that Mark tried to exalt Jesus by portraying John as a forerunning "Elijah figure" who was not worthy to "stoop down and untie the thong of [Jesus'] sandals" (Mk. 1:7). Perhaps John and Jesus never met in their lifetimes, but were only brought together by a developing Christian tradition?

3. *A Sanhedrin Trial* – While there is considerable agreement among the Synoptics regarding the events in the passion narrative prior to Jesus' arrest, after Gethsemane the accounts begin to diverge considerably. Matthew and Mark have Jesus brought before the Sanhedrin in the middle of the night, where he is accused by false witnesses,[28] convicted of blasphemy, condemned to die, and then beaten. The next morning the Sanhedrin reconvenes, and after deliberating it commands Jesus bound and brought to Pilate. Luke's account is radically different, as there is no night trial at all. Jesus is brought

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[28]Albeit while, in Mark, the witnesses *happen to be* false, Matthew has the Jewish authorites actually *seek* false witnesses *ab initio*.

to the high priest's house and beaten. The following morning there is an inquiry (not a trial) before the Sanhedrin, but with no witnesses, no charge of blasphemy, and no demands for Jesus' death. In John, Jesus never comes before the Sanhedrin at all.

Scholars have sought to account for these discrepancies, particularly those between Mark and Luke, in a number of ways. William Wilson insists that Luke possessed a unique passion source in which no Sanhedrin trial was reported, and thinking his unique source to be the more reliable one, Luke often preferred it over Mark.[29] But Luke's deviations from Mark may also reflect Luke's tendency to depict Jesus as in harmony with the contemporary institutions of Judaism. This would explain Luke's attempt to downplay the Temple incident and his omission of a blasphemy charge. As Raymond Brown notes, it may also have led him to shift Mark's trial scene to the Stephen account in Acts 6-7.[30] However, whether or not Luke utilized a different source is of little consequence for the historian, for there is no way to evaluate the historicity of that source over and against Mark.

Ultimately, the most revealing oddity in the Sanhedrin narrative is the superfluousness of the morning deliberations. It is hard to imagine why the Sanhedrin should meet in the middle of the night, conduct a trial in which Jesus is condemned to die, and then reconvene the following morning for no apparent purpose. The morning consultation would only be necessary if it was part of an original passion source to which

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[29]William R. Wilson, *The Execution of Jesus: A Judicial, Literary, and Historical Investigation*, pp. 58-62.

[30]Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1:555-560.

a night trial were prefaced.[31] If this is true, then the Sanhedrin trial would be a Marcan, or perhaps pre-Marcan, addition to an antecedent passion tradition, and the chances of its historicity would be considerably undermined. Two additional factors buttress this conjecture. First, as E.P.Sanders explains, most scholars "recognize that the earliest Christians knew only the general course of [passion] events (a Jewish interrogation, the handing over to Pilate, the crucifixion), but not the details."[32] It was left to later Christian imagination to flesh out the narrative. Second, a Sanhedrin trial would serve the interests of an evangelist such as Mark, especially if he were writing in Rome. The cross was a tremendous embarrassment for the early Christians because it suggested to imperial Rome that Christianity was a religion founded by an insurrectionist. There was thus good reason to show that the Jews were somehow legally responsible for putting a man on the cross.

**About the Historical Paul**

1. *Israel's Destiny*– The Lucan Paul says in Acts 28 that the Jews will "never understand," and yet in Romans 11 Paul himself suggests that the Jews have not "stumbled so as to fall," and that in the end "all Israel will be saved." There can be little doubt that Paul wrote these latter statements. Why, then, does Acts depict his attitude so differently?

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[31]If the night trial were original to the story, then the morning consultation would be completely unnecessary.

[32]Sanders, pp. 298-299.

Paul may very well have experienced a negative change of heart in which he concluded that the Jews had stumbled so as to fall permanently. If this happened late in his life, then it might well be reflected in Luke's account yet not in a surviving epistle from Paul himself. But there is "virtual scholarly unanimity that Paul wrote to Rome from Corinth," near the end of his missionary career (mid 50's).[33] Could so firm a conviction as that expressed in Romans 11 have changed so profoundly at the very end of Paul's life? It seems more plausible that the church of the 80's and 90's, as opposed to that of the 50's, had become so frustrated by the Jews' continued refusal to accept the Christ that it abandoned or overrode Paul's previous optimism. With the destruction of the Temple (which may have been seen as divine judgment against the Jews), and the emerging dominance of Gentile Christians, the church probably lost faith in Israel's future conversion, and saw advantage in portraying Christians and Rome as having an enemy *in common*, namely, the Jews. Accordingly, Paul's belief that the Jews' stumble was temporary – that it was meant to allow salvation to "come to the Gentiles" now even though inevitably "all Israel will be saved" – was no longer viable. If so, then Luke (Paul's unauthorized biographer) may have changed Paul's mind for him.

2. *Peter's Denial* – Paul never mentions Peter's denial of Jesus, even though it appears from the letter to the Galatians that Peter was a major rival, and that Paul was not above

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[33]Brown, *Introduction*, p. 560.

criticizing him.[34] In fact, according to Morton Enslin, Paul was at times "boastfully condescending," and always "passionate and ready to heap abusive names on all who were restive under his heavy hand and arrogant self-confidence."[35] Many scholars have therefore concluded that Paul could not have known about Peter's alleged denial. As Sandmel notes, "the combative Paul of the Epistles, who rebuked Cephas before the church at Antioch, would scarcely have failed in his own works to dredge up whatever disparagement of his opponent was known in the available tradition."[36]

But even if one accepts that Paul was silent about Peter's denial because he was unaware of the tradition, two explanations could account for his not knowing it. It is conceivable that the tradition existed, and that Paul had not heard of it. It is also plausible, however, that the tradition simply did not exist in Paul's time. Many argue that Mark created the denial scene in order to further his theme of denigrating the disciples (especially Peter), or to boost the spirits of Christians being pressured into denying Christ themselves. Is it not Mark who has Jesus predicting that "brother will deliver up brother to death...," and so on?[37] The conjecture that Mark invented the episode is further supported by the notion that if Peter had indeed denied Jesus, then the only witness to the event could have

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[34]Gal. 2:7-14, though some suggest that vv. 7-8, in which the name "Peter" is used, where everywhere before and after Paul uses "Cephas," is a gloss meant to buttress Peter's later reputation as leader of the Jewish church. See G.A. Wells, *The Historical Evidence for Jesus*, p. 225, n. 1.

[35]Morton Enslin, *Reapproaching Paul*, p. 12.

[36]Sandmel, p. 174.

[37]Mark 13:12, in which the author is most likely describing the events in his own day and attributing the words to Jesus.

been Peter himself, and it seems hard to believe that this is something he would have later admitted. And if he did admit it, and it became an early church tradition, how did Paul not hear about it?

All in all, there is good evidence to claim that Paul did not know about the denial of Peter because Mark invented the scene as a means of addressing the needs of the early church. (Paul does, however, without hesitation [in 1 Corinthians 15], accept the kerygmatic statement that the resurrection Jesus *first* appeared to Cephas.[38])

**About the History of the Early Church**

1. *Matthew's Rehabilitation of Peter* – Matthew calls Peter the "rock of the Church," while Mark paints a less flattering image of Peter. In Mark, Peter thrice falls sleep while on guard at Gethsemane, he denies Jesus, and he shows "obtuseness about the real character of Jesus,"[39] and in Mark 8 he is even branded by Jesus as "Satan"!

It seems as if Matthew was intent upon rehabilitating Peter's image from what Mark had done to it, but the historian cannot be exactly sure as to why. Possibly Matthew simply came from a community which idolized Peter, and he accordingly applied positive local traditions concerning him. Matthew's ultimate purpose may have gone deeper, however. If Mark's denigration of Peter reflected the pro-Pauline, antinomian, anti-Palestinian bias of a Gentile church in the Diaspora, then Matthew's rehabilitation of Peter

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[38]Presuming here that Cephas and Peter were indeed one and the same person.

[39]Sandmel, p. 168.

may have "emerged as a reaction against extreme Pauline practice in the dispersion church."[40] The conflicting portrayals of Peter in Mark and Matthew might reflect a fissure between the Pauline and Petrine circles within the developing church.

2. *The Tale of Judas's Betrayal* – There are many lacunae in the account of Judas's betrayal of Jesus, including: What was Judas's motive? Why should the authorities have required an informer if Jesus was known to be teaching daily? How did Jesus come with the *twelve* to Jerusalem if two were already there? Why does Paul never mention Judas, and even claim that Jesus appeared to the twelve, when the Gospel writers are meticulous in repeatedly specifying that he appeared to the eleven?

It is possible to conclude from these discrepancies that Mark fabricated the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, or coopted only a late-developing tradition (e.g., post-Pauline) about a traitor. Perhaps the church required explanations for the otherwise inexplicable realities that the supernatural messiah had been captured and executed by mere mortals? The Judas tale would address this problem, while at the same time speaking to the betrayal of Christians to Rome especially after Nero commenced persecuting them in 64. But just as it would be challenging for the church to explain how Jesus was captured, it is also hard to imagine that the church would have readily accepted a story in which a member of the inner circle was so unimpressed with Jesus that he turned him in, or that Jesus was so undiscerning as to have selected Judas in the first place. If it was hard for Christians to

[40]Ibid., p. 185.

imagine Jesus allowing himself to be captured by mortal authorities, would it not have been harder still to imagine Jesus allowing himself to be betrayed by a disciple of his own selection? For this reason, many argue for the historicity of the betrayal according to the criterion of embarrassment. And yet, Mark was not one to treat the disciples nicely, and it may not have "embarrassed" him to transform a disciple into someone so wicked and hard-hearted that he turned in the Messiah any more than Mark was embarrassed by the disciples as a whole whom he describes as such a sorry lot.

3. *The Empty Tomb Traditions* – Only Matthew includes details about the guard at the tomb (27:62-66) and in turn the bribing of the soldiers (28:11-15). Moreover, the women in Mark's Gospel do not tell anyone what they have seen (begging the question of how anyone later found out what had transpired), while according to the corrective(?) in Matthew and Luke the women *do*. Paul, for his part, mentions neither the women nor the empty tomb at all. His silence on the latter issue is conspicuous, considering that it would have provided him compelling evidence to furnish a Greek audience naturally skeptical of anyone's *bodily* resurrection.

Certainly, on the basis of Matthew's testimony, then, it seems that the early church faced accusations from Jews, if not others, that someone had stolen Jesus' body. The historicity of the empty tomb narrative presents a still trickier problem, however. It is possible to conclude, on the basis of Paul's silence, that the empty tomb narrative was a late (i.e., post-Pauline) creation – either Marcan or slightly earlier. But how can we be

sure that Paul was, in fact, unaware of the tradition? Possibly he refrained from mentioning it because his own conception of resurrection was not the resurrected corpse of Jesus.

**Discrepancies Generating Definitive Conclusions**

Discrepancies generating definitive conclusions are of the most value to a historian. They usually result from combinations of contradictions, lacunae, and silence, out of which only one conclusion can reasonably emerge.

**About the Historical Jesus**

1. *Place of Jesus' Birth* – While the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Jesus is always referred to as "Jesus of Nazareth" in those self-same Gospels. John 7 certainly suggests that Jesus' roots were in Nazareth, and even has the Jews questioning Jesus' legitimacy *precisely because* he was not born in Bethlehem (which makes no sense if the birth narratives are accurate). John 1:45 seems to accept as a fact that controversy surrounded Jesus because he was not born in Bethlehem. Mark 12:35// has Jesus challenging the notion that the Messiah must come from David (and probably from David's birthplace as well).

There can be no doubt, meanwhile, that Jesus' association with Nazareth, along with the likely implications that he originated there and also that he lacked Davidic lineage, was a source of contention between Jews and Christians in the late first century (if not between Jews and Jesus in his own day). Jews challenged Jesus' messianic credentials by

exploiting his known origins in Nazareth, emphasizing that the messiah must, like David, be born in Bethlehem. Indeed, did the supposed *necessity* of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem only *solidify* when Jews *applied* it to disqualify Jesus' credentials? Jesus almost certainly, then, was born and raised in Galilee, with his birthplace shifted to Bethlehem much later as a means of countering Jewish polemicists.

2. *The Last Supper a Passover Meal?* – Discrepancies abound in Mark's description of Jesus' final "Passover" meal. The chief priests and scribes resolve not to capture Jesus during Passover, but then they go ahead and do so anyway. During the meal, Jesus eats "bread," rather than "matzah," a tradition similarly recorded by Paul (1 Cor. 11). The only unit in Mark suggesting the meal was a Passover feast (14:12-16) misidentifies the date of the ritual (v. 12) and creates the awkward scenario wherein Jesus comes to the meal with twelve disciples when only ten remained with him after v. 13! The evidence seems to indicate that Jesus' final meal with his disciples was not a Passover meal at all, and that the association of the Last Supper with Passover was a theological innovation of a later era and accomplished through the interpolation of a single concentrated pericope into an already formulated narrative.

**About the Historical Paul**

1. *Paul's Ignorance of Traditions of Jesus' Virgin Birth* – Matthew and Luke go to great lengths to demonstrate that Jesus was born of a virgin mother; yet, when Paul states (Galatians 4:4) that Jesus was "born of a woman," he mentions no miraculous conception. Was this a simple oversight or, instead, a tell-tale indication that the origins of Jesus were unimportant – even unknown – in Paul's day, or even that the sheer "ordinariness" of Jesus' birth was indispensable to Paul's faith and therefore *precludes* on his part any mention, or belief, that Jesus was virgin born?

2. *Acts' Portrayal of Paul's Commitment to "Things Jewish"* – Luke includes numerous "Jewish" details about Paul which Paul himself never mentions in the epistles, including: study with Gamaliel, the Hebrew name Saul, cutting hair to fulfill a vow, and racing to reach Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. Some of the details seem contradictory to Paul's letters – namely, the insistence that he is able to speak Hebrew, even though he seems to quote from Septuagint-like material; Paul's insistence on circumcision for Timothy despite opposition to it for Titus in Gal. 2:2; Paul's claim to be on trial only regarding the resurrection of the dead, when there are other considerable departures from Judaism (Pharisaic as well as Sadducean) expressed in his epistles.

These considerable gaps and discrepancies suggest that Luke intentionally portrayed Paul as more committed to Jewish Law than Paul truly was. Moreover, Luke probably fabricated Paul's biographical details (his Hebrew name and education from

Gamaliel) in order to situate Paul within the context of the Palestinian Judaism from which *Luke* sees Christianity naturally emerging. Morton Enslin, among others, takes this conclusion one step further when he argues that Luke not only recast Paul in a more Jewish light, but did so with full knowledge of the epistles that Paul himself wrote.[41]

3. *Jewish Demographics within the Early Church* – Paul insists that Jews failed to flock to the church in any great numbers, yet later Luke, writer of Acts, affirmed that literally "myriads" of Jews did indeed do so early on. Why these flat-out contradictions in testimony, and in whose favor are they to be resolved? Is not Paul more credible in attesting to *meager* numbers, while Luke's "myriads" are an apologetic attempt to explain how a religion at root Jewish demographically had become nearly entirely Gentile by Luke's own day?

**About the History of the Early Church**

1. *Lateness of Virgin Birth/Infancy Stories* – The two virgin birth narratives (Matthew and Luke) manifest many discrepancies: (1) Matthew and Luke have virgin birth narratives exist alongside the baptism narratives that Matthew and Luke take over from Mark. But the need for baptism in Matthew and Luke is fundamentally obviated by a virgin birth. (2)

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[41] Enslin asks: "Why did Luke remain silent about Paul's letters, although frequently mentioning letters written by others, as James to the church in Antioch or Claudius Lysias to Felix?" Enslin concludes that Luke deliberately avoided mention of Paul's epistles because they were being used improperly by unorthodox (probably antinomian) opponents in the early church. See Enslin, p. 24.

There is no reference to the birth narratives *anywhere* except in Matthew and Luke, and even in those Gospels the birth is not mentioned anywhere except in the opening chapters. (3) The genealogies trace Jesus' Davidic origins through Joseph, even though, according to the birth narratives, Joseph plays no role in Jesus' birth. (4) Paul never mentions a virgin birth, and seems to suggest, even to require, that Jesus' birth was in fact quite ordinary. (5) The virgin birth narratives disagree with one another up and down the line. (6) Mark 3:32 and 6:3 suggest that Jesus had siblings, and do not specify that they were younger. (7) In Mark 3, Jesus' mother thinks he's gone mad, which would mean she forgot all about the annunciation, whether in Matthew or Luke.

The only reasonable conclusion is that the virgin birth narratives are a late creation, contrived either by Matthew or Luke themselves, or by others not long before them. The reason for this invention is less certain. Possibly they are meant to conform Jesus' image to that of the archetypal Greek hero, or to satisfy a growing demand from early Christians that Jesus be seen as altogether sinless. Recently, a few scholars have interpreted the birth narratives as attempts to address accusations that Jesus had no legitimate or even known of father.[42] This position might be supported by Mark 6//Matthew 13, in which Mark mentions no father at all for Jesus, and Matthew scrambles to identify Jesus as "the

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[42]Rabbinic literature mentions such a tradition. For these references, and for a modern scholarly effort advancing the illegitimacy of Jesus, see Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, and -- largely depending upon her -- John Shelby Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*.

carpenter's *son*."[43] Then again, the absence of Joseph could be more simply explained: he was no longer alive so he here went unmentioned[44]

2. *Acts 15 versus Galatians 2* – Galatians 2:11-12 portrays James as a hard-liner on the issue of circumcision for Gentiles, if not the need for outright separation from Gentiles. Yet, according to Acts 15, James mistranslates the Hebrew Bible in order to accommodate uncircumcised Gentiles.[45] Can Luke's depiction be accurate, or does it instead reflect Luke's "irenic *Tendenz*" – that is, is it similar to his attempts to tone down acrimony between Rome and Christianity, between Christianity and John the Baptist movement, and between Jesus and Jewish "institutions" (as distinguished from "Jews")? Since James was a hard liner on the issue of circumcision for Gentiles, it seems that Luke is here attempting to tone down tensions between Paul and the Jewish-Christian wing of the Church, so that what happens in Acts 15 is a relatively peaceful interchange that pales before what likely transpired according to Galatians.

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[43]It would be quite rare in Jewish custom for Jesus to be named only with reference to his mother, but then again, maybe Mark just assumed we knew his father was the carpenter because sons traditionally took on the occupation of their father.

[44]Even if Joseph had indeed died, Jesus should still have been referred to as "son of *Joseph*," not "of *Mary*") – unless Joseph had more than one wife, or Joseph were a Gentile, or the identity of Jesus' father were unknown.

[45]Amos 9:12 gives the clear impression that the revived Davidic dynasty will reclaim authority over those who were originally included in it. In Acts, James offers a trimmed LXX version that predicts the "rest of humanity " (i.e., the uncircumcised Gentiles) coming to know the Lord.

3. *Identifying Simon of Cyrene* – Mark 15:21 claims that Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus' cross, and suggests that such a claim can be verified by contacting Simon's sons, Alexander and Rufus. Matthew leaves out Alexander and Rufus. This suggests to the historian that Alexander and Rufus were *known* to readers in Mark's community, but that Matthew, writing elsewhere, left them out since *his* readership would not have known them.

4. *Anti-Christian Polemics in Matthew's Community* – As noted above, Matthew's genealogy conflicts to a considerable degree with Luke's. In particular, Matthew includes four women, each of whom experienced something irregular – and shameful – in her sexual life.[46] That Matthew should include women at all, and that each one mentioned should be known for a sexual peculiarity, makes it virtually certain that Matthew included them as parallels to Mary, herself associated with an odd sexual experience. But what exactly was Matthew trying to say about Mary? Was he aiming to prefigure Mary's *supposed* infidelity in Matt. 1:18-20, and to highlight the revelation of Mary's virginal conception there after? Or, as is more likely, was Matthew responding to accusations from opponents in his community that Mary bore Jesus illegitimately? Matthew's scrambling to identify a father for Jesus in Matthew 13, as well as the charges of illegitimacy that emerge in Rabbinic Literature, would seem to corroborate this position.

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[46]Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba.

And yet, while this discrepancy says much about the history of the early church, it reveals nothing about the historical circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. True, Jesus may have been an illegitimate child, and knowing this, opponents of Christianity may have used this fact to besmirch Mary's name and to challenge Jesus' messianic credentials. At the same time, however, Matthew wrote nearly a hundred years after the birth of Jesus, and it is entirely possible that in the intervening period legends arose about the birth of Jesus which Matthew needed to address.

# CHAPTER 3

## ANALYSIS OF SELECTED EXAMPLES

The previous chapter made note of many discrepancies within and among the texts of the New Testament, and categorized them based on their usefulness to the historian. The scope and quantity of those examples made it difficult to examine each one in detail. Conclusions were proffered without rigorous examination of the pertinent evidence. This chapter aims to explore carefully three of the examples noted, probing their possible implications for the historian, and where feasible, explicating them.

### Conflicting Testimonies between Paul and His (Lucan) Portrait in Acts

It was noted in the previous chapter that the portrait of Paul and the early church revealed in Acts often conflicts with Paul's own testimony. So, for example, Romans 11 and Acts 28 offer opposing viewpoints about Paul's ultimate prognosis for the Jews. Paul's decision to circumcise Timothy in Acts 16 is out of keeping with his epistle to the Galatians, a document offering "a veritable polemic against those who maintained the necessity of the Gentiles' submitting to the rite of circumcision."[1] Luke's insistence that Jews flocked to the early church is incompatible with Paul's disappointment over the Jews' reluctance to accept the gospel. As significant as these discrepancies are, however, they are merely the tip of the iceberg.

Many other critical aspects in the life and ministry of Paul, as well as the nature of the Jerusalem church, find different description in Acts than in Paul's own letters. In fact, it is fair to

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[1]S.G.F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church*, p. 7.

say that a biography of Paul, or a history of the Palestinian church, constructed solely on the basis of Acts would look strikingly different than one based on the epistles alone. In Acts, Paul can be described as:

> A Jew with the Jewish name of Saul, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, educated in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, a persecutor of the church in Judea, converted to Christianity "on the road to Damascus," making three great missionary journeys which took him from Antioch in Syria to regions as far west as Macedonia and Greece, finally arrested on the last of a number of visits to Jerusalem, as a Roman citizen appealing to Caesar after several hearings before local magistrates, arriving finally in Rome for his trial and presumably his martyrdom.

John Knox, who offers this description in his seminal volume, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*,[2] goes on to suggest that not a single one of the above statements about Paul could be confirmed on the basis of the epistles. Paul never mentions having a Hebrew name or an education at Jerusalem; his own description of his conversion could not possibly have occurred "on the road *to* Damascus"; he hardly conceives of himself as making three great missionary journeys; and he never mentions undergoing trials at either Rome or Jerusalem.

While some of the claims made by Acts could certainly be true, such as Paul's Hebrew name, his birth in Tarsus, or his trial in Jerusalem, others are simply impossible in light of Paul's own testimony. Luke's account of Paul's conversion[3] is one such incident. According to Acts 9, Paul persecutes the Christians in Jerusalem for a considerable time, and then receives extradition orders from the High Priest to go to Damascus. As he approaches that city he sees a flash of light, falls

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[2]John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, p. 33.

[3]Luke actually describes the conversion in three places (Acts 9, 22, and 26), with slight variations.

to the ground, and Jesus' voice commands him to continue on to Damascus to receive instructions. The blinded Paul then goes to Damascus where Ananias meets with him, anoints him, and restores his sight.

But Paul's own account of the revelation, recorded in Galatians, could only have taken place on the way *from*, or *away* from, Damascus, as Paul claims that after the experience he "went away to Arabia and again returned to Damascus."[4] If Paul "returned" to Damascus, it only makes sense that he had been there to begin with. Moreover, if Paul is correct in saying that following the revelation he was "still unknown by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea," it is hard to accept Luke's assertion that Paul had previously persecuted the Christians of Jerusalem, or that he had abetted the execution of Stephen. Similarly, if Paul "did not confer with flesh and blood"[5] after his revelatory vision, and if that vision, rather than human beings, was in his own mind the source of his gospel,[6] Luke's insistence that Paul was anointed and baptized by Ananias is completely undermined.

Luke's credibility suffers further when pitted against other evidence in Acts. Had Paul actually received orders from the High Priest in Jerusalem, it is hard to understand how he could later be so ignorant as not even to recognize the holder of the same office.[7] Moreover, the High Priest had no authority in Diaspora lands anyway. All in all, it is clear that Luke's portrayal of

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[4]Gal. 1:17.

[5]Gal. 1:16.

[6]Gal. 1:11-12.

[7]Acts 23.

Paul's origins in Jerusalem, of Paul's theophany on the road to Damascus, and of his conferral with Ananias cannot be reconciled with Paul's own testimony. The epistle to the Galatians gives the impression of Paul as a Diaspora Jew who, for some reason or another, found himself persecuting Christians in Damascus. While there, he apparently became an adherent of the new religion. He then proceeded without any apostolic sanction to Arabia, where presumably he evangelized until returning to Damascus. As we will see below, Luke's version is a perfect reflection of his own apologetic purposes, and by no means a reliable historical report.

As Luke's account of Paul's conversion conflicts with Paul's own testimony, so, too, is his description of the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15 incompatible with the evidence from Galatians. Paul himself suggests that the conference regarding circumcision and conversion took place fourteen years after his first brief visit to Jerusalem, and seventeen years after his own conversion.[8] At that time, Paul, inspired by a revelation, went up to Jerusalem to confer with Cephas, James, and John. There he "received the right hand of fellowship," that he "should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised."[9] Even after that agreement, however, the continued influence of a "circumcision party" within the Christian ranks appears to be strong.

Acts 15 offers an altogether different rendering of the same event. Prior to the bulk of his missionary work, Paul by appointment (not revelation) goes up to Jerusalem where he meets not only with Peter, James, and John, but with all "the apostles and the elders." Following a grand

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[8]Gal. 1:18, 2:1. Depending on how one interprets the relationship between these verses, Paul may be saying that the conference occurred eleven years after his first visit to Jerusalem and fourteen years after the conversion.

[9]Gal. 2:9.

convocation marked by "much debate" and testimony, James decrees that Gentiles should be admitted as unencumbered members of the Christian community, and he quotes Amos 9:11-12 as a justification for his decision. Then Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas and Silas and an official written directive (never mentioned by Paul himself), venture off to Antioch to announce that the circumcision controversy has been "amicably and effectively settled in common council."[10] C.K. Barrett captures the thrust of the Lucan departures from Paul's own testimony when he writes:

> The reader of Acts hears practically nothing of the conflicts which are familiar to us from the Pauline letters. The mission to the Gentiles is held up only for a moment. The question about circumcision and other requirements of the Law is settled almost as soon as it is raised .... Luke passes by in silence the problems of the Gentile mission and the bitterness of the circumcision controversy.[11]

The contrasting descriptions of the Jerusalem Conference point to yet another fundamental discrepancy between Acts and the letters of Paul. Whereas Paul seems to indicate that his base of operations is in the Diaspora, and that he periodically (three times) "visits" or "goes up" to Jerusalem, Acts portrays a missionary who is based in Jerusalem (or Antioch), presumably under the authority and guidance of the Twelve. This Lucan Paul makes three far-reaching missionary journeys to and from his home base in the Levant and, all in all, he finds himself in Jerusalem on five occasions. According to Knox:

> ... The letters of Paul reveal not the slightest awareness on his part that he is engaged in great journeys. To be sure, he knows that his work began in Syria and Cilicia and has moved westward; it is true also that he regards the founding of churches in new places and the visiting and revisiting of churches he has founded

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[10]Brandon, *Fall of Jerusalem*, p. 6.

[11]C.K. Barrett, *New Testament Essays*, pp. 86-87.

> as being of the very essence of his work. But there is no sign that he regards these small journeys as being parts of a series of big journeys, each of which had its beginning and its end in Antioch or Jerusalem .... Paul refers to visits to Jerusalem, if not also to Antioch. But these are *visits*, they are not *returns*. He never "goes back" to Jerusalem; normally he "goes up."[12]

Knox goes on to explain that Paul's description of his final visit to Jerusalem (Romans 15:19-29) "plainly indicates his complete autonomy."[13]

The genuine Paul therefore appears less dependent upon the church of Jerusalem than Luke would have us believe, and further discrepancies between Luke and Paul's epistles confirm this conclusion. The fact is that Paul, "who defended his apostleship so passionately, is in Acts no apostle at all."[14] In fact, according to A.Q. Morton and James McLeman, when describing Paul's conversion Luke deliberately avoids saying that Paul saw the Lord in order to deprive Paul of that essential credential for Apostolic status.[15] Moreover, "the addition of the otherwise unknown and historically insignificant Matthias to the apostolic group as its twelfth member underlines the fact that, even after the death of James, Paul was not so added."[16]

The only compelling way to account for this host of discrepancies is to conclude that Paul's epistles offer a more reliable picture of early church history than does Luke's account. To be sure,

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[12]Knox, pp. 40-41.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Barrett, p. 80.

[15]A.Q. Morton and James McLeman, *Paul, the Man and the Myth*, p. 123.

[16]Barrett, p. 80.

endless efforts have been made to reconcile Luke with Paul.[17] Some identify Acts 11 as the real parallel to Galatians 2; others attempt to smooth out inconsistencies in the conversion accounts with elaborate arguments from silence; still others maintain that Paul's conception of Apostleship is no different from that presented in Acts.[18] Sophisticated as some of these studies are, they invariably prove unconvincing. In the end, at most only one of the two sources, Paul or Acts, can be relied upon as a source for correctly understanding the life and ministry of Paul, as well as the first decades of the church at Jerusalem. Proposing that Acts is the accurate report presumes not only that Paul was a deceiver, but also that Luke knew better than Paul about Paul's own intimate and personal experiences (e.g., his conversion). Instead, Paul's is the more reliable historical account and, as many scholars now concede, his letters are the only primary NT source for reconstructing early church history, while Acts may be used cautiously "to supplement the autobiographical data of the letters, but never to correct them."[19]

As inadequate as Acts is as a primary historical source, however, it can still be of great value to the historian of first century Christianity. Luke's deviations from Paul's account often highlight Luke's overarching apologetic concerns, and these concerns can in turn yield important clues about issues facing the community for which Luke was writing.

So, for example, Luke's manipulation of the time frame of Paul's ministry, his advancing the date of the Jerusalem Conference, and his depiction of Paul as a missionary subservient to

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[17]Ibid., pp. 86-87. None of these arguments is particularly compelling. See also Samuel Sandmel, *The Genius of Paul*, pp. 143 ff., and Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 121.

[18]See Robert P. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve: Discipleship and Revelation in Mark's Gospel.*

[19]Knox, p. 33.

authorities in Jerusalem, clearly reveal his desire to mute the conflicts in the early church which are so glaring in Paul's epistles. This "irenic *Tendenz*," as it is often called, probably reflects the "early Catholicism" of the post-Apostolic era, in which church authorities wished "to propagate the view of orderly and centralised evangelism" during the earliest decades of Christianity[20]:

> The Paul of history and of the genuine Epistles did not suit their need for one original, authoritative, apostolic tradition which would distinguish the true church from the heretics. It was necessary to believe that the teaching of the apostles in the beginning was identical and unalterable and its transmission divinely guaranteed.[21]

Acts thus set out to show that a "theory of authority" existed from the days of Jesus' ministry itself, in which ultimate authority rested in those men whom Jesus appointed as Apostles, and in those whom Jesus' successors would later select. By insisting that Paul's authority as a missionary ultimately lay not in a command from Christ but rather in his ordination by Ananias and in his acceptance by the Apostles at Jerusalem, Acts is able to coopt and refashion Paul and his teachings and incorporate them into the church's unbroken chain of command.[22]

Just as Luke's "irenic *Tendenz*" can be instructive for the historian, so, too, does Luke's portrayal of Paul as observant of Jewish law and "Jerusalem-oriented" reveal clues about the community for which Luke was writing. According to some scholars, Luke depicted Paul as an observant Pharisee in order to garner favor for Christianity with Roman officials. They argue that

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[20]Morton and McLeman, p. 123.

[21]Ibid., p. 124.

[22]Sandmel, p. 160.

the religion of the Jews received a good measure of toleration from the Romans on account of its antiquity, and that Christian apologists such as Luke sought equal status for Christianity by showing that "the Christian message agreed with all that was best in the Jewish religion."[23] Christianity was not a new or subversive religion, but simply the perfected form of an ancient religion that had long been tolerated by the Roman government. Furthermore, by establishing the intransigent "old Jews" as the primary opponents of the "genuine" Jewish religion, Luke was able to deflect Roman animosity from Christians and toward the post-70 Jewish community. In Luke's mind, it was the old and misguided Jews who spurned Jesus and later rebelled against Rome. The authentic Judaism carried on in Christianity taught compliance and conciliation toward Rome.

This conception of Christianity as the "authentic Judaism" was not only politically expedient, but it functioned as a logical solution to a significant theological problem facing the church at the turn of the first century. That is, if Jesus was sent to the people of Israel, why is it that so few Jews had joined the church? According to Luke, Jesus went to the people of Israel because his manifestation as the Christ was the next and final step in the unfolding of their historical religion. Myriads of Jews initially flocked to this fulfillment of their own heritage. But later on, Luke would have it, as the Jews began more and more to reject Jesus, they simultaneously rejected Judaism, and Christianity therefore emerged as the natural extension of the authentic Jewish faith.

Luke goes to great lengths to substantiate this supersessionist theology in both of his volumes. He enlists, as well, geography as a literary device to show that Christianity's foundation rests in Jerusalem; he mutes conflicts between Jesus and the predominant institutions of Judaism

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[23]Barrett, p.90.

(e.g., the Sanhedrin and the Temple); he incorporates the "God-fearers" as a means of linking the mission to the Jews with the increasingly Gentile composition of the church; and most noticeably, he portrays Jesus, the disciples, and Paul as, in *some* respects, more rooted in Judaism and Jerusalem than they probably were.[24]

This last point raises one further possible insight into history that must be addressed before we conclude our discussion of Acts and Paul. If Paul's letters reveal a self-conceived Apostle who was at odds with the authorities of Jerusalem and depreciated the efficacy of the Law of Moses, while Luke's account presents precisely the opposite perspective, is it possible that Luke knew of the epistles and wished to offer a contrasting image of Paul? As we mentioned above, this position runs against the grain of contemporary scholarship. But consider some of the evidence in its favor: In numerous places, Paul admits that he is a less than impressive public speaker,[25] yet Luke presents him as an able *orator* and curiously fails to mention his talent as a writer of epistles (even though he mentions letters written by others!). That Luke should fail to mention the letter writing of his central protagonist has led some scholars to argue that Luke knew of Paul's epistles, and specifically avoided mention of them so as to use Paul as a mouthpiece for Lucan theology and for speeches that Luke himself would invent.[26]

Naturally, the objection to this view is that Luke never mentions the epistles of Paul, and appears to make little or no use of them in composing Acts. But if Luke's intention was to counter

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[24]See Michael J. Cook, "The Mission to the Jews in Acts: Unraveling Luke's 'Myth of the "Myriads."'"

[25]1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 10:10, 11:6.

[26]Morton Enslin, *Reapproaching Paul*, p. 25-27.

the effect of the epistles and rewrite Paul's ministry, then surely he would have refrained from explicitly mentioning them; and how can one say that Acts makes little use of the epistles when virtually all of the rare biographical or historical data within the epistles – most notably the conversion and the Jerusalem Conference – are reported in Acts? Either Luke knew of these events from sources yet to be recovered by us, or he knew about them from Paul. So long as those sources remain undiscovered, the conclusion that Acts knew of and used some of the letters of Paul (even to counter them) cannot be so readily dismissed.

**The Alleged Betrayal of Judas Iscariot**

Paul's testimony in 1 Cor. 11:23 is often cited to corroborate Gospel claims that Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot. Seemingly supportive is the translation of that verse offered in most English Bibles. The Revised Standard Version renders that text: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was *betrayed* took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it ...." Paul thus appears to confirm that Jesus was in fact betrayed on the evening of his final meal.

Closer analysis, however, reveals that the term "delivered up," rather than "betrayed," better captures the meaning of the Greek verb *paradidonai*. When Paul uses *paradidonai* elsewhere, he always means "delivered up," or "handed over." In most cases he is referring to a delivery up to *death*, such as in Romans 4:25 and 8:32, and Galatians 2:20, where that notion is explicit. The Gospels, too, "often use the term with no necessary (or even possible) reference to

*betrayal*."[27] Accordingly, it would seem that in 1 Cor. 11 Paul refers (in *theological* terms) to Jesus' delivery up to death, or (in simple historical terms) at the most to his arrest and delivery up to the High Priest (not to betrayal).

If this is true, then Paul's testimony turns from corroboration into curious silence. For nowhere else does Paul even ambiguously refer to a betrayal or mention the name, Judas (Iscariot). By itself, of course, this silence would hardly prove that Paul did not know the Judas story. After all, he may have failed to mention it for any number of reasons. But a further statement from Paul in 1 Cor. 15 makes it hard to imagine that he was familiar with a betrayal tradition. There he quotes the earlier Christian kerygma that Christ, having been raised from the dead, "appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve ...." Would Paul have allowed such a claim if he had known that one of the original twelve was a traitor? True, Paul may have been referring to "the twelve" only in an abstract sense (knowing full well that "the twelve" had become eleven), but why should Paul be less scrupulous in reporting the tradition than the Synoptists, each of whom insists that Jesus appeared to the "eleven"?[28]

Perhaps Paul was referring to the replenished twelve accomplished by the installation of Matthias, presuming this appointment actually occurred?[29] But the events of Acts 1:23-26 are most likely a Lucan contrivance meant to reconcile his insistence upon a closed college of twelve

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[27]See Michael J. Cook, "Destabilizing the Tale of Judas Iscariot–A Vehicle for Enhancing Christian-Jewish Understanding," p. 138, n. 20, for the relevant verses.

[28]Mt. 28:16; Mk. 16:14; Lk. 24:9, 24:33.

[29]The argument for the historicity of this episode usually hinges on the "criterion of vivid detail"– that is, why would Luke describe in such detail the ascendance of the otherwise unknown Matthias unless he knew that it was historically accurate?

Apostles with a tradition of betrayal inherited from Mark. After all, Matthias is never mentioned again after Acts 1, his election by human choice is out of keeping with the original selection of the twelve by divine fiat, and nowhere else in Acts are replacements introduced upon the death of an Apostle (e.g., James, the brother of John, in Acts 12). It is therefore highly unlikely that when Paul refers to "the twelve" in 1 Cor. 15 he understands Matthias to be included in that group.

It is not only Paul's conflicting testimony that raises doubts about the historicity of the Judas account. The Gospels themselves present us with discrepancies and lacunae. Note, for example, that Mark ascribes no compelling motive for Judas's betrayal, a gap later filled in by Matthew (who attributes it to greed, though thirty pieces of silver is hardly a hefty sum) and Luke (who has Satan enter Judas). Furthermore, Matthew and Luke offer incompatible reports about Judas's ultimate demise. The former claims that he hanged himself; the latter says that he fell over and burst open.[30] The most striking discrepancy, however, emerges from Jesus' "twelve thrones" saying in Matt. 19:28, in which Jesus says: "Truly, I say unto you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." As Michael Cook observes, "whether this saying is authentic to Jesus' ministry or developed only later, it could have become current only in an environment *as yet* unaware of a betrayal story."[31] The heavenly prize awaiting Judas simply cannot be reconciled with his ensuing deceit. As Cook also notes, the parallel verses in Lk. 22:28-30 are, if anything, more

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[30]Matt. 27:3-5; Acts 1:18-20.

[31]Cook, "Destabilizing the Tale," p. 120.

troubling still. There Jesus offers a judgeship to Judas even after he has specified him as the traitor![32]

All of these inter-textual discrepancies lend credence to the notion that a betrayal tradition was not known in the early years of the church, and a brief study of the redaction history of Mark 14 supports that conclusion. The resumptive clause in Mk.14:22, corresponding to Mk. 14:18, suggests that the "betrayal prediction" material between those verses was inserted into a Last Supper tradition originally devoid of any such incident. The disciples' inexplicably muted reaction to Jesus' prediction, as well as Mark's failure to mention Judas'ss parting company with the disciples in anticipation of his later return, make it virtually certain that vv. 17-20 are a late addition. The earliest forms of the Last Supper narrative simply did not contain a prediction of betrayal.

One cannot make such a definitive statement about the references to Judas and betrayal in vv. 10-11 and 43. In both of those instances, Judas is specified as "one of the twelve." That Mark should repeat this designation in v. 43, when it has just been offered in the previous scene, leads one to think that Mark inserted vv. 10-11 in order to prepare the reader for the following scene at Gethsemane. Vv. 17-20 might very well serve the same purpose. In fact, all of Mark's references to Judas prior to 14:43 might function as preparatory material for a tradition received by Mark in which a disciple was part of the arresting party at Gethsemane. Cook describes that position as follows:

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[32]Ibid. Note that Cook also emphasizes Luke's omission of the number "twelve." He presumes that Luke does so in order to resolve the dilemma inherited from Matthew. Most scholars, of course, would claim that Luke received the verse not from Matthew, but from Q. Either way, as Cook notes, it is the juxtaposition of events in Luke's narrative, not the absence of the word "twelve," that truly matters here.

> ... Is it not possible that a *rudimentary* betrayal story, in circulation by Mark's day, had *introduced* the culprit in Gethsemane? At this stage the Gethsemane episode would thereby have become the *first* time the betrayer had been mentioned–hence the need to identify him as "one of the twelve"! If so, all anticipatory references to the felon (3:19; 14:10f., 18; 14:20f.) could constitute only Mark's editorial readying of his readers for what would transpire in Gethsemane rather than anything firmly imbedded in early strata of the tradition.[33]

The problem, of course, is determining whether the betrayal was introduced into the Gethsemane narrative just prior to Mark's writing his Gospel, or whether it had been present since the formulation of the earliest Passion traditions (oral and/or written). If the former, then the likelihood of its being historical is quite small; if the latter, then its historicity is more probable.[34] Unfortunately, the matter cannot be decided definitively either way. As we have seen, a number of factors do cast doubt upon the notion of a betrayal story circulating prior to the 50's: Paul's apparent silence concerning a betrayal tradition: his failure ever to mention Judas; his tolerance of the kerygmatic formula proclaiming that Jesus appeared to the *twelve*; also, the persistence or fabrication of the throne saying. But while these facts are sufficient to raise doubts about the Gospel betrayal reports, they do not suffice to reject the betrayal's historicity altogether.

In fact, many scholars properly note that the criterion of embarrassment provides strong evidence favoring its historicity. As John Meier writes:

> The criterion of embarrassment comes into play ..., for there is no cogent reason why the early church should have gone out of its way to invent such a troubling tradition as Jesus' betrayal by Judas, one of his chosen Twelve. Why the church

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[33]Ibid., p. 122.

[34]The incorporation of a betrayal is only one part of the puzzle. One must also ask when Judas became identified as the traitorous disciple? Was the traitor originally just "one of the twelve," with Judas later identified as having been the culprit, or was Judas known as the traitor from the very outset, and the expression "one of the twelve" came merely to emphasize the dastardly nature of his crime?

> should have expended so much effort to create a story that it immediately had to struggle to explain away defies all logic.[35]

Meier goes on to say that the Gospel writers attempted to "soften the shock" of the betrayal by calling forth texts from Jewish Scripture which, in and of themselves, could not have "given rise to the idea of the betrayal of Jesus by one of the Twelve."[36]

It is true that the betrayal of Jesus would have presented a substantial embarrassment for the early church. That Jesus could somehow have been unwittingly duped by Roman and Jewish authorities is disturbing enough; that such a betrayal should come at the hands of an uninspired disciple (himself chosen by Jesus) – and one who turned in the son of God for a mere thirty pieces of silver – is altogether scandalous. Strong as this argument from embarrassment is, however, it must be considered against the theological and political challenges faced by the Marcan community from which the betrayal narrative may have originated. Not knowing of a betrayal, some might well have asked themselves how the presumably all-powerful Jesus was so easily captured and executed by mere mortals? This problem might have been exacerbated by traditions that bespoke Jesus' and the disciples' surprise at the events of the passion (e.g., the disciples fleeing,[37] Jesus' last words). In light of this theological dilemma, the development of a betrayal tradition at Gethsemane (one predicted by Jesus no less) might in the end prove *less* embarrassing than the alternative.

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[35]Meier, 3:142.

[36]Ibid., 3:142-143.

[37]If, on the other hand, the disciples' flight is a *Marcan* editorial motif (for whatever reason), then it was not a contributing cause to the Judas traditions at hand.

According to Cook, there are more reasons why such a story might have arisen. A tale in which Jesus is betrayed by an intimate may have encouraged Christians who, on account of Roman persecutions or the delay of the *parousia*, began to question their own loyalty to Christ. It would also have served to admonish those Christians who considered informing on their own friends and family (as might be inferred from Mark 13:12).[38] Furthermore, Mark's identifying the traitor specifically as the disciple Judas would have done much for Mark's passion narrative, in which he attempted to deflect blame from Rome, and towards the Jews.[39]

In the end, however, the evidence is definitive on neither side. Those arguing against the betrayal's historicity can offer a plausible argument from silence with some corroborating evidence. Those favoring the received Gethsemane narrative have the criterion of embarrassment on their side. Of course, if they were to show that Paul used *paradidonai* literally to mean betrayal, then their conclusion would be strengthened enormously.

But despite the ultimate mystery surrounding the historicity of a betrayal, some things can be said with considerable confidence. If, for example, one accepts that Jesus did maintain an inner circle of twelve (as most NT scholars do[40]), then it is reasonable to conclude that one of those twelve was called Judas (probably a minor one–insofar as he is essentially unrecognizable beyond his identity as a traitor). He is included in all the lists of the twelve, and these are probably early and well-preserved strata within the tradition. Equally certain it is that this Judas was not

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[38]Cook,"Destabilizing the Tale," p. 127-128.

[39]Ibid., p. 133-136.

[40]So Sanders, Brown, and Meier.

designated a traitor while dipping bread with his master. The incorporation of the betrayal into the Last Supper narrative is a Marcan attempt to prepare the reader for the arrival of Judas at Gethsemane.

**The Empty Tomb Story**

The previous section noted how Paul's citation of the resurrection kerygma in 1 Cor. 15 might shed light on the historicity on the betrayal account. So, too, are those verses significant with regard to the empty tomb narrative, as they are conspicuously silent about what became the Gospel testimony. Recall the formula reported in those verses:

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.[41]

Paul apparently knows of a tradition in which Cephas, usually understood to be Peter, is the first to have seen the risen Christ; yet he never mentions the incident at the empty tomb (now known from the Gospels), a curious oversight considering that it would have been compelling proof for Jesus' *bodily* resurrection. Such evidence would have been Paul's ace in the hole, so to speak, when preaching the resurrection to Gentile (Greek) audiences who disbelieved in a future life for the body. More curious still is the fact that this kerygmatic formula flatly contradicts the

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[41] 1 Cor. 15:3-7.

appearance narratives in Matthew, Luke, and John! In Matthew and John, it is women (not Peter) who first witness the risen Christ, while Luke claims that two men, one called Cleopas, were the first to see Jesus, in their case on the road to Emmaus. Mark has no appearance narrative at all, leaving one to wonder who, if anyone at all, saw Christ first.[42] Paul's silence about an empty tomb story, as well as his unquestioning acceptance of a kerygma that contradicts the Gospels' empty tomb and appearance traditions, suggests that an empty tomb story was not widely known – if known at all – during Paul's day, and may even be the creation of a later generation.

But as much as Paul's testimony appears at odds with the Gospels, the various empty tomb stories in the Gospels are themselves replete with inconsistency. For example, the process by which the tomb becomes empty differs in each account. In Mark, the stone is rolled back when the women arrive, leaving the reader to assume that Jesus opened the tomb after he had been raised from the dead. Luke agrees with Mark yet has the women encounter two men inside the cave rather than one. In Matthew's account, the women find the tomb sealed, and witness both an earthquake and the descent of a heavenly angel who rolls back the stone. John is different still: Mary Magdalene alone discovers Jesus at the tomb (and initially thinks the body had been stolen).

Added to all this is Matthew's unique "guard story," in which soldiers are placed at the tomb, and later bribed to say that Jesus' body was stolen. In consonance with this, Matthew adds that soldiers "kept watch over Jesus" on the cross,[43] along with the centurion "keeping watch over

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[42]Presuming, as most scholars do, that Mark originally ended at 16:8. Even so, the appearance narrative of 16:9-18 explicitly indicates Mary Magdalene, not Peter/Cephas, as the first to see the risen Christ.

[43]Matt. 27:36.

Jesus."[44] But if Matthew's guard story is true, then Mark's empty tomb narrative is patently absurd. Did the guard not notice, as the stone rolled away, that Jesus departed from the tomb and another, a young man, went inside? The guard story is further beset by its own internal illogic for, as Raymond Brown asks, how is it that the Jews knew and understood Jesus' prediction about his resurrection when his own disciples do not?[45]

Still another curiosity is Matthew's and Luke's insistence that the women at the tomb tell what they have seen while Mark portrays them as too afraid to speak. To be sure, the conclusion to Mark's Gospel is strange, both in terms of the grammar of the final sentence and the meaning of the women's silence.[46] Numerous solutions have been proposed. Some argue that an original ending (in which, presumably, the women fulfill their charge) has been lost. But if this is so, why does the truncated text conclude with the women too fearful to tell anyone about what they have seen? How can v. 8 be reconciled with a putative original ending in which they actually do divulge their experience? Perhaps one could say that the received text ends with the women *initially* too afraid, while the original text went on to show that they overcame that trepidation and spoke to the disciples. While plausible to some, no evidence exists to confirm or to disconfirm the conjecture.

Other scholars, such as W. Kelber, John Dominic Crossan, and the "polemical" school, have argued that the women represent the Judaized Christian community, symbolized by Peter, against whom Mark attempted to bring criticism. They argue that Mark likens the women's failure

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[44]Matt. 27:54.

[45]Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2:1312.

[46]See Mann, C.S. *Mark*, p. 659.

in completing their mission to the Jewish-Christian community's failure to properly understand the true meaning of Christian faith. And yet, while Mark's bias against the Jewish disciples is unmistakable, C.S. Mann correctly observes that the women in Mark function as *loyal* followers of Jesus, in distinction from the male disciples who abandon Jesus in his final hours.[47] The women hardly exemplify poor discipleship. Mann is wrong, however, in asserting that the women are meant to inspire faithful Christians who, in the face of trial and distress, were too afraid to witness the gospel. That purpose would be better served in a text where the women *did overcome* their fear and divulge their experience, not in a text ending with v. 8.

The most reasonable way to account for the silence of the women, along with the other discrepancies within and among the texts mentioned above, is to propose that either the story was created by Mark himself *de novo* or it first arose during, or shortly before, his day and he applied the silence of the women in order to explain why the empty tomb episode was up until then *unknown*: because the women told no one about it! The motivation to create such a narrative would have been considerable. An empty tomb is the best possible evidence for a resurrection, especially one that's "bodily." Paul's account in 1 Corinthians seems to suggest that the only evidence Christian evangelists advanced within the first three decades after the crucifixion was the testimony of eyewitnesses–Cephas, the twelve, the more than five hundred men, and so on. By Mark's day, however, most of these eyewitnesses (whom Paul insists are still alive) may well have perished; those few who were still alive may not have lived in Mark's community. Mark could

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[47]Ibid., p. 662.

certainly have benefited from a story that supplemented the eyewitness testimonies of the now vanishing first generation of Christians.

That Mark himself created the empty tomb legend also best explains the prevalence of women in the story. Many scholars have sought to explain why women, who were not respected as witnesses in Jewish tradition and about whom Paul says absolutely nothing, came to prominence as the witnesses of the empty tomb. The simplest explanation is that Mark employed women since they alone remained available for that duty! Mark has the disciples forsaking Jesus and fleeing following the Gethsemane arrest so the only personnel he can still enlist to witnesses Jesus' empty tomb would be the women. Moreover, Mark may have drafted the women as part and parcel of his polemic against the Jewish male disciples. Since in Mark the men ran away, the only ones potentially recruitable as faithful followers are the "lowly" women.

The silence of those women is thus more likely an attempt by Mark to explain why an empty tomb story had initially been unknown. For decades, the primary evidence for the resurrection was probably a kerygma similar in form to the one preserved by Paul. If Mark was going to then tell them about an empty tomb discovered by women, he would best be able to explain how such a crucial story had avoided promulgation for so long.

Matthew's inclusion of a guard story further suggests that the empty tomb narrative originated with Mark, or only shortly before Mark wrote. Two objections would have soon followed the promulgation of an empty tomb story – either the discoverers went to the wrong tomb, or someone had stolen the body. While the latter objection is overlooked by Mark, Matthew goes to great lengths to combat it, and the whole of his story deviates from Mark accordingly. Once

Matthew places guards at the sealed tomb, he cannot continue with Mark's story line in which the tomb is already opened when the women arrive (how could the guards let that happen?). He thus needs a literary device – the earthquake – to miraculously stun the guard and open the tomb. Because no man could have entered the tomb if it were sealed, Matthew replaces the young man inside the tomb with an angel who descends from heaven. If the empty tomb narrative had existed for any considerable time prior to Mark's utilization of it, it is hard to imagine that he, like Matthew, would not have taken steps to ward off the accusation of a theft.

One flaw in this overall argument is the fact that Paul, whose own notion of resurrection was *not* the resurrected corpse of the bodily Jesus, might deliberately have chosen not to mention an empty tomb tradition even if he was familiar with one. Then again, Paul might have chosen to inveigh against such a tradition, knowing that it conflicted with his notion of resurrection, and with his kerygma proclaiming Cephas and the twelve as the first to witness the risen Christ. All in all, the weight of the evidence suggests the late development of the empty tomb narrative, though admittedly the nature of the Pauline evidence demands that one maintain that position with caution.

## CHAPTER 4

## SYNTHESIS OF THE RESULTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HISTORIAN

The evidence has shown that some discrepancies among the NT texts enable historians to make definitive statements about history, others allow only for tentative assertions, while still others prove ultimately to be of no genuine historical value. This chapter aims to synthesize the results of the study and to draw conclusions.

### Indeterminative:

Discrepancies that prove *indeterminative* generally fall into three categories. First, they include *unique statements within a Gospel that conform to the apologetic aims of an author*. Each evangelist had his own interests in writing a Gospel; no true scholars dispute this. While this study has not pursued at great length the apologetic aims of each Gospel writer, it has addressed some of them. Mark, for example, sought to placate Rome in light of the incriminating evidence of the cross, and he tried to portray Jesus' immediate disciples as incompetent. Matthew undertook to rehabilitate the image of the disciples, especially Peter, and attempted to answer polemics from the Jewish community. Luke sought to present a harmonious history of the early church, and to cast Christianity as the embodiment of, and natural advancement out of, Judaism. Of course, in addition to these particular interests, each Gospel writer sought to inspire and reinvigorate faith in the risen Christ.

A problem arises, however, when evangelists furnish statements that also happen to conform to their own biases, especially when they are unique in making those claims, and no outside corroborating evidence can be brought to verify them. In such situations, the historian is left to wonder whether the statement is historical, or whether it was fabricated by the evangelist. Thus, as we saw, when Luke describes Jesus, his followers, even Paul, as meticulous observers of Jewish law, the historian cannot know whether Luke's report is historical, an interested fiction, or some combination of the two.

Discrepancies are also indeterminative *when they are irreconcilable statements or descriptions in which neither account can be verified as accurate*. Two reports are irreconcilable when the truth proposed by one statement precludes the possible truth of proposed by the other. For example, if the disciples claimed to have first seen the risen Christ in Jerusalem, they would not have also claimed to have first seen him in Galilee.[1] Similarly, if Jesus' paternal grandfather was Jacob (Matthew), then it was not Heli (Luke).[2] In the case of the first example, the statement found in one of the Gospels could well be true while the corresponding statement in the other Gospel false; yet because each statement possibly conforms to the theological interests of the respective writers,[3] the historian cannot determine which conclusion to draw. For that matter, if in both cases the statements respectively conform to the different writers' interests, then

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[1]Unless, e.g., there were different groupings of disciples, one claiming the one arena, the second the other.

[2]Unless the same person was known by two different names, in which case the respective names of the ancestors of this person with two names would have to be identical or be shown *themselves* to have referred to one and the same person.

[3]Here, *geography* may serve the interests of *theology*; Luke, e.g., viewed Jerusalem as symbolic of the *core* of Judaism which Christianity extended and perpetuated, while for Mark Galilee may have functioned as symbolic of *Gentiles*, the constituency (i.e., *Gentile*-Christians) for whom Mark may have been primarily writing.

*both* statements could be incorrect! In the second example, it is imaginable that one statement is true and the other false, but it is also quite possible that both are untrue. The historian has no way to decide.

Lastly, discrepancies prove indeterminative *when they result from reasonable silence on the part of an author*. The weaknesses of arguments from silence have been emphasized time and time again. Specifically, scholars have been quick to note that the historian can draw no legitimate inferences from an author's silence, so long as that silence is reasonable given the particular circumstances. Thus, as this study has shown, Paul's failure to corroborate most of the Gospel material is understandable, given the time and place of Paul's own ministry, his theology, and the matters relevant to his correspondences with various Christian communities.

**Tentative:**

While unique statements *conforming* to the interests of an author prove indeterminative, *statements opposing the interests of an author can often lead to* tentative *conclusions about history*. Based on the criterion of embarrassment, the historian assumes that a NT author includes an embarrassing statement or event only when it is an undeniable – i.e., *insuppressible* – historical reality. It is rather unlikely that any author supportive of Christianity would intentionally fabricate discomfiting details about the life of Jesus, Paul, or the early church. Accordingly, one might accept as historical Jesus' last words in Mark and Matthew, his baptism at the feet of John the Baptist, or his betrayal by Judas Iscariot. After all, each of these details poses a considerable challenge to the developing church. And yet, this study has also demonstrated that, in light of other evidence

in the New Testament, such details which appear to oppose the evangelists' interests may in fact conform to them! Accordingly, Jesus' final expression of disappointment in Mark and Matthew could well be part and parcel of an entire passion narrative modeled on Psalm 22; based on reports in Matthew, John, and Acts, recountings of Jesus' baptism might have reflected the early church's attempt to *subordinate* John the Baptist to Jesus; the embarrassing betrayal of Judas Iscariot possibly arose to answer the equally disturbing conundrum of how Jesus could ever have been captured at all. Thus, while embarrassing statements can yield insights into history, often times the conclusions emerging therefrom must be carefully assessed in the light of other evidence.

Similarly, *arguments from relevant (or non-reasonable) silence* yield conclusions about history which can be proposed tentatively. Determining when silence is relevant, of course, is the crux of the matter. Unfortunately, there are no objective criteria for judging such relevance, and ultimately the historian's subjective analysis may come into play and be determinative. So, for example, Paul never mentions Peter's denial of Jesus. But does this mean that Paul was unaware of that tradition? Some scholars, such as Sandmel, Brandon, and Wells, insist that if Paul had known about Peter's lapse of faith he most certainly would have noted it. He and Peter were rivals and, as demonstrated in his epistles, Paul is not above denouncing Peter. But, then again, maybe those scholars presume too much? Perhaps Paul was willing to criticize Peter over his hypocritical treatment of Gentiles, but would stop short of rehashing his most serious transgression of denying Jesus? Perhaps Paul did not want to demoralize his own readers by informing them of Peter's disloyalty? Perhaps it simply did not occur to Paul to mention it? In the end, the significance of Paul's silence depends upon the subjective evaluation of the historian.

Sometimes, however, the relevance of an author's silence is strengthened by other statements that the author does, in fact, make. Recall that Paul never mentions an empty tomb tradition. On its own, such silence only says so much, but it becomes all the more conspicuous when considered alongside Paul's insistence upon a kerygma that *contradicts* the empty tomb narratives (1 Cor. 15:5). By that same kerygma, Paul's silence about Judas or a betrayal is also rendered more substantial. And yet, even when the historian is convinced that Paul was unaware of a tradition presented in the Gospels, that is by no means conclusive proof that the tradition itself is not historically valid. In order to propose the late invention of a tradition with greater confidence, the historian must complement Paul's silence with evidence from the Gospels. So long as the argument has its basis in silence, however, it can only be considered a possible – at most even probable – conclusion.

**Definitive:**

*Definitive* conclusions arise from *combinations of discrepancies, contradictions, lacunae, and silence, for which only one solution is reasonable.* Such a compounding of incompatible details usually draws upon a variety of different texts, though it may also be discernible within but one pericope alone. For example, that Jesus' origins were actually in *Nazareth* (rather than Bethlehem) and that the Bethlehem infancy narratives were a late invention are confirmed by recourse to incompatible texts drawn from each of the Gospels and Paul's epistles; on the other hand, Mark's incorporation of Passover elements into a Last Supper narrative (originally devoid of them) is clear from multiple discrepancies resident in Mark 14 alone.

Definitive conclusions also arise in cases *where texts of a different genre oppose one another* – most notably, Luke's and Paul's conflicting accounts about Paul and the early church. Paul's testimony is preferred because of the impression made by Paul's correspondence compared to Luke's tendentiousness in writing his Gospel. For example, Paul would seem to have had no reason intentionally to postdate the Jerusalem Conference, yet Luke's motives are clearly served by shifting this Conference to an earlier point in Paul's career. Similarly, Paul gains nothing by saying that he was unknown by sight to the churches of Judea following his conversion, while Luke's insistence upon Jerusalem as site of Paul's upbringing is perfectly in keeping with the theological thrust of his Gospel. This is not to say that Paul is a completely disinterested source whose reports can be always considered accurate, or that Luke's willingness to alter or fabricate history makes his Gospel entirely devoid of dependable historical material. By and large, however, when faced with discrepancies between Acts and Paul, the historian can rely more confidently of the latter's testimony.

In exploring what is inferable from NT discrepancies, this study reveals that such discrepancies shed more light on the history of Paul and the early churches than on the history of Jesus' ministry. This is because clues about the latter tend to becloud our vision of Jesus and his disciples presented in the Gospels. This is especially true with regard to the passion narratives, as the evidence raised doubts about the historicity of the Passover elements in the Last Supper, the betrayal of Judas, Peter's denial, the trial before the Sanhedrin, and the discovery of an empty

tomb. It has also shown that Jesus' baptism at the feet of John the Baptist is by no means a historical certainty, and that Jesus' origins in Bethlehem are quite simply false.

Greater illumination is achievable about the history of the early church. This is because conjectures that early Christian communities (or even the Gospel writers themselves) invented some of the traditions just noted requires envisioning the motivation that lay behind such creativity, about what was transpiring in those communities, especially in terms of the challenges confronting them. So, for example, Mark's Sanhedrin account, if a fabrication, bespeaks a Christian community, possibly in Rome, attempting to mitigate the embarrassment of the cross as well as any interest by Roman officialdom in consigning Jesus to it. Similarly, Matthew's birth and empty tomb narratives, though not historically factual, may well suggest that he and his post-70 community were barraged by Jewish polemics and felt compelled to respond to them. Luke's manipulative refashioning of Paul's ministry, also demonstrated by this study, has been shown to be equally revealing.

All these findings underscore that the Gospels and Acts, though purporting to accurate reportage of events in history, are often simply not trustworthy to the historian. Much of the first five books of the New Testament reflects post-70 theology, and not history in any modern sense. As such, these traditions are most revealing about the thoughts and struggles of the post-70 Christian communities, and cannot necessarily serve as reliable attestations concerning Jesus, Paul or the pre-70 church. Accordingly, the burden of proof lies not with the skeptics but with those who claim these writings' reliability.

The indices to historicity described in the opening chapter represent attempts to achieve this burden of proof, but in the end these criteria yield only the barest minimum of the most basic

facts with absolute confidence. The criterion of *embarrassment*, for example, establishes the certainty of Jesus' crucifixion, as it is inconceivable that such an incriminating conclusion to Jesus' life would ever had been invented by a developing church. The same criterion is also used to establish the historicity of Peter's denial, Judas's betrayal, and Jesus' baptism; and yet even such events, though embarrassing to some extent, may themselves well have been fabricated to serve the needs of the early church. Thus, while the criterion of embarrassment can theoretically isolate the genuinely historical events and sayings contained in the Gospels, actual applications of that standard rarely determine definitively which accounts are in fact so embarrassing that they could not have been invented.

The other generally accepted indices are equally limited in their potential helpfulness. The criterion of *multiple attestation* determines that it is virtually indisputable that Jesus taught about a "kingdom of God"; yet ultimately this appears of little value for scholars cannot be sure what Jesus meant by a "kingdom of God" or how he conceived of his own relationship to it. Similarly, the criterion of *discontinuity* reveals that Jesus probably rejected fasting and prohibited divorce; yet, one is left to wonder how these few isolated teachings fit into a broader portrait of Jesus and his ministry: Are they reflective of a radically antinomian Jew? Could they be the idiosyncratic teachings of an otherwise pious eschatological prophet? Are there not many other contexts in which these teachings might be understood? The truth is that once the Gospels are stripped of their credibility as historical narratives, the methods that remain for the historian to uncover facts about Jesus and his ministry are remarkably limited in what they reveal.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the 20th century witnessed so many dissonant reconstructions of the historical Jesus. Beyond the most basic biographical details – that Jesus was born a Jew, hailed from Nazareth, and eventually did something which led the Romans to crucify him – scholars have painted pictures of Jesus in virtually every hue. There has been Jesus the eschatological prophet, the cynic, the political rebel, the socialist, the religious reformer, the militant, the pacifist, the sorcerer, the pious Jew, the rebellious Jew, the champion of the common man, and countless others. For nearly every saying ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels, some claim he said it, and some claim he did not. So, too, for nearly every episode in Jesus' life or ministry some deem it authentic, others as due to a creative early church. To be sure, some reconstructions are more sophisticated, thoroughly researched, or insightful than others, extending all the way to those that are patently absurd. In the final analysis, however, we must rest content at the most with probabilities.

The same problem arises with attempts to reconstruct the history of the pre-70 church. To this day, many scholars continue to rely upon Acts for understanding the development of Christian institutions in Jerusalem during the 30s, 40s and 50s, and the expansion of Christianity–primarily through the agency of Paul–throughout much of the Mediterranean world. But the only reliable literary sources for reconstructing the earliest church history may well be the relevant passages in the Pauline epistles.

Such conclusions are no doubt frustrating as well as disconcerting. In this connection, John Knox recalls one scholar who, in response to Knox's skepticism regarding the credibility of Acts, said: "But if we cannot rely confidently upon Acts, what is left us? We would not be able to write

a life of Paul at all ...."[4] As Knox rightly points out, such a consideration should have absolutely no bearing on scholarly assessments of the reliability of Acts, or for that matter, of the Gospels. The historian's desire to know who the real Jesus was, or to recover what the earliest church was truly like, should never compel accepting unreliable sources, or drawing conclusions that exceed the evidence.

On the other hand, a quest for *plausibility*, rather than historicity, may be permissible – so long as the historian recognizes the clear distinction between the two objectives. After all, ancient history would not be the only discipline in which plausible speculations play an important role. Quantum physics, for example, in attempting to uncover the truth about atoms, employs a theory that might well serve as a conceptual paradigm for historians as well. Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that it is not possible to determine simultaneously the position and momentum of a particle such as an electron. In other words, while scientists can identify a general area in which an electron is located, they cannot specify exactly where that electron is at any particular moment in time. They can postulate where the electron *could* be, but not where it actually is.

Research into the history of Christian origins ought to operate similarly. The certain facts yielded by the indices to historicity can serve to create general areas, or parameters, within which any reconstruction of Jesus or the early church must be situated. Within those parameters historians can then posit any number of conjectures, each to be evaluated as more or less plausible in light of the evidence. What historians must allow, however, is that ultimately there may result

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[4]John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, p. 47.

*several* plausible and equally valid conjectural reconstructions. The objective should not be to uncover a "historical" Jesus, but to formulate all the "possible" or "plausible" portraits of Jesus within those given parameters. Thus, like the physicists, historians can postulate complete pictures of who Jesus might have been, but not who or what he actually was.

# CHAPTER 5

## MODERN RAMIFICATIONS

While Jews should always be encouraged to broaden their intellectual horizons by exploring the literature and mythology of other world religions, it is especially important that Jews secure basic familiarity with contemporary New Testament scholarship. Unlike the Quran, the Vedas, or the literary traditions of African or Native American tribes, the New Testament plays an especially significant role in the *Jewish* historical and contemporary experience. It was composed, at least in part, by Jewish authors and even Gentile contributors grounded much of their theology in the Jewish scriptures. The primary historical personalities described within it considered themselves to be Jews; and, perhaps most importantly, though Christianity ultimately parted ways with Judaism, Christianity has continued to exist side-by-side with Judaism until the present day. For much of that time, the descriptions of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament affected the treatment accorded Jews by Christian neighbors and by ruling Christian authorities.

Unfortunately, those descriptions are hardly flattering, and it is not surprising that most readers of the New Testament have been induced, historically, to show little regard for either Jews or Judaism. The passion narratives, for example, portray Jews, particularly Jewish leaders, as corrupt and ignorant fools who blindly destroy their own savior. Elsewhere in the Gospels, the Pharisees, the forerunners to the rabbinic Judaism out of which all the modern streams of Judaism emerged, are depicted as hypocritical and oppressively legalistic. Paul describes the Jews as blind and jealous backsliders. True, Paul himself understood this lapse in Jewish judgment to be

temporary, offering an opportunity for God to extend to the gentiles a salvation which the Jews, too, would ultimately participate in (Rom. 9-11). Over time, however, Paul's words have not always been understood within that context and their effect has been to perpetuate anti-Jewish sentiment.

For centuries, of course, Jews were powerless to respond to their depiction in the New Testament or to curb the anti-Jewish animosity which naturally emerged on account of it. Today, however, American Jews, at least, are not so paralyzed as in the past. Democracy provides them the protection to address stereotypes and accusations which continue to be reinforced by the New Testament, while contemporary scholarship offers them the tools to do so in a sophisticated manner. And yet, despite the fact that such scholarship is readily available, few Jews, including rabbis, endeavor to familiarize themselves with it. For that matter, most Jews (excepting those who have converted from Christianity) lack even a most rudimentary knowledge of the contents of the New Testament.

Such ignorance becomes conspicuously problematic when Jews encounter the kinds of negative attitudes toward Jews and Judaism that are often inspired by the New Testament. When faced with the assertions that the Jews killed Jesus, that Judaism is a legalistic and superseded religion, or that Jews have been too stubborn to accept the firm historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection offered by the Gospels, most Jews are unable to respond. Often they become reticent or contentious; only rarely do they serve as informed advocates for their ancestors or their faith. If Jews are to take full ownership of their own history and identity, they must understand what the New Testament says about Jews and Judaism and, perhaps more importantly, why it makes the

claims that it does. Such awareness is especially incumbent upon liberal rabbis, as they are called upon not only to educate their communities, but often times to speak on behalf of those communities as well.

A number of the findings in this study could be particularly useful in helping American Jews respond intelligently and effectively to the infelicitous descriptions of Jews or Judaism that periodically surface in popular media. For example, on April 15, 2001, newspapers around the country published a *B.C.* cartoon in which the candles on a menorah slowly burn away, in conjunction with Jesus' last seven "words." In the final panels, the menorah is transformed into a cross, and set against the backdrop of an open tomb. While the author of the comic strip, Johnny Hart, insisted that the cartoon was a tribute to both Jews and Christians during the season of Passover and Easter, few were able to discern his intended praise for Judaism. In the weeks that followed, Jews, especially, took umbrage, voicing their discontent in letters to the editor, sermons, and in other public arenas. An angry Rabbi Raphael Kanter of New Bedford, Massachusetts, said that "at worst it's insensitive, at best it's a sloppy comic that is unintelligible to the people I've seen look at it."[1] Rabbi Marvin Hier of California claimed that the cartoon is "... basically saying the Jewish people will not exist – they will be consumed by Christianity."[2] The Jewish Defense League went so far as to call it "... an example of outright Jewish hatred, ... telling Christians to destroy our religion in the name of Jesus."[3] These statements suggest that a good number of Jewish

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[1]http://www.s-t.com/daily/04-01/04-14-01/a08wn047.htm

[2]http://newstribune.com/stories/041301/ent_0413010031.asp

[3]http://www.newsmax.com/commentarchive.shtml?a=2001/4/17/182138

respondents were unable to identify the central idea expressed in the cartoon, or to indicate precisely why the cartoon disturbed them as it did.

Far from being "unintelligible," or "sloppy," or a prescription for the future consumption or elimination of Jews by their Christian neighbors, the cartoon is a clear illustration of a theology expressed long ago by the author of Luke-Acts. This theology does not contend that Christianity is superior to Judaism, or that Christianity will one day displace Judaism, but rather that Christianity *is* authentic Judaism. Luke sought to show that through Christ's death and resurrection, Christianity became the natural extension of ancient Judaism, while those who continued to disbelieve in the risen Christ no longer practiced Judaism at all. Hart's cartoon captures this notion by showing that the menorah was the symbol of Judaism prior to the first Easter, yet the cross became the symbol of authentic Judaism thereafter. It is crucial to note that the cross does not replace or supersede the menorah, but is rather embedded in the menorah from the first frame onward, the implication being, as Michael Cook has noted, that the "goal of ancient Israelite religion...reached its culmination only in the birth of Christianity." Effectively, then, "Gentile-Christians now constitute the true Jews, and the biological Jews – unless they accept Jesus – are dispossessed, even 'orphaned,' from their own heritage.[4]

Were more Jews able to identify and articulate this central idea in the cartoon, they might also be able to frame their responses in a more constructive way. Rather than accusing a man of "Jewish hatred," or calling him "insensitive" because his religious beliefs oppose their own, Jews could respond by identifying the belief in question and explaining why they disagree with it. They

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[4]Michael Cook, in a posting to hucalum@shamash.org on April 14, 2001.

might explain that they do not feel dispossessed of their religion, and that, to their own mind, Jews have remained a vibrant, creative, and distinct religious community from ancient times until the present day. They might add that the Catholic Church, at the Second Vatican Council, affirmed the notion that a viable Judaism continued to develop after the 1st century.

Six years earlier than the publication of the controversial *B.C.* cartoon, on Good Friday, 1995, another issue surfaced in the media for which the findings of this thesis would help formulate a Jewish response. New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, and evangelical theologian William Craig were guests on CNN's program *Talk Back Live*. The subject of their discussion was "Jesus: Man or Messiah?" In defending his choice for "Messiah," Craig made the following assertion:

> I think that there are three major factors that undergird the belief in Jesus' resurrection as a fact of history: the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances to his disciples, and the very origin of the Christian movement itself. The consensus of New Testament scholarship is that each of these three facts can be independently established. And I know of no better explanation of those three facts than the fact that Jesus historically rose from the dead.[5]

Craig's statement does not overtly address Judaism, but its tacit implications are of immediate concern to Jewish listeners. By insisting that the consensus of New Testament scholars is that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is a historical "fact" (a word used four times in the passage above), Craig insinuates that those who do not believe in the risen Christ deny something which is objectively verifiable.

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[5]Russell Shorto, *Gospel Truth: The New Image of Jesus Emerging from Science and History, and Why It Matters*, p. 253.

Though true scholars of New Testament know that Craig's "facts" are not facts at all, his statement is especially pernicious in a public forum because most of the listeners do not know the least bit about contemporary biblical scholarship. According to Russell Shorto, such deceptive and disingenuous reporting has become an emerging trend in some conservative theological circles. In an attempt to counter the critical scholarship of the New Testament which began over a century ago, many Christian fundamentalists have scrapped their efforts to undermine the scholarly endeavor, and have instead begun to insist that modern scholarship in fact confirms the assertions of Christian faith. They hope to further their evangelical goals by advancing the notion that the Jesus of faith and the Jesus of history are one in the same – that Jesus' identity as the Christ can be scientifically and historically verified.[6]

While Jews cannot be expected to possess the skills and knowledge of New Testament scholars, they should be made aware that the New Testament, being primarily reflective of post-70 Christian theology, is rarely reliable as a source for information about the historical Jesus. This is especially true with regard to its descriptions of supernatural phenomena – the virgin birth, healings, miracles, and the resurrection. Should Jews pursue the issue further they would find, as this study has, that none of Craig's three assertions can be independently verified. The Gospels themselves do not even agree upon a location for the disciples' vision of the risen Christ; the empty tomb appears to be a fabrication of the later developing church; and the emergence of the Christian movement no more verifies the truth of Christianity than the emergence of Jews verifies the truth of Judaism, or the emergence of Muslims confirms the truth of Islam.

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[6]Ibid., pp. 254-262.

Both Johnny Hart's cartoon and the CNN television program were inspired by the Easter season. During that same time each and every year, Jews are confronted by other events that invariably call for a Jewish response. As Christians prepare to commemorate the final week of Jesus' life, passion plays take to the stage throughout this nation and the world. They range from large scale productions that extend well into the weeks before and after Easter, to local church renditions with only one or two performances. By and large, the scripts for these plays derive from one Gospel or another, or from a composite of all four Gospels, or from other scripts already similarly derived. Often the scripts are augmented with details that are especially disagreeable to Jews, such as offensive costuming for the Priests and Pharisees, or depictions of Jews reminiscent of the hunched over and swarthy medieval European stereotypes. One annual play in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, even has women dallying seductively in the Sanhedrin.

Even if they were understood to be works of drama alone, passion plays would be detrimental to Jewish interests. Consider, for example, how influential Shakespeare's fictitious character, Shylock, has been in shaping non-Jewish attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. Only in recent times has it become common to see Shylock not as an authentic characterization of the medieval Jew, but as a reflection of the antisemitic stereotypes common in Elizabethan England. Passion plays, however, are usually not seen as works of dramatic fiction, and the fact that many viewers understand these plays to be reflective of *history* makes their effect all the more devastating. When viewers believe that the Jews depicted on the stage of a passion play represent *real* Jews in history, who *really did* conspire against and murder an innocent Jesus, then the

negative portrayal of Jews can no longer be dismissed as the product of mere literary creativity or cultural bias.

Historically, the depiction of Jews in the passion narratives has been of great consequence. As John Pawlikowski notes, "probably no other accusation against the Jewish community by the Christian church is responsible for more Jewish suffering throughout history than the deicide charge."[7] It has served to justify Christian mistreatment of Jews, and to confirm Christian conceptions of Jews as a stubborn and insolent people rejected by God. In fairness, the 20th century has seen considerable abatement of the conscious link in Christian minds between the Jews of Jesus' era and the Jews of modernity. The Catholic Church, for example, in its *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, promulgated in 1965,[8] proclaimed that "what happened in [Jesus'] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today"; and furthermore, that "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God." Thus, while the Catholic Church holds, as the Gospels do, that some of the Jews in Jesus' day are to be held accountable for his death, it also insists that the guilt for this deicide has not been inherited by future generations of Jews (although, to be sure, first-century *Roman* officialdom here continued to be assigned no role at all). This and other similar gestures by Christian communities represent laudable efforts to break down that which

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[7]John Pawlikowski, *What Are They Saying About Christian-Jewish Relations*, p. 1.

[8]Reference here is to Section 4 of the fuller Ecumenical Council Vatican II document (October 28, 1965).

Pawlikowski calls, "a highly developed theology within Christianity which claimed that Jews, for the remainder of human history, were to be subjected to continual suffering...."[9]

As Christians do their part to undo some of the historic animosity towards Jews inspired by the passion narratives, it would also behoove Jews to become their own best advocates in responding to passion traditions. They ought to know that there is fair reason to doubt many alleged events in the final week of Jesus' life, such as the betrayal by Judas, the Sanhedrin trial, and the Barabbas incident. They ought to know that the only "fact" of history universally recognized in the passion scenes is the execution of Jesus on a cross, and that the order for such an execution could only have come from a Roman official. They ought to know that the Gospel writers intentionally portrayed the Romans as reluctant accessories to an otherwise Jewish plot to destroy Jesus. Jews should be familiar with these points, and they should feel comfortable articulating them in responding to passion plays.

Jews who possess such familiarity with New Testament scholarship would also be able to identify other instances in which passion events, as well as other dubious accounts in the Gospels, are presented as historical facts. For example, a high school textbook used in the United States, though published in 1973 and claiming to include "an extensively revised text reflecting new scholarship," offers the following description of Jesus' ministry:

> The most important foundation of the new [medieval] culture was the Christian religion, whose founder, Jesus of Nazareth, was born in a small town of Judea some time near the beginning of the Christian era .... Though the conception he held of himself is somewhat obscure, he apparently believed that he had a mission to oppose Roman rule and to save mankind from error and sin. His preaching and

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[9]Pawlikowski, p. 1.

> other activities eventually aroused the antagonism of some of the chief priests and conservative rabbis. They disliked his caustic references to the legalism of the Pharisees, his contempt for form and ceremony, and his scorn for pomp and luxury. They feared also that his active leadership would cause trouble with the Romans. Accordingly, they brought him into the highest court in Jerusalem, where he was solemnly condemned for blasphemy and for setting himself up as "King of the Jews" and turned over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, for execution of the sentence.[10]

Not only does this putatively historical account accept the historicity of the Gospel birth narratives at face value and advance the notion that the Jews were primarily responsible for Jesus' death, it also perpetuates the image of the Pharisees as oppressively legalistic. The textbook stresses this point in its chapter describing "The Hebrew Civilization," where it explains that "Jesus himself, although he condemned the Pharisees for their legalism and hypocrisy, did not repudiate all of their tenets. Instead of abolishing the ancient law ... he demanded its fulfillment ...."[11]

The use of texts relying upon the Gospels as straightforward accounts of history is not limited to high school curricula. Remarkably, one encounters similar texts on syllabi for college-level courses in Jewish history, even on recommended reading lists for persons pursuing conversion to Reform Judaism. For example, Solomon Grayzel's *A History of the Jews*, a volume widely assigned by many professors of Judaic Studies, is hardly discriminating in its approach to the Gospels. The whole of Jesus' ministry described in the Gospels – from his baptism at the foot of the John the Baptist, to his miracles, his trial and conviction before Jewish authorities, and even his

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[10]Edward McNall Burns, *Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture*, pp. 222-23.

[11]Ibid., p. 90.

empty tomb – is reported as historically factual.[12] Paul Johnson's *A History of the Jews* does the same, at one point even confirming and reasserting the Gospel's interested notion that the Jews convicted Jesus on the trumped-up charge of blasphemy and urged a reluctant Pilate to execute him. Claiming that Deuteronomy 17 provided Jews the legal impetus to pursue Jesus, he describes the passion events as follows:

> In *a people as argumentative and strong-minded as the Jews*, living under the rule of the law, this provision, known as the offence of the "rebellious elder," was considered essential to hold society together. Jesus was a learned man; that was why Judas, just before his arrest, called him "rabbi." Hence, when brought before the Sanhedrin–or whatever court it was–he appeared as a rebellious elder, and by refusing to plead, he put himself in contempt of court and so convicted himself of the crime by his silence. No doubt it was the Temple priests and the Shammaite Pharisees, as well as the Sadducees, who felt most menaced by Jesus' doctrine and wanted him *put to death in accordance with scripture. But Jesus could not have been guilty of the crime, at any rate as it was later defined by Maimonides in his Judaic code.* In any case it was not clear that the Jews had the right to carry out the death sentence. To dispose of these doubts, Jesus was sent to the Roman procurator Pilate as a state criminal. *There was no evidence against him at all on this charge*, other than the supposition that men claiming to be the Messiah sooner or later rose in rebellion–Messiah-claimants were usually packed off to the Roman authorities if they became troublesome enough. *So Pilate was reluctant to convict but did so for political reasons.*[13] (Emphases added)

In addition to reinforcing the Gospels' effort to shift the blame for Jesus' death from the Romans to the Jews, Johnson here includes yet another tendentious concept from the Gospels (that Jesus was "put to death in accordance with scripture"). All along, moreover, he demonstrates a naive understanding of Jewish legal history (using the 12th century *Mishneh Torah* to make sense

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[12]Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews: From the Babylonian Exile to the Present*, pp. 131-136.

[13]Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, pp. 129-130.

of a 1st century legal issue), and he applies stereotypical and pejorative language in describing the Jewish people as a whole ("argumentative and strong-minded"). Following this paragraph, Johnson goes on to describe Christianity, in no uncertain terms, as the religion which distilled Judaism into its "spiritualized," "non-violent," and "universalistic" essence. He also implies that this new universalized religion made great inroads amongst the Jewish masses, who previously had been "driven ... into the arms of the Torah rigorists."[14]

Thus, each of the three texts mentioned above – a high school textbook, a college text, and a popular history recommended to conversion students – reveals considerable flaws, or oversteps warranted bounds, in attempting to present the historical Jesus and the history of the early church. Each relies too heavily on a literal reading of the Gospels, which not only generates an uncritical and inaccurate reconstruction of history, but also serves to perpetuate negative attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. Were Jews familiar with the conclusions of this thesis – even if they were only able to articulate a few basic principles about the nature and contents of the Gospels *vis-a-vis* history, traditionally conceived – they could take ownership of their own history and serve as advocates for their own people. Whether in response to a passion play, in a high school or college classroom, or in any other venue, Jews could cease being passive accessories to the blurring or blending of Christian faith, or Christian Scripture, with history.

At the same time, however, liberal Jews should recognize that many of the events described in their own sacred literature appear likewise suspect to the historian. A full treatment of such literature would go well beyond the scope of this thesis, but it suffices to say that the Hebrew Bible,

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[14]Ibid., p. 131.

like the New Testament, cannot be depended upon as a straightforward account of history. The same can be said of Rabbinic Literature or the writings of the Apocrypha. Even the chronicles of Josephus, relied upon heavily by many scholars of the ancient world, must be understood in light of the interests and biases that they convey. Accordingly, while it is appropriate for liberal Jews to cite New Testament scholarship when responding to inappropriate or unfair presentations of "history," it ought not be used in attempts to "debunk" Christianity, or to assert the preeminence of Judaism over it.

In fact, the challenge posed by historical criticism to *both* Christianity and Judaism might serve as a basis for common discourse rather than a source of contention or religious competition. After all, each religion traditionally has been rooted in events that were believed to have occurred, and each has been forced to reckon with the findings of contemporary scholarship which, by and large, question the historicity of those events. Jews face the proposition that the Patriarchal narratives, the Exodus, and the revelation at Sinai are merely literary creations. Christians must cope with the fact that Jesus' historical ministry, including his death and the belief in his resurrection, remain for the most part clouded in mystery.

For some Jews and Christians, of course, this dilemma hardly matters: So-called fundamentalists, for example, maintain the pre-modern notion that Scripture accurately reports real events in history and, if critical scholarship finds otherwise, then it is simply wrong. Others advance a post-modern faith in the truth of Scripture, claiming that the 20th century's "epistemology of objectification" has run its course and no longer impresses itself on the religious believer.[15] But

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[15]Stephen W. Gunter, *Resurrection Knowledge: Recovering the Gospel for a Postmodern Church*, p. 83.

while it is true that the methods of modern scholarship have their shortcomings, and that post-modern perspectives can inform the way scholars understand concepts such as "truth" and "history," the simple fact is that a significant number of present-day Jews and Christians feel caught between the traditional claims of their religion and the findings of 20th century scholarship (not only in history, but in biology, psychology, anthropology, and other disciplines as well).

The purpose of this study has not been to propose a solution to that dilemma, but simply to emphasize that the task of reformulating the nature of religious faith and observance in light of modernity falls upon liberal Jews and liberal Christians alike. After all, such liberals often have more in common with one another than they do with the orthodox adherents in their own religion! Accordingly, there are opportunities for meaningful dialogue between these communities, as each seeks to reinterpret an ancient religion in the present age. Through sharing and reasoned discourse, they can assist one another in the daunting tasks before them: the incorporation of scholarship into the study of sacred literature, the reformulation of liturgy, canon, and traditional structures of authority, the ongoing redefinition of liberalism over and against relativism or ethical nihilism, and so on.

However, the importance of cooperative ventures and dialogue amongst liberal adherents of all faiths goes well beyond issues of religious reform. A survey of world affairs reveals that the menace of fundamentalism poses a threat to human freedom throughout the globe. There are evangelical Christians who would deny civil liberties to Americans; there are orthodox Jews and Muslims who continue to stymie prospects for peace in the Middle East. At times, of course, it is not only human freedom, but human life, that is attacked – consider Timothy McVeigh, Yigal Amir,

or the September 11th attackers. With the increasing availability of devastating nuclear and biological weapons, it is quite possible that future acts of violence fueled by fundamentalism will not kill by the tens, hundreds, or even thousands, but by the millions, if not more. On that grim scale, not only human life, but all of human civilization is at risk. In the face of this threat, posed by some who continue to believe in ancient religious texts as infallible truth, it is critical that liberals of all faiths should join hands in the name of freedom, fairness, and humanity.

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