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THE  
**NEW TESTAMENT**

# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO **MATTHEW**

Barbara E. Reid, O.P.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In many ways the Gospel of Matthew holds primacy of place for Christians. It is the first book in the New Testament, and in patristic times it was thought to have been the first Gospel written. It was the Gospel most used in worship in the early church. And it has been the one most commented upon and preached, beginning with the first known commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by Origen (ca. A.D. 185–254).

Some of the best-loved passages in Scripture, as well as some of the most difficult sayings and teachings of Jesus, are found in this Gospel. This Gospel is distinctive for its emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus, as authoritative teacher, whose life and ministry fulfill the Scriptures. Wisdom motifs also mark Matthew's presentation of Jesus. The assurance that Jesus is Emmanuel, "God-with-us," frames the whole Gospel (1:23; 28:20).

### **Author**

Traditionally, the author of the First Gospel has been identified as Matthew, the tax collector who was called by Jesus (Matt 9:9) and sent out as an apostle (10:3). But, like many ancient authors, the evangelist nowhere identifies himself. The apostle Matthew may have been responsible for an earlier stage of the Gospel tradition, or he may have been a missionary to the area where this Gospel was composed. But most scholars agree that he was not the author of the Gospel. The composer copied extensively from the Gospel of Mark; an eye-witness would have told the story in his own words. It is also doubtful that a tax collector would have the kind of religious and literary education needed to produce this Gospel. Finally, the theological concerns in this Gospel are those of second-generation Christians. For the sake of brevity, however, we continue to refer to

the author as “Matthew.”

The evangelist was likely a Jewish Christian, writing for a community that was predominantly Jewish Christian. The author had extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and a keen concern for Jewish observance and the role of the Law. A few scholars hold that Matthew was a Gentile because of his fierce anti-Jewish polemic, especially in chapter 23. In addition, he seems to have been unfamiliar with distinctions between Pharisees and Sadducees (e.g., 16:5-12; 22:23). He also appears to have misunderstood the Hebrew parallelism in Zechariah 9:9, thinking that the prophet is speaking of two beasts (21:1-9).

These, however, are not sure indicators that the evangelist was a Gentile. The anti-Jewish polemic can be explained as part of a Jewish Christian’s attempt to define his community in relation to other Jews who have not followed Jesus. Matthew’s juxtaposition of “Pharisees and Sadducees” is simply a generic phrase for the religious leaders at a time when Sadducees were no longer functioning. And the apparent misinterpretation of Zechariah 9:9 does not negate the evidence that the evangelist had a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, seen in his frequent biblical citations and allusions.

## **Date**

Allusions to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (21:41-42; 22:7; 24:1-2) indicate that Matthew wrote after A.D. 70. A date of approximately A.D. 85 would allow time for circulation of the Gospel of Mark, one of Matthew’s sources, which was composed close to A.D. 70.

## **Setting**

We do not know the precise locale of the Matthean community, but a prosperous urban setting is likely from the twenty-six times that Matthew uses the word *polis*, “city” (cf. Mark, four times; Luke, sixteen times) and the twenty-eight times he mentions gold and silver (cf. Mark, one time; Luke, four times). Matthean Christians, like those of other locales, were women and men of diverse social and civic status, ethnic identities, and levels of wealth. They comprised only a small percentage of the total population. It was a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, striving to work out their identity as the New Israel.

The oldest tradition, and still the most frequently suggested locale for the Matthean community, is Antioch of Syria. As the third largest city of the empire, it had a sizable Jewish population. It was an important center of emerging Christianity (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3), where Jewish and Gentile Christians

struggled to work out their new relationship in Christ (Gal 2:11-13). Other possible settings include Caesarea Maritima, Sepphoris, Alexandria, Edessa, Tyre, and Sidon.

### **Jews and Christians**

The relationship of the Matthean community to their Jewish counterparts is not entirely clear. Pointing to a rupture between the two groups are references to “their synagogues” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54), “your synagogues” (23:34), “their scribes” (7:29), “the Jews to the present [day]” (28:15), Jewish persecution of Jesus’ followers (10:17; 23:34), and bitter denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees (ch. 23). There are stories of exemplary faith of those who are not Jews: the magi (2:1-12); a Roman centurion (8:5-13); a Canaanite woman (15:21-28); a Roman soldier (27:54). That Jesus’ message is for Gentiles is seen clearly in the final commission (28:19) and more subtly in the inclusion of Ruth and Rahab in Jesus’ genealogy (1:5); the coming of the magi to worship Jesus (2:11); the saying “in his name the Gentiles will hope” (12:21); the faith of a Canaanite woman (15:21-28); and in the parables of the tenants (21:33-43) and the marriage feast (22:1-10).

Yet, at the same time Matthew stresses a specific outreach to Israel. Only in Matthew does Jesus tell his disciples to confine their mission to the towns of Israel (10:5-6, 23; 15:24). And Matthew’s Gospel, overall, is strongly Jewish in tone, emphasizing the abiding validity of the Law and fulfillment of the Scriptures.

This Gospel is designed to offer Matthew’s Jewish Christians an account of Jesus’ life and mission that enables them to relate to the two loyalties that pull them. On the one hand, they are Jews who are trying to define themselves in relation to other Jews who have not accepted Jesus. The latter see them as disloyal to the Mosaic covenant, engaged in dangerous partnership with pagans. On the other hand, they are Christians trying to relate to a community in which the majority is now Gentile, for whom the continued adherence of Jewish Christians to Jewish Law and customs would prove problematic. Matthew’s Gospel tries to defend and define Jewish Christianity, on the one hand, and unity with Gentile Christians, on the other. It validates the community’s continuity with the past promises to Israel, while at the same time justifies their new allegiance to the person of Christ and his mission.

A prime pastoral concern is the impact that Christian use of the Gospel of Matthew has had on Jewish-Christian relations. Statements in the Gospel that

reflect the historical tensions of an emerging Jewish Christian community struggling to define itself in relation to other Jews need to be clearly explained as such so that they are not used to fuel anti-Judaism in contemporary contexts.

## **Composition**

Eusebius, our earliest source of information on Matthew, quotes Papias of Hierapolis (ca. A.D. 125) as saying, “Matthew compiled the Sayings (*logia*) in the Hebrew language, and everyone translated them as well as they could” (*H.E.* 3.39.16). Irenaeus and Origen understood Eusebius’s statement to mean that Matthew composed the Gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic. There is no firm evidence, however, that Papias was in a position to know the facts of the evangelist’s method of composition. Moreover, his statement is full of ambiguities, and there is no indisputable evidence from the Greek text of the Gospel that it was translated from a Hebrew or Aramaic original.

Most modern scholars think that Matthew relied on the Marcan tradition as one of his prime sources. Matthew has retained some 600 of Mark’s 660 verses, often streamlining the story and converting narration into dialogue. He follows Mark more closely from chapter 13 onward than in the first twelve chapters. Matthew adds infancy narratives and resurrection appearance stories, and recasts Jesus’ teaching into five large blocks of discourse. He adapts the story to his predominantly Jewish Christian community by omitting explanations of Jewish customs (e.g., Matt 15:2; cf. Mark 7:3-4). Matthew also emphasizes more explicitly Jesus’ fulfillment of the Scriptures, often citing specific texts from the Old Testament, particularly from the prophet Isaiah (e.g., 3:3; 4:14; 8:17). He gives more attention to the question of the Law and its observance (5:17-48).

Matthew, as well as Luke, also used a source called “Q” (for *Quelle*, German for “source”) for some two hundred sayings of Jesus. Although no copy of this collection of sayings has yet been found, its existence can be supposed, due to the similarity in the wording and order of these sayings in the two Gospels. Finally, Matthew also relied on oral and written traditions, designated “M,” that are unique to his Gospel.

The evangelist’s own words capture well his method of composition: “every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old” (13:52). Matthew both faithfully transmits and creatively shapes the tradition.

## **Structure**

There are various ways to delineate the structure of Matthew's Gospel. Many think that Matthew's organizing principle was to present Jesus as the New Moses, giving five blocks of teaching, corresponding to the five books of the Pentateuch. A concluding formula, "When Jesus finished these words" (7:28; 19:1; cf. 11:1; 13:53; 26:1), marks off each section of narrative and discourse. Framing the whole are the infancy narratives and the passion-resurrection account. Benjamin W. Bacon was the first to propose this structure (*Studies in Matthew* [London: Constable, 1930]):

1. Infancy Narratives: 1:1–2:23
2. Five Books of Narratives and Discourses
  1. The Son Begins to Proclaim the Kingdom
    1. Narrative: Beginnings of the Ministry: 3:1–4:25
    2. Discourse: The Sermon on the Mount: 5:1–7:29
  2. The Mission of Jesus and His Disciples in Galilee
    1. Narrative: The Cycle of Nine Miracle Stories: 8:1–9:38
    2. Discourse: The Mission, Past and Future: 10:1–11:1
  3. Jesus Meets Opposition from Israel
    1. Narrative: Jesus Disputes with Israel: 11:2–12:50
    2. Discourse: Parables: 13:1–53
  4. The Messiah Forms the Church and Prophesies His Passion
    1. Narrative: The Itinerant Jesus Prepares for the Church by His Deeds: 13:54–17:27
    2. Discourse: Church Life and Order: 18:1–35
  5. The Messiah and the Church on the Way to the Passion
    1. Narrative: Jesus Leads His Disciples to the Cross as He Confounds His Enemies: 19:1–23:29
    2. Discourse: The Last Judgment: 24:1–25:46
3. Climax: Passion, Death, and Resurrection: 26:1–28:20

One problem with this structure is that it relegates the infancy and passion narratives to a marginal position, when, in fact, they are central to Matthew's story. Not all scholars agree that the motif of Jesus as the New Moses is the central organizing theme.

Some scholars see a chiasmic pattern, with chapter 13 as the hinge (e.g., Peter Ellis, *Matthew: His Mind and His Message* [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1974]):



a	Narratives	chs. 1–4
b	Sermons	chs. 5–7
c	Narratives	chs. 8–9
d	Sermons	ch. 10
e	Narratives	chs. 11–12
f	Sermon	ch. 13
e'	Narratives	chs. 14–17
d'	Sermons	ch. 18
c'	Narratives	chs. 19–22
b'	Sermons	chs. 23–25
a'	Narratives	chs. 26–28

In this configuration, Matthew 13:35 is the turning point: before it Jesus addresses all Jews; after it he devotes his attention solely to those who have already become his disciples.

Not all scholars see Matthew's structure in such neat patterns. Another approach is to regard Matthew more as a storyteller whose structure has more seams and turns and is determined by his retelling of Mark's story (e.g., Donald Senior, *What Are They Saying About Matthew?* [rev. ed.; New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1996] 34–37):

1. 1:1–4:11 Origin of Jesus
2. 4:12–10:42 Galilean ministry of teaching (chs. 5–7) and healing (chs. 8–9) as a model for disciples' ministry (ch. 10)
3. 11:1–16:12 Varying responses to Jesus (rejection by Jewish opponents, faith of disciples)
4. 16:13–20:34 Jesus and his disciples on the way to Jerusalem
5. 21:1–28:15 Jerusalem; Jesus' final days of teaching in the temple
6. 28:16–20 Finale: Back to Galilee; disciples sent to the whole world; Jesus' abiding presence

This outline delineates the major movements and theological motifs of the Gospel, taking into account the fluid nature of narrative, and is the outline adopted in this commentary.

## **Purpose**

This Gospel, with its emphasis on Jesus as authoritative Teacher and its stress on the ethical implications of discipleship, is a powerful catechetical tool. The evangelist may have composed it with the idea of providing a handbook for church leaders to assist them in preaching, teaching, and leading worship. This text is a particularly useful guide for helping believers discern what to keep from tradition and what to let go in changing circumstances. Its strategies for peace-making, reconciliation, and formation of community make this Gospel a potent pastoral aid. In every age it continues to bring new vision and hope to Christians in mission, inviting them into ever deeper relationship with Jesus, who remains always with them (1:23; 28:20).

The commentaries in this booklet are all primarily based on the Greek text rather than the New American Bible translation. Accordingly, the translation of words or phrases in the commentaries sometimes differs from the translation provided at the top of the page. It is hoped that these complementary translations will enhance understanding of the Gospel.

## **COMMENTARY**

### **THE ORIGINS OF JESUS**

#### ***Matt 1:1–4:11***

The opening chapters set the stage for the whole Gospel. Matthew, like Luke, begins with two introductory chapters of infancy narratives. The differences between the two accounts indicate that they did not share the same sources for this portion of the story. Matthew tells the story of Jesus' origins, the unusual circumstances surrounding his birth, and the threat to Jesus' life by Herod from the perspective of Joseph. Luke, in contrast, makes Mary central. Beginning with the infancy narratives, Matthew calls attention to the fulfillment of Scripture through Jesus' life and ministry. In the opening two chapters he highlights Jesus' Davidic descent and presents Jesus as recapitulating in his own life important events in the history of Israel. Matthew then situates Jesus in relation to John the Baptist, followed by his account of Jesus' testing in the desert in preparation for his public ministry.

#### **1:1 Book of origins**

The title verse introduces motifs that run throughout the whole of the

Gospel. The opening phrase, “book of the genealogy (*biblos geneseōs*),” can also be translated “account of the birth” or “book of origin.” This same phrase begins the account of creation in Genesis 2:4 (LXX) and the list of descendants of Adam in Genesis 5:1. Matthew narrates a new creative act of God. Three important titles follow. Jesus is *christos*, “messiah,” the “anointed” of God. This term designates one who is set apart by God for particular service, such as kings (Pss 2:2; 89:20); priests (Lev 4:3, 5); prophets (1 Kgs 19:16). Some Jewish writings spoke of a coming messiah who would carry out God’s purposes in a new way. Expectations surrounding this figure were by no means uniform. “Son of David,” one of Matthew’s favorite designations of Jesus (1:1, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42-45), underscores Jesus’ royal status and also recalls God’s choice of unlikely persons for important roles in salvation history. “Son of Abraham” relates Jesus to the prime figure in Israel’s history, the one whose struggle to be obedient to God brought blessing for all the peoples on earth.

### **1:2-17 The genealogy of Jesus (cf. Luke 3:23-38)**

The genealogy functions not as a historical record but as a way to situate Jesus in relation to the memorable characters in Israel’s history. It tells who he is by recounting who his people are. Drawing on 1 Chronicles 1:28-42; 3:5-24; Ruth 4:12-22, Matthew outlines Jesus’ ancestors in three schematized sections of fourteen generations each (v. 17). The progression is from Israel’s origin in Abraham to its glorious days under David (vv. 2-6a), then to the disastrous time of the Babylonian exile (vv. 6b-11), and finally to the hope-filled future with the birth of the Messiah (vv. 12-16). The number fourteen is symbolic. Some think that it represents the numerical value of the name David ( $d + v + d = 4 + 6 + 4 = 14$ ), but more likely it signifies fullness or completion, being double the number seven, which symbolizes perfection in the Bible. A problem is that the last section has only thirteen generations. Matthew simply may have miscounted, or a name may have dropped out in the transmission.

The linear progression of thirty-nine male ancestors is broken at four points by the names of women. They are not the ones who would immediately come to mind as great figures from Israel’s past. Each has an unusual twist to her story. Tamar (v. 3), after being widowed, took decisive action to coerce her father-in-law, Judah, to provide an heir for her (Gen 38). She conceived Perez and Zerah, who continued the Davidic line. Tamar is the only woman in the Hebrew Scriptures who is called righteous (Gen 38:26), a term that is of central

importance to Matthew. Rahab (v. 5), a prostitute in Jericho (Josh 2), risked disobeying the orders of the king of Jericho and sheltered spies sent from Joshua to reconnoiter the land. She subsequently gave birth to Boaz, the great-grandfather of David. Ruth (v. 5), a Moabite woman, returned with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Bethlehem, rather than stay with her own people after her husband Mahlon died. In Bethlehem, Ruth presented herself to Boaz at the threshing floor and conceived Obed, who carried forth the Davidic line. Finally, the wife of Uriah (v. 6) is the one who bore David's son Solomon after David arranged to have Uriah killed in battle (2 Sam 11).

Each story speaks of how women took bold actions outside the bounds of regular patriarchal marriage to enable God's purposes to be brought to fruition in unexpected ways. Not only were the circumstances unusual, but some of these women were also outsiders to Israel. Remembering their stories prepares for the extraordinary circumstances of Jesus' birth and the salvation he will ultimately extend to those outside Israel (28:19). The women's presence in the midst of the male ancestors of Jesus also signals the integral role that women disciples play in the community of Jesus' followers. They remind the reader that women are not marginal to the history of Israel or of Christianity.

### **1:18-25 The birth of Jesus**

Both the genealogy and the account of the birth of Jesus stress the theme of continuity and discontinuity. The same faithful God of Israel continues to act with saving grace toward the New People of God in surprising ways. Verses 18-25 explain how Jesus is son of God through the holy Spirit and "son of David" through legal adoption by Joseph.

Marriage in first-century Palestine, usually arranged by the elders of the two families, took place in two steps. There was a formal betrothal before witnesses that was legally binding. The bride remained in her father's home for another year or so until the ceremony of her transfer to the home of her husband. Jesus' conception occurs between these two stages. The agency of the holy Spirit (v. 18) is not sexual; rather, the Spirit is God's life-giving power evident in creation (Gen 1:2; Ps 104:30) and in prophetic speech (22:43). It is the divine power at work in Jesus (3:16; 12:18, 28) and his disciples (10:20).

Joseph is faced with an impossible dilemma (v. 19). He is a righteous (*dikaios*) man, that is, one who is faithful to the demands of the Law. The Law prescribed death for adulterers (Deut 22:23-27). But Joseph is unwilling to publicly denounce his betrothed. A secret divorce is not possible; two witnesses

are needed, and Mary's pregnancy would be known by all her relatives and towns-people. Joseph decides on a middle course: he will divorce her quietly (Deut 24:1), without stating the reasons. He will not initiate a public trial (Num 5:11-31). This solution, however, does not prevent Mary from being exposed to public shame. The only way to prevent this would be for Joseph to complete his marriage to her and adopt the child as his own. This is what the angel instructs him to do in a dream (v. 20).

This is the first of four instances in the infancy narratives in which an angel communicates with Joseph through a dream (see also 2:13, 19, 22). This is a common means of divine revelation in biblical tradition (see Gen 16:7-14; 37:5-11), especially to announce the birth of important figures in Israel's salvation (Ishmael, Gen 16:7-12; Isaac, Gen 17:1-19; Samson, Judg 13:3-22). There are usually five elements in annunciations: (1) the angel appears; (2) the person is afraid; (3) the angel gives reassurance, announces the birth, tells the child's name and its meaning, and foretells his great deeds; (4) the person objects; (5) the angel gives a sign. The angel assures Joseph (v. 20) that this child is of God, and not from any act of unfaithfulness. God asks Joseph and Mary to complete their commitment to each other in difficult circumstances. But they also have the promise that God will be with them throughout (v. 23). The angel pronounces and interprets the name of the child, Jesus (v. 21). This derivative of the name Joshua (in Hebrew, *Yeshua* or *Yeshu*) was common in the first century. It means "God helps" but came to be associated with the verb *yš.*, which means "God saves." Jesus' saving mission of forgiveness is enacted in healing stories (9:2-8) and is confirmed in his words to his disciples at his final supper with them (26:28).

The first of Matthew's quotations of the Hebrew Scriptures (vv. 22-23) is from Isaiah 7:14. As in 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9, the citation begins with the formula "this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet" (see also the Old Testament citations without this exact formula in 2:5; 3:3; 12:17; 13:14). In Isaiah 7:14 the oracle to King Ahaz refers to the birth of a royal son in the near future who will be a sign of hope to Judah. The Hebrew word *almâ*, "young woman," refers to the mother's age, not her sexual status (*betulah* is the Hebrew word for "virgin"). The Septuagint, the Greek translation, however, renders this *parthenos*, "virgin." Isaiah is predicting a birth that will come about in a normal way, but Matthew applies it to the virginal conception of Jesus. The promise of Emmanuel, "God is with us" frames the whole Gospel (1:23; cf. 28:20).

Joseph follows the angel's commands and completes the marriage ceremony with Mary (v. 24) and names her son Jesus (v. 25). Again Matthew underscores Mary's virginity at the time of Jesus' conception and birth. Verse 25 is ambiguous; it neither affirms nor denies Mary's perpetual virginity.

In this opening chapter Jesus' identity is established in relation to God, to the royal line of David, and to notable figures of Israel's past. He embodies the faithfulness and startling creativity of God, the kingliness of David, and the bold and socially questionable righteousness of the women in his ancestry and of his legal father, Joseph. In the next chapter the focus is on positive and negative responses to Jesus. Place names figure prominently, linking Jesus with significant events of Israel's history.

## **2:1-12 Herod and the magi**

Matthew does not relate details about Jesus' birth (cf. Luke 2:1-7). What is of interest is the place and the initial reactions to him. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the place where David was anointed king (1 Sam 16:1-13), highlights his royal Davidic identity. The reigning king is Herod the Great, who was appointed by the Roman senate to rule Judea in 40 B.C. A power struggle will ensue between Jesus and the Herodian kings over who bears the title "king of the Jews" (v. 2; see 27:11, 29, 37, 42).

The first visitors to the newborn Jesus are exotic characters from the East. The term "magi" originally referred to a caste of Persian priests, who served their king. They were not kings or wise men, but were adept at interpreting dreams. Here they appear to be astrologers who can interpret the movement of the stars. Magi were often associated with sorcery and magic, and were not always held in high regard (e.g., the magicians of Pharaoh, Exod 7-8). Matthew, however, portrays them very favorably. These Gentiles who respond positively to Jesus stand in stark contrast to Herod, the chief priests, and scribes (v. 4), foreshadowing the inclusion of non-Jews in the Jesus movement and the rejection of Jesus by many Jews.

There is much speculation whether the episodes in Matthew 2 have a historical basis or whether they are creations of Matthew to serve his theological purposes. With regard to the star, some think it was Halley's comet, which appeared in 12-11 B.C., others the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn in 7-6 B.C. Alternatively, Matthew may have created it in conformity with the belief in antiquity that royal births are marked by astrological phenomena. Or Matthew may have intended an allusion to the story of Balaam, a sorcerer from the East,

who predicted that a star would come out of Jacob (Num 24:17).

The Scripture quotation in verse 6 is a conflation of Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2. Matthew customarily adapts the biblical citations to fit his context and purposes. As Jesus' birthplace, Bethlehem is no longer "too small to be among the clans of Judah" (Mic 5:1), but now is "by no means least among the rulers of Judah" (Matt 2:6). And just as God called David from Bethlehem to shepherd Israel (2 Sam 5:2), so Jesus is shepherd to God's people (9:36; 26:31).

The response of the magi to Jesus matches that of disciples. The magi are overjoyed at the sign of Jesus' birth (2:10), just as disciples' initial acceptance of Jesus is marked by joy (13:20, 44) and is promised as an end-time reward (25:21, 23). The magi bow down in homage to Jesus (v. 11; cf. Herod's insincere desire to do so in v. 8), as do the disciples after the storm (14:33), the Canaanite woman pleading for her daughter (15:25), and the women disciples (28:9) and the Eleven (28:17) when they meet the risen Christ. The magi give to Jesus the most precious gifts they have (v. 11), just as disciples offer him their very selves (4:22; 8:15; 10:37-39). Finally, the magi, like Joseph, are obedient to divine commands conveyed in dreams (v. 12), just as disciples are to obey the covenant and Jesus' word (5:19).

The text does not say how many magi there were or exactly from where they came. The traditional number of three magi is derived from the three gifts that they bear (2:11). It is possible that Matthew has in mind Psalm 72:10, which speaks of the kings of Arabia and Sheba bringing gifts to the newly anointed king. Or he may have intended an allusion to Isaiah 60:6: "All from Sheba shall come / bearing gold and frankincense, / and proclaiming the praises of the LORD." In any case, Matthew sets the stage for all who will come from east and west to dine in the realm of God (8:11; 22:1-14).

### **2:13-15 The flight into Egypt**

Each of the Gospels tells of those who not only reject Jesus but who actively seek to destroy him from the beginning of his ministry. Matthew begins this theme even earlier. From Jesus' very infancy Herod tries to kill him. As an intended victim of violence, the Matthean Jesus teaches his disciples how not to respond in kind to violence, to love their enemies, and to pray for their persecutors (5:38-48). There are circumstances, however, when flight is the necessary course of action (2:13-15).

Joseph takes center stage once again as he obediently fulfills the divine command conveyed in a dream (as also in 1:20-24; 2:19-20, 22). He takes Jesus

and his mother to Egypt, a traditional place of refuge for Israelites (Gen 42–48; 1 Kgs 11:40; 2 Kgs 25:26; Jer 26:21; 41:16-18; 43:1-7).

The quotation from Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (2:15), seems odd, for the holy family is just going into Egypt. What Matthew presumes is that they will, indeed, leave Egypt, and by doing so Scripture is fulfilled in one more way. The text alludes to the Exodus and identifies Jesus with the paradigmatic saving event for Israel. Here begins Matthew’s portrait of Jesus as a Moses-like figure, the authoritative Teacher of the Law.

### **2:16-18 The slaughter of the children**

There is no verification of this event in historical records, but sources do attest to the cruelty of Herod. Josephus (*Ant.* 15; see also *T. Moses* 6:2-7) tells of how Herod, in his paranoia about his power, killed members of his own family. He also ordered the murder of one son from each of the leading families of Judea to ensure that there would be mourning at his funeral. The episode of the slaughter provides another parallel between Jesus and Moses, recalling Pharaoh’s murder of the male Hebrew children (Exod 1:15-22). Just as God protected Moses through the actions of Moses’ mother and sister and Pharaoh’s daughter (Exod 2:1-10), so divine protection surrounds Jesus through the obedient actions of Joseph.

Once again, a citation from the Old Testament underscores the fulfillment of Scripture (2:17-18). Matthew adapts the quotation from Jeremiah 31:15 to fit his context and purpose. Rachel, who died en route from Bethel to Ephrath (which is identified with Bethlehem, Gen 35:16-21), is weeping for all the descendants of Israel who were marched off into exile. Ramah, about five miles north of Jerusalem, was on the route of the exile. Whereas Matthew uses this text to express the bitter lamentation of Israel over its slaughtered children, in Jeremiah it is part of an oracle that promises an end to the suffering and the return of the exiled Israelites (Jer 31:16).

### **2:19-23 A home in Nazareth**

Just as Moses received a divine command to return home after the rulers who sought his life had died (Exod 4:19), so Joseph follows the angel’s directive to go home to Israel with his family. Although Herod the Great is dead, his son Archelaus still poses a menace. Archelaus was the eldest of Herod’s three sons among whom the kingdom was divided. He ruled Judea, Samaria, and Idumea for ten years (4 B.C.–A.D. 6), while Philip governed the area north and east of the



Sea of Galilee, and Herod Antipas (14:1-12) controlled Galilee and Perea. Archelaus followed in his father's footsteps when it came to cruelty, but he did not have his father's administrative ability.

Joseph, once again directed by a dream, takes his family to Galilee (2:22), which enjoyed greater peace than Judea. They settle in Nazareth, some four miles from the city of Sepphoris, which Herod Antipas was building as his capital. It is possible that the availability of work for Joseph, an artisan (13:55), was also a motivating factor for their choice of Nazareth as their new home. Matthew, however, sees this as one more way in which Scripture is fulfilled. There is actually no text in the Scriptures that says "He shall be called a Nazorean" (v. 23). Most likely Matthew sees a wordplay with *nēser*, "shoot" or "branch," and intends an allusion to Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse." This reference to a Davidic royal heir once again highlights Jesus' identity as king in the line of David (see Rom 15:12; 1 Pet 4:14; Rev 5:5, which also interpret Isaiah 11:1 in relation to Jesus as Messiah). Another possibility is that the wordplay is with *nāzîr*, meaning "one dedicated to God." Nazirites, like Samson (Judg 13:5-7), took a vow, did not cut their hair, and did not drink wine (Num 6:1-21) as a sign that they were set apart for God. Matthew may have in mind an allusion to Isaiah 4:3, "he . . . will be called holy." In any event, this final verse of the infancy narratives rounds out the portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of all God's promises to Israel.

### **3:1-12 The proclamation of John the Baptist**

The scene switches now to a desert area of Judea, east of Jerusalem, where John is baptizing and preaching repentance. The precise locale of John's ministry is not known. The arid region in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, along the Jordan River (3:6), is likely. John prepares the way, proclaiming the identical message as Jesus, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (3:2; 4:17).

The phrase "kingdom of heaven," unique to this Gospel, occurs thirty-two times. While Mark and Luke speak of the "kingdom of God," Matthew avoids using the divine name, much as Jews reading the Torah substitute "Adonai" ("Lord") for "YHWH." The expression "kingdom of heaven" does not connote a geographic area, nor does it refer to something that will be manifest only at a later time in the transcendent realm. The term *basileia*, "kingdom," means "kingly rule" or "reign," not a territory. God's reign is already present and visible here and now with the coming of Jesus (3:2; 4:17; 12:28), though it awaits completion (6:10, 33; 16:27-28).

In the context of first-century Palestine, this proclamation of God's reign was a direct challenge to Roman imperial authority. Jesus and John offer an alternate vision of power—not one based on domination and exploitation, but one in which forgiveness, healing, and well-being are offered to all. “God-with-us” means divine authoritative power over all and empowerment of all who become disciples. It is difficult to find an adequate way to express this in English. The metaphor “kingdom” falls short, evoking an image of male monarchical rule. Other ways to translate *basileia* include “rule,” “reign,” “realm,” or “kin-dom,” expressing this powerful and empowering relatedness of God's people in terms that are more inclusive.

John prepares people to recognize this embodiment of God's saving power in Jesus by adapting the words of the prophet Isaiah (40:3). In its original context the prophecy referred to the return of Israel from exile in Babylon, through the desert, to their homeland. Matthew also wants to portray John in the likeness of Elijah, with his ascetic clothing and diet (3:4; 2 Kgs 1:8). Many expected that Elijah would return as precursor and messenger before the end time (Mal 3:1; 4:5-6; Sir 48:10-11). Matthew makes this identification of John with Elijah even more explicit at 11:10, 14; 17:11-13.

With hyperbole, Matthew depicts the response to John as overwhelmingly positive (v. 5). The baptism John offers differs in several ways from Jewish ritual washing: it is a one-time ritual, not repeated; it is not self-administered, but performed by God's prophet; and it is not for the removal of ritual impurity, but signifies repentance from sin (vv. 2, 6).

Unique to Matthew is the naming of Pharisees and Sadducees among those who come to John to be baptized (v. 7). The Pharisees were lay religious leaders active in Palestine from the second century B.C. until the first century A.D. Their name probably derives from the Hebrew word *perushîm*, “separated ones.” They differed from the Sadducees in their oral interpretation of the Law, their more progressive theology, such as belief in resurrection (Matt 22:23; Acts 23:8), and in their accommodation to Hellenism. Sadducees were priests, from a more elite class, based in Jerusalem, whose role disappeared after the fall of the temple in A.D. 70. Their name may have come from the high priestly family of Zadok (1 Kgs 1:26) or from the word *ṣaddîqîm*, “just ones.” The Sadducees had influence over the temple personnel and the political elite, whereas the Pharisees appealed to ordinary laypeople, advising them how to live everyday life in faithfulness to the Torah.

Matthew's introduction of these two groups of religious leaders brings onto

the stage the prime opponents of Jesus. The Sadducees have a limited role in the Gospel, mentioned again only at 16:1, 6-12, while the Pharisees appear at every turn, challenging Jesus on his table practices (9:11; 15:1), fasting (9:14), the source of his power (9:34; 12:24), sabbath observance (12:2), and his interpretation of the Law (19:3). The Pharisees are the prime movers in the conspiracy to destroy Jesus (12:14; 21:46; 22:15). John's fierce accusation here reveals their insincerity in coming to be baptized and prepares for Jesus' denunciation of their hypocrisy in chapter 23. John insists that anyone who is serious about repentance must demonstrate this visibly in his or her deeds (v. 8), a theme in Jesus' teaching as well (7:21-23). Birth into the people of God is not sufficient for salvation (v. 9). A note of urgency is struck in verse 10. The time for producing "good fruit" (one of Matthew's favorite expressions; see 7:15-20; 12:33-37; 13:8, 22-26; 21:19, 43; 26:29) is now.

After painting numerous parallels between John and Jesus, Matthew now clearly distinguishes the two (vv. 11-12). Jesus is more powerful than John; the baptizer is not even worthy to perform the task of a slave, to carry Jesus' sandals (v. 11). The reference to Jesus baptizing is best understood as a metaphor for his whole ministry of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Only the Fourth Gospel mentions Jesus baptizing (John 3:22; 4:1-2).

Jesus' mission is one that refines with fire (see Zech 13:9; 1 Cor 3:13-15) and empowers people with the holy Spirit. And as a farmer separates wheat from chaff by tossing the harvested grain into the air with a winnowing fork, so Jesus will separate the righteous from the unrepentant at the end time (v. 12; see Jer 15:7). Unquenchable fire metaphorically expresses the unending pain of those whose choices separate them eternally from the love of God (similarly 13:30, 40-43, 49-50).

### **3:13-17 The baptism of Jesus**

This episode further elaborates the relationship between Jesus and John and builds on the identification of Jesus as Son of God that was set forth in the infancy narratives. Only in Matthew's Gospel is there a dialogue between John and Jesus (vv. 14-15). It reflects the difficulties that the early Christians had with Jesus' undergoing John's baptism of repentance. First, if Jesus is greater than John (as John asserted in verse 11), then why does he appear subordinate here? A second problem is that as Christians came to believe in Jesus' sinlessness from birth, they struggled to explain why he would have sought John's baptism of repentance.

In Jesus' reply (v. 15) we find two key Matthean terms: "fulfill" and "righteousness." The theme of fulfillment of God's promises to Israel in the person of Jesus has been stressed from the outset with citations of Scripture (1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23) and in the way Jesus' life has replicated the history of his people. Matthew introduced his theme of righteousness when he applied the term to Joseph (1:19); now he affirms Jesus' righteousness. This is also a quality expected of disciples of Jesus (5:6, 10, 20; 6:33). The term *dikaiosynē*, "righteousness," denotes right relationship with God, self, others, and all creation. From a Jewish perspective, righteousness is accomplished through faithfulness to the demands of the covenant, which the Matthean Jesus affirms (5:17-20).

A divine revelation further interprets the happening (vv. 16-17). "Rend[ing] the heavens" is a familiar expression from prophetic literature (Isa 63:19; cf. Ezek 1:1). People in Jesus' day imagined that the world is divided into three tiers: the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. An opening of the heavens signals a moment when human beings are in direct communication with the divine. The descent of the Spirit recalls the messianic prophecies of Isaiah: "the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him" (11:2; cf. 61:1) and "the spirit of God" that swept over the waters at creation (Gen 1:2; the Hebrew *rûaḥ ʾelohîm* can also be translated "a mighty wind," as in the NAB).

A heavenly voice (v. 17) is the counterpoint to the voice of John in the desert (v. 3). While in the Gospels of Mark (1:11) and Luke (3:22) the voice is directed only to Jesus: "You are my beloved Son," in Matthew the revelation is to all: "This is my beloved Son" (v. 17; emphasis added). This declaration carries multiple meanings. In the Hebrew Scriptures "son of God" occurs with three different nuances: (1) a chosen servant of God (the Hebrew *'ebed*, "servant," is rendered *pais* in the LXX, which can also be translated "child") who will play a saving role for Israel and who will suffer for it (Isa 42:1; see 12:18-21, where Matthew explicitly presents Jesus as fulfilling this text); (2) a royal Davidic son (see Psalm 2:7, a coronation psalm, in which God assures the Davidic king, "You are my son"); (3) Israel is God's first-born son (Exod 4:22-23). The filial relationship between God and Israel is now personified in Jesus. There is also an echo of Genesis 22:2, where God instructs Abraham, "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love" to the land of Moriah to offer him up. There is a foreshadowing that the sacrificial act that God interrupted with Isaac will be fulfilled with Jesus.

Vivid metaphors of the heavens opening, the Spirit descending, and the

voice of God speaking (see also 17:5) bring to a dramatic climax a scene that further establishes Jesus' identity as Son of God and Son of David. The baptism scene also points ahead to Jesus' death, where the centurion and his companions affirm, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Matt 27:54).

#### **4:1-11 Testing in the wilderness**

This is the final episode of the first section of the Gospel, which tells of Jesus' origins, establishes his identity, and sets the stage for the beginning of his public ministry. Matthew, like Luke (4:1-13), draws both from Mark's brief notice of Jesus' testing in the desert (Mark 1:12-13) and Q (see p. 8), which supplies a dialogue between Jesus and the devil. There is a mythical quality to the scene, as the evangelist has telescoped into one episode temptations that Jesus likely faced repeatedly throughout his life (Heb 4:15). There are also echoes of Israel's sojourn in the desert. But unlike Israel, who proved unfaithful during that time by grumbling against Moses, and testing God, Jesus stays steadfastly faithful to God's word. The fast for forty days and nights (v. 2) echoes that of Moses (Deut 9:18; so also Elijah, 1 Kgs 19:8). The motif of the mountain (v. 8) calls to mind Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai. Matthew uses this motif frequently (5:1-8:1; 15:29-31; 17:1-8; 28:16-20) to present Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Law.

While the first three chapters clearly establish Jesus' identity as "Son of God" for the reader, the tester (4:3) articulates three fundamental doubts. "*If you are the Son of God . . .*" (vv. 3, 6; emphasis added) functions both to confront the readers about any lingering doubts about what it means for Jesus to be beloved child of God and also demands that they examine their own answers to these tests as followers of God's own beloved. Each cuts to the core of what it means to be faithfully centered on God.

The first temptation is to be intent on gratifying one's own hungers (v. 3). Jesus counters with a quotation from Deuteronomy 8:3. In subsequent episodes Jesus enacts God's care for hungry people by feeding them with both physical and spiritual food (5:1-7:29; 14:31-21; 15:32-39; 26:26-30).

The second test concerns the desire for a showy display of power to prove God's might (v. 5). The devil takes Jesus to the parapet (literally, the "wing") of the temple and urges him to jump off to prove God's ability to rescue. He quotes Psalm 91, which assures that God's angels will let no evil befall the beloved. Jesus counters with another text from Deuteronomy (6:16). As the Gospel continues, Jesus remains true to his mission as "God-with-us," meeting people in

their human needs and bringing them healing and empowerment. He does not compel people to believe through flashy displays of power, but in the paradoxical manner of God in human flesh.

The third test concerns idolatrous misuse of power (vv. 8-9). A human face is put on this temptation when Jesus makes the same reply, “Get away, Satan!” (v. 10), to Peter when he rejects Jesus’ prediction of his passion (16:21-23). Here Jesus invokes Deuteronomy 6:13, bringing the focus again to true power and worship, which centers on God alone. The same verb, *proskyneō*, “prostrate,” (v. 9) is used of the magi’s adoration of the infant Jesus (2:2, 8), and of the women disciples’ worship at the feet of the risen Christ (28:9).

Although the devil departs at the conclusion of this episode (v. 11), Matthew indicates that these tests haunted Jesus to the end. Even as he was dying a variation on these temptations surfaces: “He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God’ ” (27:43). The ministrations of angels (4:11) signal that divine protection and power always surround God’s beloved ones, no matter how intense the trial.

## **THE BEGINNINGS OF THE GALILEAN MINISTRY**

### ***Matt 4:12–10:42***

In the second main section of the Gospel, Matthew narrates the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. After his opening proclamation of his mission (4:12-17), Jesus calls the first of his disciples (4:18-22) and begins to preach and heal multitudes of people (4:23-25). Then follows his magisterial teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:28), a series of healing stories (8:1–9:37), and the sending of the disciples in mission (10:1-42).

#### **4:12-17 The announcement of the nearness of God’s reign**

Matthew, following Mark (1:14), links the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry with John’s arrest (4:12). He gives a fuller account of John’s death at the hands of Herod Antipas at 14:3-12. It seems odd that Jesus would go to Galilee upon news of John’s arrest; it may be that Jesus intended to take up the mission where John left off (see John 3:22-23; 4:1-3). The expression “withdrew to Galilee” (v. 12) clashes with Jesus’ preaching in public (v. 17), and hints at the danger Jesus faces by ministering there.

Jesus resettles in Capernaum (see also 8:5; 9:1), a fishing village at the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. It lay along an important trade route, the *Via Maris*, “the Way of the Sea.” This would have ensured a greater audience for

his ministry than the tiny village of Nazareth (see 13:53-58, where Jesus is rejected in his hometown). For Matthew, the reason for Jesus' relocation is to fulfill Scripture (vv. 14-16). He adapts an oracle from the prophet Isaiah (9:1-2) to announce the hope that lies beyond death with the coming of Jesus. The oracle was originally addressed to Galilee after the Assyrian invasion in 732 B.C. To make the link, Matthew reminds the reader that Capernaum was in the general region of the territory allotted to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali (Josh 19:10-16; 19:32-39). The Matthean Jesus stresses at the outset that his mission is only to Israel (10:5; 15:24). But here again, as in the story of the magi (2:1-12), with the expression "Galilee of the Gentiles" (v. 15) there is a foreshadowing of the expansion of Jesus' mission to the Gentiles (28:16-20).

Jesus' opening proclamation of his mission (v. 17) matches that of John the Baptist (3:2). (See above, at 3:2, for comments on the meaning of "the kingdom of heaven.") The phrase "at hand" translates a word (*engiken*) that is ambiguous in Greek. It can mean "has arrived" or "has drawn near." Matthew (as also Mark 1:15) expresses that there is a new inbreaking of God's reign with the arrival of Jesus, but it is not yet fully accomplished. The expression "from that time on" (v. 17) marks an important transition in the story, as also at 16:21, where the phrase signals a new focus on Jesus' coming passion in Jerusalem.

#### **4:18-22 The call of the first disciples**

In this stylized account of the call of Jesus' first followers, Matthew introduces key characteristics of discipleship, which help readers reflect on their own response to Jesus. First, the invitation is initiated by Jesus. Unlike disciples of rabbis, who would seek out the one with whom they wanted to study, these disciples of Jesus are invited by him. They are going about their everyday work, casting their nets into the sea and making repairs to them when Jesus encounters them at the seaside. Far from being "uneducated, ordinary men," as the polemical reference to Peter and John in Acts 4:13 states, these fishermen were savvy businessmen who managed employees (Mark 1:20) and located their industry in an advantageous tax district. Philip and Andrew were originally from Bethsaida (John 1:44), in the territory ruled by Philip. It is likely that they relocated to Capernaum for a tax break.

Jesus' invitation is to an active mission. Discipleship does not entail merely intellectual assent, but following Jesus in every respect, becoming "fishers" of other persons (see Jer 16:16). There is a stress on the totality and immediacy of the response of these first disciples. The radical changes that the life of

discipleship demands are symbolized in the leaving of their nets, their boat, and their father. In the story there is no preparation for this encounter with Jesus. There is something so compelling about his person and message that Peter, Andrew, James, and John immediately follow him.

The communal dimension of discipleship is emphasized by the coming of the call to two sets of brothers. That the call can be rejected is shown in the story of the rich young man (19:16-22). The inclusion of marginalized people in Jesus' entourage is exemplified in the call of the toll collector Matthew (9:9-13). Others for whom there is no call story but who are clearly disciples of Jesus include the women "who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him" (27:55), among whom were "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (27:56). Another latecomer in the Gospel is Joseph of Arimathea, whom Matthew also identifies as "a disciple of Jesus" (27:57).

#### **4:23-25 The spreading of Jesus' fame**

A summary statement of Jesus' successful ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing makes a bridge between the opening proclamation and initial formation of disciples to the advanced teaching (chs. 5-7) and further healing (chs. 8-9) that precede the sending out of the disciples on mission (ch. 10). Unlike the Gospel of John, which shows Jesus moving between Galilee and Jerusalem, in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' ministry first centers only on Galilee (v. 23). He makes only one fateful trip to Jerusalem, which begins at Matthew 19:1. Characteristic of Matthew's emphasis on the primacy of Jesus' mission to Israel (10:5; 15:24) is that Jesus teaches in synagogues (v. 23). The expression "their synagogues" reflects the tension in Matthew's day between his predominantly Jewish Christian community and Jews who have not chosen to follow Jesus (see above, "Jews and Christians," in the introductory comments, p. 7).

The geographical sweep indicates those places from which Matthean Christians hailed or places in which the Gospel first circulated. Syria (v. 24) most likely refers to the Roman province by that name, which included Palestine and the other places listed in verse 25. "Decapolis, Ten Cities," most of which were on the east side of the Jordan River, were cities in which Hellenistic culture flourished and which were thought of as Gentile regions. The names thus hint at a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. This great multitude becomes the audience for Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.



## THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

### *Matt 5:1–7:28*

This is probably the best known and most quoted part of the Gospel. Luke has a comparable sermon, but sets it on a plain (6:17-49). Matthew's setting on a mountain (5:1; also at 4:8; 15:29-31; 17:1-8; 28:16-20) makes Jesus a Moses-like figure, but one who exceeds Moses as authoritative Teacher of the Law. This is the first of five major discourses in the Gospel (followed by 10:1–11:1 on mission; 13:1-53 on parables; 18:1-35 on church life and order; 24:1–25:46 on the last judgment). It may have originated as a collection of the core teachings of Jesus, specifically aimed at Jewish Christians, helping them relate their new faith to their Jewish heritage. The emphasis on fulfillment of the Law and the prophets (5:17; 7:12) encircles the whole.

Several ways of outlining the structure of the sermon are possible. The Beatitudes (5:1-12) and parabolic sayings about publicly living and proclaiming them (5:13-16) lead off. Then follow six antithetical statements about the rigorous demands of discipleship (5:17-48). Jesus' interpretation of the Law is more stringent than that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). Next are teachings about various attitudes and actions incumbent on disciples (6:1–7:12). A highlight in this section is the Our Father (6:9-15). Rounding out the sermon are concluding exhortations and warnings (7:13-28).

### **5:1-12 The Beatitudes**

The summary statement in 4:23-25 has brought on stage a great multitude who have been healed by Jesus and have heard his teaching. This crowd, along with Jesus' disciples, are now the recipients of detailed instruction. Throughout the Gospel the crowds are generally favorable to Jesus, but at the passion narrative they become adversarial (27:20-26). Jesus assumes a sitting position, typical of teachers (5:1; Ezek 8:1) and of rulers (Matt 27:19).

The Beatitudes have echoes in Wisdom literature and the prophets (e.g., Prov 3:13; 28:14; Sir 25:7-9; 48:1-11; Isa 30:18; 32:20). Matthew casts them in eight parallel statements of blessing and promise in the third person plural (vv. 3-10) and concludes with a ninth beatitude in the second person plural (v. 11). Luke structures them into four blessings followed by four "woes" (6:20-26). Matthew relegates the woes to an extended denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees in 23:13-23. The rewards assured to disciples are already experienced to a degree in the present time ("Blessed *are* . . ."; emphasis added) but await

fulfillment at the end time.

In the first blessing (v. 3), *ptōchos* denotes “beggar,” that is, one who is destitute. The theme of God’s care for the poor is found abundantly in the Old Testament (e.g., Exod 22:25-27; Deut 15:7-11; Isa 61:1). That wealth is an obstacle to discipleship surfaces again in Jesus’ teaching at 19:16-30. Matthew’s addition of “in spirit” (cf. Luke 6:20) likely reflects the struggle of those in the community with greater material wealth to live as disciples. The assurance of the “kingdom of heaven” frames the Beatitudes (vv. 3, 10).

The second beatitude (v. 4) speaks of comfort to those who mourn. This recalls the comfort Isaiah gives to Zion when mourning the destruction of the temple (Isa 61:1-3). It also points forward to the women who perform the rites of mourning for Jesus surrounding his death (26:6-13; 27:55-56, 61; 28:1-10) and the joy they experience in encountering him once again alive (28:8).

The third beatitude, “Blessed are the meek” (v. 5), does not teach disciples to be shrinking violets; rather, the word *praeis* connotes those who are not overly impressed by their own self-importance—in other words, those who are appropriately humble and considerate. This beatitude echoes Psalm 37:11, where the Hebrew word for meek, *anāwîm*, is essentially equivalent to “poor in spirit.” The promise of land has an echo in 1 Enoch 5:7, where the eschatological promise refers not only to Israel but to the whole earth.

In the fourth beatitude there is an allusion to Psalm 107:5, 8-9, in which God satisfies those who hunger and thirst. Matthew adds one of his key terms, “righteousness” (see also 1:19; 3:15; 6:33), that is, right relation with God, self, others, and all creation. Disciples are to seek it actively, “hunger and thirst” for it (v. 6), through faithfulness to the demands of the covenant (5:17-20). However, there is a sober warning in the eighth beatitude that they will be persecuted for the sake of righteousness (v. 10).

The fifth beatitude assures those who exercise mercy that the same will be shown to them (v. 7). A similar assertion is made about forgiveness in the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples (6:12; see also 18:23-35). Twice in conflictual situations Jesus admonishes his opponents to learn the meaning of mercy (9:13; 12:7). At 23:23 Jesus lists mercy, along with judgment and fidelity, as the weightier matters of the Law.

In Psalm 24:4, a hymn for processing into the temple, the “clean of hand and pure of heart” are those who are not idolaters and who have not sworn falsely. They are the ones who are able to stand in the holy place and receive blessings and justice from God. In the sixth beatitude (v. 8) the promise of

“seeing God” refers not to encountering God in the temple in Jerusalem (as in Pss 11:7; 17:15; 27:4; 42:3), but is an eschatological promise to be in God’s presence face to face (cf. Exod 3:6; 19:21; 33:20, 23, reflecting the belief that human beings could not see God and live).

The seventh beatitude (v. 9) assures those who devote themselves to peacemaking that they will be sons and daughters of God. As Jesus has been shown to be Son of God (1:1; 2:15; 3:17), so too disciples who learn his ways of forgiveness and reconciliation share in the same intimate relationship with God. Jesus gives concrete strategies for peace-making in 5:38-48 and 18:1-35. In the ears of Jewish Christians, this beatitude would also be evocative of God’s gift of *shālôm*, not just the absence of strife, but a pervasive well-being in every arena of life.

The eighth beatitude (v. 10) circles back to the fourth one, regarding righteousness (v. 6), and promises attainment of the reign of God, as does the first (v. 3). The kinds of persecution that Matthean Christians likely faced were economic harassment, conflicts with Jews who did not join them, struggles over the degree of accommodation to Hellenistic culture, and the like. Jesus speaks to his disciples more concretely about the kinds of persecution they may face when he first sends them out on mission (10:16-42).

The ninth beatitude (v. 11) speaks of verbal abuse that disciples suffer because of Jesus. They are to find joy in the midst of such trials through hope in a heavenly reward and from the assurance that they are being prophetic—a ministry that always entails rejection by some (v. 12; 23:29-34).

### **5:13-16 Salt and light**

With two metaphors Jesus speaks to his followers about how they already are salt of the earth (v. 13) and light of the world (v. 14). The first word, *you*, is emphatic in both verses, contrasting Matthean Christians with their counterparts in the synagogue. Salt was a critical necessity in the ancient world (Sir 39:26). It was used for seasoning, preservation, and purifying (2 Kgs 2:19-22). It was used to ratify covenants (Num 18:29; 2 Chr 13:5) and in liturgical functions (Exod 30:35; Lev 2:13; Ezek 43:24; Ezra 6:9). To eat salt with someone signifies a bond of friendship and loyalty (Ezra 4:14; Acts 1:4). Salts in the soil are needed for its fecundity, but soil that is “nothing but sulphur and salt” is a desert wasteland (Deut 29:22; similarly Ps 107:34; Job 39:6; Jer 17:6; Zeph 2:9). Salt scattered on a conquered city symbolically reinforced its devastation (Judg 9:45).

In telling his disciples “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus can draw on any of these symbols. Disciples preserve, purify, and judge, drawing out the savor of God’s love in the world. The puzzle about how salt may lose its taste is probably best answered by salt being diluted or dissolved. Coming on the heels of Jesus’ exhortation to rejoice when persecuted (vv. 11-12), it is likely a warning to disciples not to let their ardor dissipate under the rigors of persecution.

Disciples are also “the light of the world,” like a city set on a mountain that cannot be hidden (v. 14). The metaphor has a political twist, since Cicero (*Cataline* 4.6) described Rome as a “light to the whole world.” It is Jesus’ beatitudinal way of life that is light to the world, not the imperial domination system. Just as the city on a mountain cannot be hidden, a lamp is not lit and then immediately extinguished (v. 15). One does not waste precious fuel oil this way. Using a vessel (*modios*, literally, a “bushel basket”) to put out the light would prevent dangerous sparks from spreading.

These two images speak of the all-encompassing nature of the witness of disciples: as salt and light they influence the whole world. These metaphors also show that the disciples do not draw attention to themselves. Just as salt is most effective when it is not noticed in well-seasoned food and a lamp serves to illumine the other objects in the room, so the effect of disciples’ good works is to point to God, who is glorified. In verse 16 Matthew gives the first of many references to God as “Father.” See remarks at 6:9-16.

### **5:17-20 The Law and righteousness**

These verses clearly set forth Jesus’ relationship to the Law. He is a thoroughly observant Jew who is devoted to keeping the Law. He does not replace the Law, nor does he break it; rather, he fulfills it, bringing it to its intended purpose. He is authentic interpreter of the Law for a changed situation.

### **5:21-26 On anger**

This is the first of six antithetical statements (5:21-48), each of which begins with “You have heard that it was said . . .,” followed by a command introduced with the formula “But I say to you . . .” In each instance Jesus declares a former understanding of the Law inadequate as he places more stringent demands on his disciples. Each of the six examples addresses an aspect of right relation among people in a covenantal faith community. The word *adelphos* in verse 22 refers not only to blood relations but to a Christian “brother or sister.”

Killing another person is the epitome of broken relationships. The Law given to Moses forbids killing (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:18). Jesus' command is to defuse anger and work toward reconciliation before the rupture in the relationship reaches a murderous stage. He gives three concrete examples. The first is to avoid insulting one another. *Rēqā* is an Aramaic word meaning approximately the same thing as *morē* in Greek, which is "you fool" (v. 22). Second, liturgical sacrifices do not cover over broken relationships. One must attempt face-to-face reconciliation before making ritual offerings (vv. 23-24; see similar injunctions in Isa 1; Prov 15:8; 21:3, 27; Sir 34:21-27; 35:1-4). The third example warns against letting conflicts escalate to the point of litigation in court (vv. 25-26). For disciples, it is imperative to defuse anger and attempt reconciliation, so that no conflict becomes murderous. One who lets anger simmer and grow will face judgment (v. 22) before God.

The Sanhedrin, Gehenna, and prison are all ways of speaking about judgment. The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish judicial council (see 26:57-68). Gehenna comes from the Hebrew *gê hinnōm*, "Hinnom valley," which runs south-southwest of Jerusalem. It came to represent the place of fiery judgment, because there the fires of the Molech cult burned, and later, smoldering refuse. Prison was not used to hold debtors or other offenders long term, as verse 26 implies. Once guilt was determined, one would be executed, deported, or sold into slavery. The point is that the consequences for not working at reconciliation are dire. It is not enough for Jesus' disciples to avoid killing; they must actively seek to defuse anger and pursue right relation with all. Here Jesus is not addressing righteous anger, that is, outrage at injustice that gives energy to work toward change.

### **5:27-30 On adultery**

Just as anger is prohibited (vv. 21-26) as the first step toward murder, so the lustful look is condemned as the prelude to adultery. The Law forbids not only adultery (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18) but also covetousness (Exod 20:17) of another person's spouse and of their possessions. Vivid metaphors of tearing out one's eye and cutting off a hand convey the seriousness of the sin of lust. On Gehenna, see verse 22.

### **5:31-32 On divorce**

The third example builds on the previous one, adding that divorce is also a form of adultery. It is addressed to males and reflects the Jewish custom that

only they could initiate divorce. The process for doing so is found in Deuteronomy 24:1. A fuller elaboration of Jesus' teaching on divorce is found in Matthew 19:1-12. Here the reasoning is not given, simply the prohibition, along with the exception for *porneia* (v. 32). Scholars are divided over whether this word connotes sexual misconduct, that is, adultery, or whether it refers to marriage to close kin, which was forbidden in Jewish law (Lev 18:6-18; see also Acts 15:20, 29).

### **5:33-37 On taking oaths**

Now the focus shifts to address honesty in relationships. Whereas Leviticus 19:12 admonished, "You shall not swear falsely by my name, thus profaning the name of your God," Jesus insists that relations among Christians be so transparent as to end the need for taking oaths at all. Just as Matthew uses *the reign of heaven*, avoiding the use of "God" (see comments at 3:2), so here he employs "heaven" (v. 34), "earth" (see Ps 24:1), and "Jerusalem" (v. 35) as euphemisms for God. Verse 36 makes an ironic reference to coloring one's hair, a practice already used in antiquity. Christian integrity must be such that there is no need to swear in order to make another believe the veracity of their word.

### **5:38-42 On nonretaliation**

The fifth unit concerns the *ius talionis* (Lev 24:20), which was based on the principle of equal reciprocity. The Law placed limits on retribution, so as to curtail escalating cycles of vengeance. As in the previous four examples, Jesus demands more, thus going to the core of the attitudes and actions necessary to adequately fulfill what the Law intends. The principle is articulated in verse 39a, and four concrete examples follow in verses 39b-42. Verse 39a is best translated "do not retaliate against the evildoer." The verb *antistēnai* most often carries the connotation "resist violently" or "armed resistance in military encounters" (e.g., Eph 6:13).

A command not to resist evil makes little sense on the lips of Jesus, when the whole Gospel shows him doing just the opposite. The issue here is *how* the disciple is to confront evil. The examples that follow show how nonretaliation is a strategy that breaks cycles of violence in confrontations between persons of unequal power and status. In the first three the person addressed is a victim of an injustice inflicted by a more powerful person. Retaliation by the injured party is not a realistic option. The expected response is submission. There is an alternate way to respond by actively confronting the injustice with a positive and

provocative act that can break the cycle of violence and begin a different one in which gestures of reconciliation can be reciprocated.

The first example (v. 39b) involves a backhanded slap (only the right hand would be used for striking another), meant to insult and humiliate. Turning the other cheek is a creative response that robs the aggressor of the power to humiliate and shames the one who intended to inflict shame. It interrupts the cycle of violence, which is the first step toward restoration of right relation. It could begin to move the aggressor toward repentance, leading to reconciliation.

In a similar way, a debtor who stands naked in court, after handing over both under and outer garments to a creditor (v. 40), performs a shocking act that places shame on the creditor. See Genesis 9:20-27, which asserts that it is the one who views another's nakedness who is shamed. Isaiah (20:1-6) made use of this strategy. This tactic exposes the injustice of the economic system to which the creditor subscribes and opens the possibility that he may repent, perceiving the common humanity that unites him with those he had exploited.

The third illustration (v. 41) envisions a situation in which a Roman soldier compels one of the subject people to carry his pack. Seizing the initiative, the subjugated person can destabilize the situation, creating a dilemma for the soldier, who worries that he would face punishment for exacting service for excessive distances.

The last example (v. 42) is addressed to the person in a superior economic position. In context it implies a situation in which there is indebtedness due to some injustice. Nonretaliation on the part of the lender would be foregoing the demand that the money or goods be returned.

Each of these illustrations gives an example of how to restore justice by interrupting cycles of violence and enmity and initiating new cycles of generosity that invite reciprocity. In this way the intent of the Law is fulfilled.

### **5:43-48 Love your enemy**

The sixth and last in the series of antitheses deals with the command to love the neighbor (Lev 19:18). Love, as a commandment, concerns not feelings but deeds that reflect faithfulness to the covenant. Nowhere in the Scriptures is there a command to hate the enemy. It was generally understood, however, that Israelites were obliged to practice deeds of covenant fidelity toward one another, but such was not required toward those outside the covenant community. "Hate," *miseō*, not only denotes active hostility but also connotes "love less" (as Matt 6:24). For Jesus this is an inadequate interpretation of the Law. He requires the

same treatment for both those inside and outside the covenant community. Concrete ways to love enemies include praying for persecutors (v. 44) and welcoming outsiders (v. 47). “Persecut[ors]” likely refers to fellow Jews who opposed Christian missionaries, as in 10:23; 23:34. The verb *aspazomai*, “greet,” in verse 47 connotes welcome and a wish for well-being, not simply a salutation.

While in previous examples the motive was to avoid punishment (vv. 21-26, 29, 30), the reason given for loving enemies (vv. 45-48) is that God acts this way, treating both the just and the unjust with the same gratuitous bounty (v. 45). Giving loving treatment only to one’s own people does not adequately fulfill the Law. Verse 48 sums up: “There must be no limits to your goodness, as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds” (cf. NAB: “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect”). The word *teleios*, usually translated “perfect,” connotes not so much moral perfection as completeness, full maturity, as the Hebrew *tāmîm* does (Deut 18:13).

### **6:1-18 Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting**

There is a shift now away from the antithetical structure of 5:21-48 as this next section addresses three practices that are pillars of Jewish spirituality: almsgiving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-15), and fasting (vv. 16-18). All the material, except the Lord’s Prayer (vv. 9-13), which stands at the center, is unique to Matthew. Verse 1 sounds the theme and ties this section to the previous one. As recipients of God’s limitless graciousness and mercy (5:43-48), disciples are to respond in kind, with generous deeds of righteousness (see 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20) that express and establish right relation. The emphasis in each instance is on the interior disposition. The thread of “who sees” (vv. 1, 4, 5, 6, 16, 18) and the theme of reward (vv. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 18) run throughout the section.

### **6:2-4 On almsgiving**

Care for the poor is frequently enjoined in the Scriptures (e.g., Deut 24:19-22; Isa 58:6-8; Prov 25:21; Sir 3:30). In performing deeds of mercy, disciples are not to call attention to themselves. The exaggerated metaphors “blow a trumpet before you” (v. 2) and “do not let your left hand know what your right is doing” (v. 3) underscore the point that almsgiving should be done in an unobtrusive manner. Ostentatious givers already receive the reward of praise from others (v. 2). But such displays further shame the recipient, thus preventing right relation from becoming a present reality. Jesus contrasts the desired behavior of his disciples with that of hypocrites. *Hypocritēs* is the term for an actor who dons a



mask (see Jesus' accusation of the Pharisees as hypocrites in 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). It is aptly used here for those who pose as something they are not. The polemic between Matthew's community and the synagogue surfaces again at verses 2 and 5. Hypocrites are found in every religious group, and Christians are no exception. Staying centered on God is the key, as the next section on prayer elaborates.

### **6:5-15 On prayer**

Jesus continues his denunciation of ostentatious shows of pious practices. It is not a critique of praying in a standing position, which was the normal prayer stance both for Jews and early Christians. Nor is Jesus advocating private prayer over communal. In fact, he teaches his disciples a communal prayer to *our* Father (v. 9). As in verse 2, the problematic aspect is the showiness of prayers done to attract the attention of others. Such behavior makes prayer impossible. The purpose of prayer is communication with God, for which one needs to shut out other concerns ("close the door," v. 6) and reach into the depths of spirit ("go to your inner room," v. 6). The reward is deeper communion with God (v. 6) rather than empty praise of human admirers (v. 5).

Furthermore, prayer is not a one-way street, nor does it require multiple words. Matthew stereotypes the prayer of pagans as babbling and criticizes them for thinking that they can manipulate God by deluging God with voluminous words. Jesus emphasizes that God already knows the needs of those who pray and implies that God stands ready to meet those needs (v. 8). Moreover, prayer of petition is only one kind of prayer. Jesus exemplifies prayer that flows from God's gracious initiative and responds in deeds of right relation (14:23; 19:13; 26:36-46). Jesus then teaches his disciples how to pray (vv. 9-13; see also 18:19; 24:20).

As in the rest of this section, the emphasis is on the interior disposition, "how" to pray (v. 9), not the words that are to be used. Luke 11:2-4 has a shorter version. Each evangelist tailors the prayer to his community's needs. The address "Our Father in heaven" is common in Jewish prayers. The pronoun "our" stresses the communal dimension of faith and the oneness of all children of God across all boundaries of difference. Calling God "Father" was not unique to Jesus; there are texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, Qumran, Philo, Josephus, and rabbinic literature in which this metaphor is used of God. Although it is the most frequently used metaphor (fifty-three times) by the Matthean Jesus, it is not the only one. See, for example, 13:33, where Matthew speaks of God as a

bakerwoman, or 23:37, where Jesus applies to himself the metaphor used of God in Psalm 91, namely, that of a bird that gathers her fledglings under her wings. For the early Christians, “Father” expressed not so much intimacy as God’s power and providence. By addressing God as “Father,” they challenged the emperor’s claim to be “father of the nation,” asserting that only God is the supreme power.

The first three petitions (vv. 9-10) focus on God and are essentially reiterations of one desire, expressed in three ways. “Hallowed be your name” echoes Leviticus 22:32; Deuteronomy 32:51; Isaiah 8:13; 29:23; and is similar to a line from the Jewish *Kaddish* prayer: “May thy great name be magnified and hallowed.” God’s name is hallowed when people recognize and give praise for divine saving deeds (Isa 29:23) and when they keep God’s commands (Lev 22:32). The reign of God is already inaugurated (3:2; 4:17); disciples pray for God to bring it to eschatological fulfillment, according to God’s will for salvation and well-being for all realms of creation, “on earth as in heaven” (see 7:21 on God’s will).

The remaining petitions (vv. 11-13) ask for divine assistance in satisfying human needs for sustenance, forgiveness, strength in the final testing, and deliverance from evil. “Bread” refers to both spiritual nourishment (e.g., Wisdom’s banquet, Prov 9:1-6) and physical nourishment. The meaning of *epiousios*, “daily” or “for the coming day,” is ambiguous. It may refer to the food one needs to survive each day, or it may allude to the eschatological Day of the Lord. The prayer recalls God’s providing of manna to the Israelites (Exod 16:12-35) and cultivates in disciples this same kind of trust. There are also eucharistic overtones for Christians.

Matthew’s keen interest in forgiveness and reconciliation (5:38-48; 18:1-35) is reflected in his expansion of the petition for forgiveness (vv. 12, 14-15). He draws a clear link between one’s ability to forgive others and one’s ability to be forgiven by God. The two flow from and into each other. Divine forgiveness comes first (18:23-35). After receiving unearned forgiveness from God, disciples are obliged to offer forgiveness to others. And when disciples forgive others, they are forgiven by God (6:14-15; 18:35). Matthew uses the term *opheilēmata*, “debts,” (cf. *hamartias*, “sins,” in Luke 11:4), a term that reminds disciples that offenses against others include monetary inequities from systemic injustices. See Deuteronomy 15 for prescriptions for relaxation of debts in the sabbatical year.

The final petition (v. 13) is for God’s protection and deliverance both now and at the end time. Until God’s purposes are completely accomplished, evil will

still exist, ever testing the disciple to be faithful. The language of testing (*peirasmos*) is used not in the sense of God sadistically toying with people, looking for ways to determine their fidelity, but rather it acknowledges the struggle against evil in which disciples engage (as did Jesus, 4:1-11) throughout their earthly sojourn. Jesus teaches his disciples to rely on God's power and faithfulness to bring them through every trial and emerge victorious over evil (*ponēros* can be understood as "evil" or "the evil one," that is, Satan). In Matthew's apocalyptic outlook, there will be a final end-time crisis that will bring this testing to conclusion (chs. 24–25). The whole prayer has an eschatological dimension as well as a present one. Disciples rely on God's power and protection to provide for and save them for all eternity, a reality already tasted in the present.

### **6:16-18 On fasting**

As with almsgiving and prayer (vv. 1-6), Christians who fast are not to call attention to their pious practice. The verb *aphanizō*, "neglect their appearance," literally means "disfigure" or "render unrecognizable." It may refer to covering one's head with a cloth (Jer 14:4) or with ashes (1 Macc 3:47), or neglecting to wash (v. 17). The point is that adulation is its own reward, and no further benefit will accrue to one who is ostentatious in fasting.

### **6:19–7:12 Ethical sayings**

The next sayings are loosely connected by catchwords. Almost all of them have parallels in Luke. They make dualistic contrasts between earth and heaven, light and darkness, love and hate. Such clean separation does not exist in real life. What these pairs underscore is the choice disciples must make to be wholly centered on God while moving toward light, love, and heaven. The prevailing motif is trust in God's providence. The first saying (vv. 19-21) contrasts the corrosive nature of material things with the security of devotedness to God. Treasure on earth, such as clothing and linens, can be consumed by moths or insects or stolen by thieves. They also consume one's attention and one's heart. The lasting treasure is the heart centered on God, which cannot be dislodged.

In this context the saying about the eye being the lamp of the body (vv. 22-23) points out the dangers of eyeing the possessions of others, which incites covetous desire. Evil-eyed envy is one of the attitudes that is most destructive of community. Not only the individual but the whole body of believers is affected by such "darkness." The next saying (v. 24) reprises verses 19-21 with a

different image. A word play makes the point all the more sharply. “Mammon,” “wealth,” is derived from the root *mn*, “trust,” the same root from which “amen” comes. God is the only one to whom disciples say “amen.”

The last section (vv. 25-34) builds on these sayings, illustrating God’s care for birds, wild flowers, and grass of the field, and assures disciples that God knows their needs and provides for them. This passage does not advocate passivity, that is, doing nothing and expecting that God will provide. Nor does it make a judgment on the faith of those whose daily reality is a desperate struggle to survive. The point is that when disciples’ whole attention is centered on seeking God’s reign and right relation with all creation (5:6, 10, 20; 6:1), then those who have enough of life’s necessities do not become obsessed with the quest for material possessions. Rather, they cooperate with God in providing for others (6:1-4), in supplying their daily bread (6:11). Likewise, those who are in desperate straits can let go of their worry. Neither obsessive anxiety about subsistence nor fixated desires on excessive accumulation have a place in the realm of God. Both are reflective of little faith (see also 8:26; 14:31; 16:8).

The present imperative “Stop judging” (7:1) not only warns about avoiding judging others but commands the listeners to desist from what they are in fact doing. As with forgiveness (6:14-15), peoples’ actions redound to them in kind. It is not the case that disciples should overlook wrongdoing by another member of the community (*adelphos*, “brother,” vv. 3-5). What is forbidden is hypocritical fault-finding. A wooden beam in the eye (v. 3) is a hyperbolic way of depicting an evil eye (6:23).

The saying in 7:6 is unique to Matthew and somewhat enigmatic. What is holy (“hallowed”) in 6:9 is God’s name. A pearl can signify the realm of God (see 13:45-46). “Dogs” is likely a reference to outsiders (see also 15:26), since Jews did not keep dogs indoors as house pets. Swine were unclean animals for Jews. So the saying is best understood as an admonition not to preach about the reign of God to Gentiles or pagans, but to concentrate the mission within Israel (similarly 10:5-6). If persecution can be expected in the mission to Israel (5:10; 10:16-36), all the more would such be anticipated with outsiders.

Verses 7-11 circle back to the theme of petitionary prayer. There is a reprise of the image of God as Father (6:9), as the sayings assure that just as human fathers provide good things to their children, so does God. The emphasis (as in 6:25-34) is on God’s loving providence. Humans do not manipulate God into giving them what they want, nor does God need reminding of their needs. God does not give stones for bread (Matt 4:3; 6:11; 14:13-21; 26:26-30). When

disciples seek foremost God's reign and right relation (6:33), this is readily granted. Askers receive, seekers find, and the door is opened to those who knock, even if the specific things disciples ask for are not always granted.

This loosely connected group of ethical sayings reaches its climax with the "golden rule" (v. 12). There are numerous parallels to this saying in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature. In the Old Testament there are variations such as "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18; see Matt 5:43) and "do to no one what you yourself dislike" (Tob 4:15). Admonitions about forgiveness (6:14-15) and judging (7:1-3) have already been framed in terms of getting back in kind what you do. Now this is offered as the guiding principle that sums up the whole of how disciples are to live according to the Scriptures. It closes the section that began with 5:17-20, on Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and the prophets.

### **7:13-29 Exhortations and warnings**

The final group of sayings and parables are mostly from Q. Using dualistic contrasts, they warn about end-time consequences for doing or not doing what Jesus teaches. The notion of two ways was a common one in Judaism and early Christianity (e.g., Deut 30:15-20; Ps 1:6; Sir 15:14-17). The "narrow gate" (v. 13) and the "constricted road" (v. 14) express the difficulties involved in choosing the way of Jesus. Moreover, there are teachers or pastors ("false prophets" and "ravenous wolves," v. 15) who would lead believers astray. But it is not difficult to determine the right leaders to follow. The effects ("fruits") of their teaching and preaching easily reveal the correctness of their words (vv. 16-18, 20). The theme of bearing good fruit is a favorite of Matthew (see references at 3:10), as is fiery destruction for one who fails to do so (vv. 19; 3:10, 12; 13:40; 18:8; 25:41).

Every major discourse in Matthew's Gospel ends with a warning to put Jesus' teaching into practice (5:2-27; 13:36-43, 47-50; 18:23-35; 24:37-25:46). This is the focus of the sayings in verses 21-23 and the parable of the two builders (vv. 24-27). Saying "Lord, Lord" (vv. 21, 22), either as a cry for help (8:2, 6, 8, 25; 9:28; 14:28, 30; 15:22, 25, 27; 17:15; 20:30, 31, 33) or as a liturgical acclamation (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11) is not sufficient; one must not only acknowledge Jesus' power but also engage it in doing deeds like his own (i.e., doing "the will of my Father in heaven" v. 21; on God's will see also 6:9-10; 12:50; 18:14; 26:39, 42, 44). The opposite is also true. Those who do mighty deeds like those of Jesus must be in intimate relationship with him, or else they risk him declaring at the end time, "I never knew you" (v. 23).

In the parable of the two builders (vv. 24-27) the point is similar. One who hears and puts Jesus' words into practice is like one who builds on a rock foundation (v. 24). This image is often used of God (e.g., Deut 32:4, 18, 31; Pss 18:2; 28:1; Isa 17:10). Now it is applied to Jesus and at 16:18 to Peter. The emphasis on hearing and doing echoes Israel's response at the giving of the Law, "All that the LORD has said, we will heed and do" (Exod 24:7; see also Deut 31:11-12). The emphasis in the parable is on Jesus as authoritative interpreter of the Law—"these words of *mine*" (vv. 24, 26; emphasis added). The conflicts with other religious leaders, both in Jesus' day and in Matthew's, lurk beneath the surface of this parable.

The Sermon on the Mount concludes with the same formula as each of Matthew's major discourses does, "When Jesus finished these words" (7:28; cf. 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). The next major section focuses on Jesus' healing ministry.

### **8:1–9:38 Compassionate healing**

Matthew returns to the Markan source, gathering in this section stories of Jesus healing every kind of illness. Two segments dealing with discipleship punctuate these (8:18-27; 9:9-17) and prepare for the commissioning in chapter 10. The healing stories generally have the same form with the following elements: (1) the setting is described; (2) the sick person approaches Jesus and requests healing; (3) the gravity of the illness is depicted, highlighting the healing power of Jesus; (4) Jesus pronounces a word of healing and often touches the person; (5) there is a demonstration of the cure; (6) onlookers react with amazement. The healing stories focus on Jesus' power, but they do not compel people to believe. Some persons are tentative in their requests (8:2), some have great faith before Jesus heals (8:10; 9:22, 29), and others have little faith (8:26). Some reject him (8:34), and others glorify God (9:8) and preach throughout the land about him (9:31).

#### **8:1-4 A person with leprosy**

There are three healings in the initial cycle. First is a person with leprosy (vv. 1-4), who prostrates himself before Jesus (see also 2:2, 8, 11; 14:3; 15:25; 28:9). Having just instructed his disciples about doing the will of God (7:21), Jesus now enacts God's will to heal and shows that his own will is one with God's. In Leviticus 13–14 there are detailed prescriptions for dealing with leprosy (a term applied to various kinds of skin ailments, not only what is known

today as Hansen's disease). Once again Jesus is intent on fulfilling the Law and sends the healed man to complete the rituals for reincorporation into the community of believers. The detail about telling no one (v. 4) is one that Matthew has preserved from Mark, but the theme of secrecy does not function in Matthew as it does in Mark. In Matthew the crowds are still with Jesus (v. 1), and Jesus' identity has been made public from the start.

### **8:5-13 A centurion's servant**

In the second healing story, set in Capernaum (4:13; 9:1), an officer of the Roman army in charge of one hundred soldiers approaches Jesus, appealing on behalf of his servant (*pais* could also mean "child"). Unlike the episode with the Canaanite woman (15:21-28), Jesus does not rebuff this Gentile. As with her (15:28), Jesus praises the faith of this non-Jew and even contrasts his great faith with that of Israel (v. 10). It is a foreshadowing of the inclusion of Gentiles from all corners of the earth (see Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4; Zech 8:20-23). Reclining with Israel's ancestors at the eschatological banquet (v. 11) is a frequently used image for the joys of the life that lies beyond (22:1-14; Isa 25:6). Matthew uses his favorite image of "outer darkness, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth" (vv. 12, cf. 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) to contrast the fate of those for whom the eschatological banquet has been prepared but who do not accept Jesus. One unique element in this story is that Jesus heals at a distance and does not personally encounter the sick person. It highlights Jesus' authority (*exousia*, v. 9) but also may reflect a concern for ritual purity by not having Jesus enter a Gentile house.

### **8:14-15 Peter's mother-in-law**

Third in the series of healing stories is the cure of Peter's mother-in-law. There are also elements of a call story. Unlike other healing stories, in which the sick person approaches Jesus, here Jesus takes the initiative. He sees her (*eiden*, v. 14), just as he sees Matthew when he calls him to be a disciple (9:9). Her response, "she rose and waited on (*diakonein*) him" (v. 15), also characterizes discipleship. The verb *diakonein* is used throughout the New Testament for a variety of ministries: table service (Acts 6:2), ministry of the word (Acts 6:4), financial ministry (Luke 8:3; Acts 11:29; 12:25), apostolic ministry (Acts 1:25). Also, in Matthew's version her service is to Jesus alone (cf. Mark 1:31, where she waits on "them"). See 27:55, where the many Galilean women who followed and ministered to Jesus keep vigil at the crucifixion. It is possible that Matthew

has blended the story of this woman's healing with that of her call as a disciple. That Simon's mother-in-law may have played a significant role in the early community of disciples is likely from the fact that she is identified (though not by name), whereas other persons who are healed remain completely anonymous.

### **8:16-17 Summary**

Matthew, like Mark, sets this first cycle of healings in one powerful day, rounding it off with a summary statement of all the other cures Jesus did. Typically, he cites Isaiah, drawing attention to how Jesus' healing ministry fulfills the Scriptures. This text (Isa 53:4) is from the Suffering Servant songs and points ahead to the Passion.

### **8:18-22 The rigors of discipleship**

The link between healing and ministry is hinted at in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (vv. 14-15; see also 9:31). But discipleship demands far more than an attraction to Jesus because of his mighty deeds of healing. To a scribe who wants to follow him, Jesus speaks soberly about the itinerant nature of discipleship (vv. 19-20). For other favorable references to scribes, see 13:52; 23:34. Jesus reminds those who have already become disciples that commitment to following him takes precedence over all other obligations and ties, even to family members. (See Tob 1:16-20 on the obligation to bury the dead; cf. 1 Kgs 19:20.) Jesus' homelessness recalls that of Woman Wisdom (Prov 1:20; Sir 24:7; see other parallels with Wisdom at Matt 11:16, 25-30; 23:34-39).

This is the first instance of the title "Son of Man" in the Gospel. This enigmatic expression is found only on the lips of Jesus. It occurs in contexts where Jesus speaks of his earthly ministry (9:6; 11:19; 12:8, 32; 13:37; 16:13), his passion (12:40; 17:9, 12, 22; 20:18, 28; 26:2, 24, 45), and his future coming and role as judge at the end time (10:23; 13:41; 16:27, 28; 19:28; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; 26:64). The phrase *ho huios tou anthrōpou* ("son of man") is found in Daniel 7:14 and in 1 Enoch 37-71 for an end-time agent of salvation and judgment. It may reflect a Semitic expression, *ben ʾādām* in Hebrew, or *bar ʾēneāsh* in Aramaic, "son of humanity," designating a single member of the human species. Jesus may have used this phrase as a way of speaking of himself simply as a human being. It could be translated as "a certain person" or "someone" or, when used as a self-designation, simply "I." Whatever the provenance and original meaning of the expression, it is clearly used as a christological title in the Gospels.



### **8:23-27 Stormy fears**

Having given orders at verse 18 to cross to the other side of the lake, Jesus now does so with his disciples in tow. These are ones who are willing to give up ties to home and family. But further difficulties lie ahead, symbolized by the “violent storm,” literally, *seismos megas*, “a great earthquake” (see 24:7; 27:51; 28:2). The “earthquake” points ahead to the difficulties for disciples surrounding Jesus’ passion. Initial enthusiasm for following Jesus can quickly give way to paralyzing fear for one’s own life. But Jesus’ power to preserve life, already demonstrated in his authority over disease, illness, and demons, now extends even to natural forces (see Pss 65:8; 89:10; 93:3-4; 107:29 for God’s power over the threatening waters). The “little faith” of fearful disciples (see also 6:30; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20) gives way to amazement as they focus, not on the seemingly overwhelming obstacles, but on the person of Jesus.

### **8:28-34 Ministry at the margins**

In the next healing story Jesus ventures out on the other side of the lake, which Matthew regards as Gentile territory. Demons and death (“tombs,” v. 28) epitomize the forces of evil. Matthew has made the locale Gadara (cf. Gerasa in Mark 5:1), which is some five miles away from the sea. Despite the logistical difficulties, the image of swine (unclean animals) rushing down the steep bank to their watery demise vividly conveys the point. Jesus’ power extends over all forces of evil, especially to those on the margins. The deeds expected at the end time (v. 29) are already begun in his earthly ministry. Unlike the story of the Samaritan woman who brings her whole town to believe in Jesus (John 4:39), the swineherds’ report to their townspeople causes the opposite reaction (vv. 33-34). Jesus then returns to his home territory (9:1), where he receives a favorable reception (9:8).

### **9:1-8 Forgiveness with healing**

Matthew preserves a tradition from Mark (2:1-12) that reflects the ancient belief that sickness and sin are related. In other New Testament texts (e.g., John 9:3) Jesus clearly asserts that sickness or disability is not due to any one individual person’s sin. In a broader sense, sin can be thought of as the mortal condition that holds all people bound, from which only God can liberate. Thus when Jesus forgives the sin of the paralyzed man, some scribes accuse him of blasphemy. A scribe is portrayed favorably in 8:19, but for the remainder of the Gospel scribes are mainly adversaries of Jesus (7:29; 9:3; 12:38; 15:1; 16:21;

20:18; 21:15; 23:13-29; 26:57; 27:41). Blasphemy ordinarily refers to misusing the divine name (Lev 24:15-16; Num 15:30), but here it refers to Jesus arrogating to himself a power that belongs only to God. This is a charge that resurfaces when Jesus is interrogated by the high priest (26:65).

Not only does Jesus pronounce divine forgiveness, but he also reads others' thoughts (v. 4), another power that belongs only to God (Jer 11:20; Ps 7:9). This episode affirms another dimension of Jesus' power, while also heightening the conflict with Jesus' opponents. In addition, it portrays the important role of the faith community in bringing a person to wellness. It is the faith of the man's friends which Jesus sees (v. 2) and which causes him to act. Finally, it reflects a holistic approach to the person. Jesus heals both body and spirit, allowing the person to arise to a new life (*egeirein*, "rose," v. 7, the same verb used of Jesus' resurrection at 28:6). The crowd reacts (v. 8) in a manner similar to that of 7:28-29.

### **9:9-13 The call of Matthew**

Interjected in a cycle of healing stories that began with Jesus ministering to outsiders (8:28-34) is the call of a tax collector, a marginalized Jew. Matthew has taken the story from Mark (2:13-17), where the tax collector's name is Levi. The change to the name Matthew brings forward the authoritative figure behind this Gospel, one of the Twelve (10:3). As in the call of the first disciples (4:18-22), the response is immediate and total. The remaining verses center on Jesus' close association with many marginalized people (v. 10).

Tax collectors were ostracized by observant Jews for a number of reasons. They were looked upon as collaborators with the Romans, and their work brought them into continuous contact with Gentiles. Moreover, they had a reputation for dishonesty, as they would try to charge more than the amount prescribed (Luke 3:13). "Sinners" (v. 10) refers to Gentiles, who do not know the Law, as well as Jews who miss the mark in keeping the Law, either by immoral acts or because of their profession (tax collectors, shepherds, wool dyers, etc.). Eating with such people was particularly offensive (v. 11), since a shared meal signified intimate relationship. In addition, meals with Jesus foreshadow inclusion in the eschatological banquet (14:32-39; 22:1-14; 26:26-30). Dining with Jesus is not only a social event but also a means of healing (v. 12) and forgiveness (v. 13). Matthew adds a quotation from Hosea 6:6 (v. 13; see also 12:7), which reflects conflict between his community and other Jews about ritual purity. With this story the evangelist legitimates the presence and

participation of all kinds of marginalized people in the community of Jesus' followers. Discipleship is offered to all who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6); those who think of themselves as already righteous find it difficult to be open to the call (v. 13).

### **9:14-17 Old and new**

Inclusive sharing at table was not the only practice of early Christians that proved problematic. The question of why Jesus did not fast (see also 11:18-19) needed to be explained, as well as why Christians resumed the practice. Jews were obliged to fast only on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29; 23:27), but they also fasted in tandem with prayer (Ps 35:13), penance (2 Sam 12:13-25; 1 Kgs 21:27), mourning (2 Sam 1:12; 3:36), and divine revelation (Dan 10:3). The *Didache* (8:1; from the first half of the second century) notes that Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays (see Luke 18:12), so Christians took up the practice on Wednesdays and Fridays. While the bridegroom (a metaphor used of God, e.g., Hos 2:19; Isa 54:3-6; Jer 2:2, and used again of Jesus in Matt 25:1-13) is still present with the guests, it is not the time for fasting. "The days will come" (v. 15b) is a phrase often used to introduce an oracle of woe (Amos 7:2; Jer 38:31) and hints at the death of Jesus. It echoes Isaiah 53:8, where the Suffering Servant "was taken away." After the death of Jesus it is appropriate for his disciples to fast (see 6:16-18). Metaphors of new cloth and new wine symbolize the new way of Jesus. Yet there is no abandoning what went before. Matthew preserves from the Markan tradition the theme of the incompatibility of the old and the new but adds "and both are preserved" (v. 17).

### **9:18-26 Tenacious faith**

A third cycle of healing stories begins with an account that weaves together the cure of a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years and that of a twelve-year-old girl who has died. Matthew trims away many of Mark's descriptive details (cf. Mark 5:21-43) and adds some that heighten the Jewish ambiance: flute players at the deathbed of the young girl (v. 23), as prescribed for funerals for even the poorest of Jews (*m. Ketub* 4:4); and "tassels" (v. 20) on Jesus' cloak, worn by Jews to help them remember to keep all God's commandments (Num 15:38-41).

In both stories the healing power of Jesus and the faith of the petitioners is central. The official, despite the fact that his daughter is already dead, prostrates himself before Jesus (as do other characters in 2:2-11; 8:2; 14:3; 15:25; 28:9).

And even after twelve years of suffering, the woman with the hemorrhages still musters courageous faith. Jesus, like Elijah (1 Kgs 17:17-24) and Elisha (2 Kgs 4:32-37), has the power to resuscitate those who have died, an act that prefigures his own resurrection.

There are a number of similarities between Jesus and these two women that point ahead to his passion. Like the woman with the hemorrhage, he too suffers, bleeds, does not cry out, stays steadfast in faith, and attains salvation (the Greek word *sōzein*, v. 22, means both “healed” and “saved”) by his courageous act. As the child of the ruler, at the time of her death, is surrounded by an unruly crowd, who ridicule Jesus for saying she is not dead, so Jesus, the child of God, is taunted by crowds of passersby, religious officials, and those crucified with him, for his trust in God to bring life from death (27:39-44). And as news spread throughout the land that Jesus had raised up the girl (v. 26), so the Galilean women will spread the news that Jesus has been raised (28:6-8).

### **9:27-31 Efficacious faith**

Matthew brings the cycle of powerful healing stories to a climax as he doubles the number of men (also at 8:28; cf. Mark 5:2) who are blind (cf. Mark 10:46-52; see also Matt 20:29-34) and turns Jesus’ question not only toward the ones seeking healing in the narrative but to the reader as well: “Do you believe that I can do this?” (v. 28). A disciple will need to answer this question with a strong affirmative before being able to call on that same power in mission (ch. 10). The men address Jesus with Matthew’s favorite messianic title, “Son of David” (v. 27; 1:1; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15). The warning not to tell anyone (v. 30) is a holdover from Mark’s version; the theme of secrecy does not function in Matthew as it does in Mark (see also 8:4).

### **9:32-34 Healing and conflict**

The final brief healing story reflects ancient belief that disability and illness were caused by demon possession (see also 8:28-34). Matthew keeps the focus on Jesus’ mission to Israel (v. 33, as also 10:6; 15: 24). The divided response to Jesus (as in 9:1-8) is a theme that keeps building. The crowds continue to react favorably to him until his passion (27:20-26), while the Pharisees take the role of prime opponents (see 3:7; 5:20; 9:11, 14).

### **9:35-38 Compassionate shepherd**

Concluding this section is a summary statement (as 8:16-17) of Jesus’

successful ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. His focus remains on ministry to his own people (v. 35). This is one of the few times that Matthew does not make the reference to synagogues polemical. The stress is on Jesus' heartfelt compassion for his people. The image of shepherd as religious leader is a familiar one for God (Pss 23; 100; Isa 40:11) and for religious leaders (Ezek 34:8-12) and occurs twice more in the Gospel (10:6; 18:14-16). The metaphor shifts abruptly into agricultural imagery (vv. 37-38), as the image of laborers for the harvest leads into the mission discourse.

### **10:1-4 Called for mission**

The mission discourse is the second of the five major blocks of teaching. It begins with the call and sending of the twelve disciples (vv. 1-15), followed by sober warnings about coming persecutions (vv. 16-25), reassurances about God's protection (vv. 26-33), and further sayings about repercussions, conditions, and rewards of discipleship (vv. 34-42). The central place of this discourse conveys to the reader that all discipleship has a missionary dimension to it. The number twelve is symbolic for the whole of the new Israel, recalling the twelve tribes that constituted the people of the covenant. "Disciples" (*mathētai*, v. 1) designates a wide group of followers (73 times in Matthew). The term "apostle" (*apostolos*, v. 2) means "one sent" and is used only here in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' bestowing his authority on his disciples to heal recalls Moses' imparting his spirit to the elders of Israel (Num 11:24-25). The commission to teach comes to disciples only at 28:20.

Matthew relies on Mark (3:13-19) for the list of the Twelve. There are slight variations in the names in Luke 6:12-16 and Acts 1:13. Matthew orders the names in six pairs and adds the designation "the tax collector" to Matthew (v. 3). About many of these figures little is known. Simon Peter always stands at the head and Judas Iscariot at the end. The Twelve (who appear again in 11:1; 19:28; 20:17; 26:14, 20, 47) do not play a major role in this Gospel.

### **10:5-15 Commissioning**

The instructions given to the Twelve speak to all itinerant Christian missionaries as well as to those who receive and support them. They tell Jesus' envoys where and how to travel, how to approach people in new places, what to say and do, and how to handle rejection. For the community that offers hospitality to missionaries, they also provide a way to identify false prophets (7:15-23). Matthew is unique in stressing the mission to Israel (also 15:24).

While a few episodes foreshadow a Gentile mission (2:1-12; 8:5-13, 28-33; 15:21-28), this does not become explicit until 28:16-20. Jesus himself likely understood his mission to be only for the renewal of his own people, while his followers subsequently understood it as intended for Gentiles as well.

Christian missionaries make the same proclamation as Jesus (4:17) and John the Baptist (3:2), and they perform the same healing deeds as Jesus (chs. 8–9). By so doing, Christians are the human face of Christ still at work in the world, bringing hope and healing wherever there are illness, death, and manifestations of evil. Missionaries are to present themselves as completely vulnerable—without money, luggage, extra clothing, footwear, or weapons (a walking stick was often used to fend off beasts). They are not self-sufficient; rather, they are totally reliant on God’s providence, demonstrated in their dependence on the hospitality of others. While missionaries deserve to be paid (v. 10; similarly 1 Cor 9:14), Jesus instructs them to minister without charge so that the poor are not excluded and so that they are able to proclaim the Gospel with integrity (v. 8b; similarly 2 Cor 11:7). The message cannot be tailored to what those who will give money want to hear. Missionaries are not to move around seeking better accommodations. They are to remain in one house, a visible sign of “God-with-us” (1:23; 28:20), offering peace (see above on 5:9) to all within. Like Jesus, missionaries face acceptance by some and rejection by others. When rejected, they are not to respond violently, but rather they symbolically shake off the vestiges of their encounter. Not to accept the bearers of the Gospel has dire consequences. For the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 15), see Genesis 19.

### **10:16-42 The cost of missionary life**

In addition to the self-imposed rigors outlined in 10:5-15, missionaries also face dangers from without (vv. 16-25). They may be “handed over” (v. 17; as is Jesus in 27:2, 18) to local councils of Jewish leaders, the Roman prefect, or the Herodian king. They may be flogged (v. 17; see 20:19; 23:34; Acts 22:19; 2 Cor 11:24-25) and hated by all (v. 22). Worst of all, members of one’s own family or apostates from the Christian community (“brothers” and “sisters”; see v. 21) may denounce them to the authorities.

In response to such perils, missionaries must first remember that they are heralds of the messianic reign of peace, when sheep and wolves can dwell together (Isa 11:6). Even so, they are not naïve about their opponents. When possible, they are to flee persecution (v. 23). When brought before the

authorities, they can rely on the Spirit for the words by which they will bear witness. They are to endure “to the end” (v. 22), probably a reference to the eschatological coming of the Son of Humanity rather than to martyrdom. Regarding persecution, see above on 5:10-11. All these tribulations should come as no surprise to Christian missionaries, since they are following in the footsteps of their teacher (vv. 24-25). On Beelzebul (v. 25), see 12:22-37.

Three times Jesus reassures those he sends out not to be afraid (vv. 26, 28, 31). They are to proclaim boldly and openly, since the Gospel is meant for all; it is not esoteric teaching (vv. 26-27). Further, even if their life is taken, it is only their body (*sōma*) that is destroyed, not their soul (*psychē*). Moreover, they are so highly prized in God’s sight that God’s providential care will never falter (vv. 29-31). One who publicly professes commitment to Jesus can depend on the same unwavering commitment from God through Jesus (v. 32). The only cautions are that there is one who can destroy the whole person in Gehenna (v. 28; see 5:22), and there are eschatological consequences for apostasy (v. 33).

A disparate collection of sayings (vv. 34-42) rounds out the mission discourse. These apply more widely to all disciples. In verses 34-37 Jesus returns to the topic of family divisions that result from allegiance to Jesus. Previously Jesus pronounced peacemakers blessed (5:9) and outlined concrete strategies of nonretaliation of violence (5:38-48). At his arrest he prohibits the use of a sword in his defense (26:52). Verse 34 does not contradict these but rather speaks about the effect of his mission. Jesus’ purpose is not to create division, but his coming has provoked opposing responses (see also 4:22; 8:21-22). The “sword” may be an allusion to Ezekiel 14:17, where the prophet speaks of a sword of discrimination that goes through the midst of the people, separating out those destined for destruction from those who will have mercy.

The sayings in verses 37-39 underscore the utter attachment to Jesus that is demanded of a disciple. A disciple who does not love his or her own family members and who does not recognize God’s love revealed in those closest at hand will not be able to share that divine love with outsiders. But disciples, especially those called to go away from home on mission, must be willing to subordinate their attachment to what they love best—family and even their own life—for the sake of Jesus and his mission. Taking up one’s cross (v. 38) does not refer to accepting suffering in general but refers specifically to the persecutions and sacrifices one endures for the sake of the mission. The paradoxical reward for such self-renunciation is finding life (v. 39).

The last sayings in the discourse shift focus to the receiving communities.

Those who accept prophets, righteous ones, and “little ones” (see vv. 40-42; see also 18:6, 10, 14) among the disciples can expect to share in the grace of the one offering such gifts. On reward or punishment for offering a drink, see 25:35, 42.

## VARYING RESPONSES TO JESUS

### *Matt 11:1–16:12*

#### **11:1-19 Jesus and John the Baptist**

Matthew concludes the second block of teaching (10:1-42) with a transitional sentence, “When Jesus finished . . .” (as in 7:28; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Unlike Mark (6:30), Matthew does not recount the return of the Twelve and the success of their first missionary excursion; rather, he focuses on the divided responses to Jesus’ mission, which his disciples also experience. The disciples do not always understand, but they, along with the crowds, continue to follow him, while opposition from the religious leaders increases.

This section begins with John’s query about Jesus’ identity (vv. 2-6), followed by Jesus’ testimony about John (vv. 7-11), and concludes with a parable about the rejection both experience (vv. 12-19). The sayings are mostly from Q (parallel in Luke 7:18-35). Matthew noted at 4:12 that John had been arrested, and he will recount the story of John’s death at 14:1-12. John’s uncertainty about whether Jesus is the “one who is to come” (v. 3) seems to be at odds with the baptismal scene (3:13-17), where John appeared to know that Jesus is the “one coming after” him and is mightier than he is (3:11). The scene in 11:2-6 functions to clarify for the reader that the healings and teaching of Jesus in the previous chapters confirm his messianic identity. The kinds of deeds listed in verse 5 echo Isaiah 35:5-6. Although there is no explicit mention of the Messiah in Isaiah 35, these promises in a postexilic context are heralds of the dawning messianic era. An alternative interpretation is that Jesus is redefining what is to be expected of the Messiah. If some are looking for a military and political leader of the Davidic line such as the *Psalms of Solomon* 17-18 describe, then Jesus corrects their mistaken expectation. It is important to remember, however, that there was a variety of messianic expectations in Jesus’ day. The beatitude in verse 6 underlines the paradoxical nature of Jesus’ messiahship, at which many will take offense (*skandalizomai*, literally, “be scandalized”; see also 13:21, 57; 15:12; 26:31, 33).

Verses 7-15 shift the focus to Jesus’ estimation of John. John is no flighty figure who runs after every would-be messiah who blows into town; rather, he is



the one who has correctly identified God's anointed. He is the expected Elijah-like prophet (v. 14; see 17:10-12), the forerunner of the messianic reign. In verse 10 Matthew combines Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:30 to show the fulfillment of God's promise to send a messenger (John) to prepare the way for the one who heralds God's reign (Jesus). There may be an implied contrast in verses 7-8 between John and Herod Antipas, as the latter had coins minted with the symbol of a reed at the founding of Tiberias (A.D. 19). John's Elijah-like clothing (3:4) was nothing like Herod's luxurious dress.

John is a hinge figure who both prepares the way for the new era of God's reign (v. 11) and is also part of the reign, as both he and Jesus proclaim its arrival (3:2; 4:17) and suffer violence for its sake (11:12). John's imprisonment is an example of how the reign of God suffers violence at the hands of the violent who attempt to overpower it (v. 12). "The violent" who attempt to lay waste God's rule include not only human opponents, like Herod and those of his ilk, but also the demonic forces with which Jesus contends in his exorcisms and healings. The theme of having "ears . . . to hear" (v. 15) points ahead to the parables discourse (13:9, 13-17, 43).

The parable in verses 11-16 likens "this generation" (a pejorative phrase, as also at 12:39-42; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36) to a group of children who stubbornly refuse to play with another group, whether it is a comic game or a tragic one. Not responding to John's "dirge" nor Jesus' "flute," they instead sit (v. 16) in judgment (see 27:19). Such was also the reception accorded to Woman Wisdom, who called out her invitation to eat and drink (Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). But just as Wisdom is rejected by the foolish (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too John and Jesus are rejected. The accusation "glutton and drunkard" (v. 19) alludes to Deuteronomy 21:20, where it connotes a rebellious son. Verse 19b refutes this charge: Jesus is Wisdom incarnate who is vindicated (Prov 8:8, 20) by her works. For other parallels between Jesus and Wisdom, see 8:18-22; 11:25-30; 23:34-36, 37-39.

### **11:20-24 Consequences of rejection**

To reject Jesus' invitation carries weighty consequences. The "mighty deeds" he has done (esp. chs. 8-9) should lead to repentance with understanding that he is the "one who is to come" (11:3) and Wisdom incarnate (11:19b). Capernaum, where Jesus makes his home (4:13; 8:5; 9:1; 17:24), Chorazin, and Bethsaida are villages near the Sea of Galilee. Previously Capernaum had given Jesus a favorable reception (9:8), although after his first powerful deed done

there, he already spoke of his rejection by Israel (8:10-12). It is here that Jesus first clashes with the religious leaders (9:3, 11). A taunt to the king of Babylon (Isa 14:12-20) is redirected to Capernaum (v. 23). The coastal cities Tyre and Sidon were frequently denounced by the prophets for their corruption (Isa 23:1-12; Jer 25:22; Ezek 28:11-23). For the story of Sodom (vv. 23-24), see Genesis 19.

### **11:25-30 The revealer's yoke**

This prayer is akin to the *Thanksgiving Hymns* from Qumran and uses language like that of the Fourth Gospel. It stresses the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Creator and Jesus' unique role as revealer. These verses are not to be taken as speaking of predestination or as anti-intellectualism; rather, they speak of how those who are vulnerable and marginalized are the most receptive to the revelation Jesus offers. The word *hēpioi*, "infants," (v. 25) connotes both the dependence of one who is needy as well as the inexperience of the fledgling disciples who have welcomed Jesus' teaching and his saving deeds.

In verses 28-30 Jesus, like Woman Wisdom (Sir 51:23-30), invites those who are oppressed by the yoke of sin, suffering, economic distress, and hard physical labor to take upon themselves his yoke. Rather than taking up the yoke of oppressive rulers such as Egypt (Lev 26:13) or Babylon (Isa 47:6), Israel is to take upon itself that of Yahweh (Jer 2:20). God's "yoke" is study of and obedience to Torah (Jer 5:5). To take up Jesus' yoke is not to reject Torah; rather, it is to live by his interpretation of it (5:17-20). The lightness of Jesus' yoke is not a lax interpretation of the Torah—quite the contrary (5:21-48; 10:16-23)! Accepting its more stringent demands paradoxically leads to liberation from all that oppresses. This is the opposite of what the Pharisaic interpreters do (23:4). "Rest[ing]" connotes that all the created order is in right relationship, and the believing community together delights in its goodness (as God does in Genesis 2:1-3).

### **12:1-14 Sabbath controversies**

Two conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees advance the theme of rejection and culminate with a death threat (v. 14). In the first conflict Jesus defends his hungry disciples for plucking heads of grain on the sabbath. Deuteronomy 23:25 allows hungry persons to take grain from a neighbor's field, but they may not use a sickle. This saves poor persons from having to beg, while at the same time guaranteeing that they will not take undo advantage of the

owner of the field.

The issue in Matthew 12:1-8, however, is that the disciples are breaking the sabbath. Jesus defends his disciples' action by citing two texts of the Torah. In verses 3-4 Jesus interprets 1 Samuel 21:1-6 as an illustration of how an act of compassion to respond to a human need must take precedence over cultic observance. This is reiterated in verse 7 with a quotation from Hosea 6:6. In verse 5 Matthew makes reference to the instructions on the duties of priests described in Leviticus 24:8 and Numbers 28:9-10. Jesus does not dismiss the Law (see also 5:17), but when there are differing interpretations of the Law, it is he who is the authoritative interpreter of the Law.

The second controversy (vv. 9-14), involving a cure on the sabbath, takes place in a synagogue. The question put to Jesus in verse 10 is a trap. Jesus cleverly replies, arguing from the lesser to the greater (as also 6:25, 26, 30; 10:31). His accusers readily recognize that they would rescue a sheep in danger on the sabbath. How much more valuable is a person in need, Jesus advances. The point of debate is whether or not the need is life-threatening, thus warranting saving action on the sabbath, which is allowed. Again, this episode highlights Jesus' authority to interpret the Law and the deadly hostility which that claim provokes.

### **12:15-21 Approved by God**

At the center of the controversy stories in chapter 12 is Matthew's longest fulfillment quotation, that is, the use of citations from the Old Testament to interpret what he is saying about Jesus. The main point of the citation from Isaiah 42:1-4 is to underscore Jesus' identity as the one approved of and chosen by God, even as human authorities reject him and seek to do away with him. There are echoes of God's affirmation of the beloved Son at his baptism (3:17) and transfiguration (17:5). The emphasis is not on the suffering of the servant, but on his meekness and gentleness (11:29; 21:4-5). That Jesus has the spirit of God (v. 18) prepares for the ensuing controversy in 12:22-32.

### **12:22-37 Power from the Spirit of God**

This episode begins with a healing very similar to that in 9:32-34. This time the controversy centers on the source of Jesus' power. The crowd continues to react favorably, though they are uncertain about Jesus' identity (v. 23). The religious leaders, however, continue their offensive, this time accusing Jesus of exorcising by the power of Beelzebul. The etymology of this disdainful name for

Satan is uncertain. Most likely it derived from “Baalzebub,” “Lord of the Flies,” a Philistine deity (2 Kgs 1:2). The impact of Jesus’ reply is that since his deeds of power are destroying Satan’s realm, he cannot be using Satan’s power. He then turns the tables and suggests that it is his opponents who are in the grip of Satan’s power (v. 27). Returning to his own defense, Jesus spells out that it is by the spirit of God that he performs exorcisms (v. 28)—clear signs of the inbreaking of God’s realm. Jesus, the stronger one (see 3:11), binds up Satan (v. 29) by his deeds of power.

A series of loosely connected sayings follows. First there is a warning that one cannot stay neutral in this power struggle (v. 30). Then follow ominous sayings about blasphemy against the Spirit (vv. 31-32). This unforgivable sin is attributing to Satan what is truly of God. This is a warning to the religious leaders. They knowingly pit themselves against God by opposing Jesus. By so doing, they close themselves off from God’s boundless offer of forgiveness. It is not that God refuses to forgive, but that they have consciously refused to accept forgiveness (see 5:43-48; 18:23-35). Then Matthew uses a favorite metaphor, bearing fruit (vv. 33-37; see also 3:8, 10; 7:16-20; 13:23; 21:19), to unmask further the wickedness of the religious leaders. Their deeds, and especially their spoken opposition to Jesus, reveal their true nature.

### **12:38-47 An evil generation**

A shift of scene brings scribes and Pharisees asking for a sign from Jesus. The many signs Jesus has already performed have not led them to faith; more of the same will likewise have no effect on those who have already chosen evil (v. 39). One final sign remains: that of Jesus’ death and resurrection. But even this mighty deed will not convince everyone (27:62-63; 28:17). The theme of outsiders who respond more favorably than Israel, particularly its leaders, surfaces once again (similarly 2:1-11; 8:10-12; 11:20-24), as even Ninevites and the Queen of the South (1 Kgs 10:1-13) will participate in judging the unrepentant.

The saying about the roaming unclean spirit (vv. 43-45) warns that in addition to initial repentance (“swept clean,” v. 44), one must become filled with Jesus, allowing him to take possession and dwell within. The religious leaders appear to have everything in order (v. 44), when in fact, they are empty within (similarly 23:27-28). In addition to renouncing evil Jesus’ disciples must have a full heart (12:34) that actively seeks the realm of God and a life that produces good fruit.

### **12:46-50 True family**

The final vignette in this section brings Jesus' mother and siblings onto the scene. Matthew does not give a motive for their wanting to speak with him. Are they for him or against him? At 10:34-39 Jesus has spoken about the family divisions that disciples face. Is that the case with his own family? This is the last mention of Jesus' family members. Those bound to Jesus in discipleship are as family to him and to one another.

### **13:1-53 The parables discourse**

The third major block of teaching comprises seven parables, two allegorical explanations (vv. 18-23, 36-43), and a theory on Jesus' use of parables (vv. 10-17, 34-35, 51-52). These puzzling stories use figurative language to speak in everyday terms about the realm of God. Yet there is usually a twist, so that they do not simply tell how life is but challenge the hearer to convert to how life can be in God's realm. They are usually open-ended, allowing for a variety of interpretations.

### **13:1-9 Parable of the sower, seed, soil, harvest**

The scene shifts from the controversies with religious leaders to a large crowd eager for Jesus' teaching (vv. 1-2). Matthew's rendition closely follows that of Mark (4:1-9). A different message comes forth, depending on which "character" is the focus: the sower, the seed, the soil, or the harvest. The sower is usually thought to represent God or Jesus, while the seed is the word of God (vv. 18-23). When focusing on the sower, the central point concerns how the farmer acts: he indiscriminately sows seed on every type of ground, offering the word to everyone, regardless of their potential for accepting it (similarly 5:45). The exhortation in verse 9 recalls the *Shema*, ("Hear O Israel," Deut 6:4-5), prayed each day by observant Jews. This prayer underscores Israel's unique relationship with God, while Jesus' parable widens the invitation to all.

When the seed is the focus, the point shifts to the reliability of the seed to bring forth a yield, even though it first seems that there will be no harvest. The parable echoes Isaiah 55:10-11, assuring that God's word does accomplish its purpose, even though much of it falls on deaf ears. Shifting attention to the harvest, the point is the assurance not only that the work will eventually bear fruit but that the harvest will explode in staggering proportions. The huge amounts in verse 8 are hyperbolic and propel the hearer into an eschatological scenario. The image of harvest is often used to speak of the end time (see also

13:30, 39; 21:34, 41). A good harvest yields up to tenfold. One that produces one hundred or sixty or thirtyfold is unimaginable. Fulfillment at the end time will far exceed all that we know here and now. Finally, if one focuses on the soil, the message concerns the quality and conditions needed for the word to be nurtured and come to fruition in the lives of disciples. The explanation in verses 18-23 elaborates this interpretation.

### **13:10-17 The reason for speaking in parables**

Matthew, in contrast to Mark (4:1-12), draws a clear division between Jesus' disciples and the crowd. Rather than ask Jesus to explain the parable to them, the disciples ask why Jesus speaks to the crowd in parables (v. 10). Jesus explains that disciples have been given a gift from God to understand the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11), that is, the presence of God's realm in Jesus and his ministry. Verses 13-17 emphasize human responsibility to respond to God's gift. The effect of the quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10 is to place the blame for not understanding on those who deliberately block their ears to God's word, in contrast to the blessedness of those who do respond to God's grace (vv. 16-17).

### **13:18-23 Explanation of the parable of the soil**

Rarely in the Gospels are parables explained. This and the explanation of the weeds and wheat (13:36-43) are exceptions. Ordinarily parables are open-ended, requiring the hearer to wrestle with their enigmatic challenges. Most likely 13:18-23 represents an interpretation by the early church rather than words from Jesus' lips. The allegorical explanation focuses on the varying levels of receptivity of the four different types of soil, that is, the four types of hearers of the word. The emphasis is on the hearer; each is exhorted to cull out all impediments to becoming "rich soil." The parable also helps explain why some hearers of the word "bear fruit" and others don't.

### **13:24-30 Weeds among the wheat**

This parable, unique to Matthew, wrestles with the questions of who is responsible for evil (vv. 27-28a) and what is to be done about it (vv. 28b-30). The first question is easily answered: an enemy is responsible (v. 28). The more difficult question is what is the best course of action to take with regard to the weeds. The householder's reply is startling, since the best method is to eradicate the weeds as early as possible. To try to separate the two at harvest is difficult

and not totally effective. Moreover, to let the two grow together poses danger to the wheat seedlings as they compete for water and nutrients.

The parable does not tell whether the householder's plan succeeded. If one presumes that it did, then the parable assures that the forces of good can withstand the forces of evil, and it advocates patient trust in the One whose job it is to do the separating at the end time. Alternatively, if the householder is seen as a foolish absentee landlord who greedily thinks that even the weeds can bring him benefit as fuel, then the parable speaks of good news to peasants who watch exploitive landowners brought down by one of their own. One other twist may be that the parable invites nonretaliation against an enemy (as 5:43-48), an action that is vindicated in the end time.

### **13:31-32 Mischievous mustard**

The most common interpretation of this parable is that just as a tiny mustard seed grows into a large tree, so the realm of God grows enormously from its small beginnings. But this explanation misses the possible twist and the call for conversion that may lie beneath the surface. That the mustard becomes a large tree (*dendron*), a botanical impossibility, may point to a burlesque of the image in Ezekiel 17, 31, and Daniel 4. Rather than think of the coming reign of God as a majestic cedar tree imported from Lebanon, Jesus uses the image of a lowly garden herb that grows right in one's own backyard. God's realm is not like a dominating empire, but its power erupts out of weakness. Its transformative power comes from unpretentious ventures of faith by Jesus' disciples. Moreover, the uncontrollable growth of mustard, crossing over boundaries to mix with other crops, offers an image for the manner in which Gentile Christians were growing exponentially and intermingling with Jewish believers in the Matthean community.

### **13:33-35 Hiding leaven**

Important to the meaning of this parable is that in every other instance in Scripture in which leaven occurs, it represents evil or corruption (Exod 12:15-20, 34; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor 5:6-7; Gal 5:9). The startling message is that the reign of God is like a batch of dough that has been permeated by "corruptive" agents. It offers both hope to those who have been on the margins or excluded and a challenge to those who are in a privileged position. An odd detail is that the woman hides (*kryptō*) the leaven in the dough, which brings out again the paradox of hiddenness and revelation with regard to Jesus and his

message (10:26; 11:25; 13:35, 44). It is also important to note that it is the work of a woman that is the vehicle for God's revelation. The amount of flour also indicates a revelation of God is in the offing. Every time a character in the Scriptures bakes with three measures of flour (approximately fifty pounds!), it is in preparation for heavenly visitors (Gen 18:6; Judg 6:19; 1 Sam 1:24). In verses 34-35 Matthew quotes Psalm 78:2 to explain again (as in 13:10-17) that Jesus' disciples have a privileged place of understanding, while the message remains hidden to the crowds.

### **13:36-43 The weeds and wheat explained**

The allegorical explanation of the parable in 13:24-30 is likely not from the lips of Jesus but represents how the early Christians made sense of it (as with 13:18-23). The audience shifts from the crowds to Jesus' disciples (v. 36), as they become privy once again to special understanding. Each detail is given a symbolic meaning. The tone is apocalyptic as evildoers are separated once and for all from the righteous and their opposite fates are sealed. A warning is sounded to anyone who will listen that they be found among the "children of the kingdom" and not among the "children of the evil one." There is a shift from 13:16, where the disciples were blessed *because* they see and hear; now the possibility lies open that a disciple may not hear (v. 43).

### **13:44-53 Treasure found, stored, and shared**

The parables of the buried treasure (v. 44) and the pearl of great price (vv. 45-46) offer two different ways of coming upon the reign of God: finding it unexpectedly or after a diligent search. Both speak of the total response required (as also 4:18-22; 9:9). The emphasis, however, is not on how much one has to give up, but on the immense joy that comes from the complete investment of self and resources in God's realm. The parable of the net (vv. 47-48) and its explanation (vv. 49-50) mirrors that of the weeds and the wheat and its interpretation (13:24-30, 36-43), both in wording and message.

The final verses (51-52) tie together the whole parable discourse in chapter 13. The disciples have a certain privileged level of understanding (13:11-12, 16-17), but their comprehension is by no means complete. The saying about scribes who have been instructed is often thought to be a self-portrait of the evangelist, but it actually characterizes the educated disciple, schooled in Jesus' interpretation of the Law, thus knowing how to preserve what is essential from the old for a new reality.



### **13:54-58 Rejected prophet**

The divided responses to Jesus' teaching play out not only with disciples and crowds, as in the previous discourse on the parables, but also with his own family and neighbors. In a close-knit village, everyone presumes to know everything about Jesus, yet he startles them with his wisdom and mighty deeds. As they puzzle over the source of Jesus' power, the reader is led to supply the answer with a response of faith. The reference to Jesus' siblings has been understood in various ways: as other children of Mary and Joseph, cousins of Jesus, or Joseph's children from an earlier marriage. It is not clear whether Matthew knew the tradition about Mary's perpetual virginity (see 1:25).

### **14:1-12 Death of John the Baptist**

The theme of the rejection of Jesus by his own is heightened as Jesus' likeness to John is voiced by Herod (see also 16:14). John's arrest was the catalyst for Jesus to begin his ministry in Galilee (4:12) and to reveal himself as the coming One and Wisdom incarnate (11:2-19). Like John, Jesus too will be executed and buried by his disciples. Matthew follows Mark 6:14-29 in retelling John's death. He shortens and simplifies the account, shifting the spotlight more toward Herod, not his wife, as the responsible one.

### **14:13-21 Feeding of the five thousand**

In contrast to Herod's deadly banquet, where the king seeks to satisfy his own desires, Jesus hosts a vast multitude, healing and feeding them until they are all satisfied (v. 20). From the midst of his own grief at the death of his mentor (v. 13), his wounded heart fills with compassion for others who are suffering (v. 14). The same faithful God who provided manna and quail for Israel in the wilderness wandering (Exod 16; Num 11:31-35) and who worked through Elisha to feed a hungry crowd (2 Kgs 4:42-44) acts now through Jesus to bring well-being to the people. Jesus' saying that many would come from east and west to eat with Israel's ancestors in the realm of God (8:11) is enacted here. The parable of the great banquet (22:1-10) will also return to this theme. The parallels with the Last Supper (26:26) are unmistakable as Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives the bread. There are also overtones of the eschatological banquet envisioned by Isaiah (25:6-10). In contrast to the disciples' solution to have all in the crowd take care of themselves, Jesus points them toward the abundance—even surfeit—of resources that are already in their midst to be shared (see also 15:32-39). Matthew makes it explicit that the participants in this

feast are women and children as well as men (v. 21).

### **14:22-36 Walking on water**

This is the second time that Jesus demonstrates his mastery over the water. In 8:23-27 Jesus calmed the sea and the disciples' dread in the midst of a storm. In this episode Jesus shows himself to be like God, both in his ability to tread on the water (e.g., Ps 77:19; Job 9:8; 38:16) and in his self-identification as *egō eimi*, literally "I am" (v. 27), the self-designation of God to Moses (Exod 3:14). While in the Markan episode the disciples remain uncomprehending and resistant to this epiphany (6:45-52), Matthew adds a poignant vignette that captures the faltering attempts of the disciples, represented by Peter (see also 16:18-19), to overcome their fears and to step out with Jesus in faith. His power to save (1:21; 8:25) takes them beyond their little faith (also 6:30; 8:26; 16:8; 17:20) to the ability to proclaim him "Son of God" (see 3:17; 16:16; 17:5; 27:54).

Jesus continues his saving ministry to all those who are sick. As a pious Jew, he is wearing tassels as a reminder to keep God's commandments (Num 15:38-40; Deut 22:12). Those who want to touch these are expressing their desire to live in the way that is faithful to God, through Jesus (as also the woman with a hemorrhage, 9:20-22). All who do so are saved (the verb *diesōthēsan*, v. 36, means both "saved" and "healed").

### **15:1-20 Blind guides**

This section begins with a confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders (vv. 1-9), followed by a declaration of Jesus to the crowd (vv. 10-11), then a discussion between Jesus and his disciples (vv. 12-20). Matthew follows Mark (7:1-23) but makes substantial changes. He tones down Mark's sweeping critique of Jewish practices (7:13), although he does heighten the censure of the Pharisees with his addition of verses 13-14. In contrast to Mark's mostly Gentile community, Matthew's community probably still observed many of the Jewish practices and did not find these incompatible with Jesus' teaching.

The "tradition of the elders" (v. 2) refers to customs and regulations passed down orally, interpreting how to live the Law in everyday life. These began to be codified in written collections around A.D. 200. The debate over the level of authority such traditions carried was a lively one both in Jesus' day and in Matthew's. Jesus denounces those whose interpretation is not in accord with God's intent (vv. 3, 6). As examples, he cites the imposition of purity practices

(v. 2), meant only for priests (Exod 30:19; 40:12); distorted use of *korban*, the custom of declaring something dedicated to God (vv. 3-9); and giving cultic purity (regarding unclean foods) priority over moral purity (v. 11). Purity of the heart is fundamental (vv. 17-20); from this all authentic ritual practice flows.

The quotation from Isaiah 29:13 (vv. 8-9) is an invitation to the hearers to open their hearts to Jesus (similarly 13:15, 19). In contrast to Jesus, who leads the blind to sight and faith (9:27-31; 20:30-34), his opponents are blind guides (see also 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26), taking themselves and others toward disaster and judgment.

### **15:21-28 Tenacious faith**

This is one of the most disturbing episodes in the Gospel. In no other story does Jesus ignore and then insult a person who comes to him in need. Matthew does not say why Jesus is headed toward the pagan coastal region; it is not to extend his mission beyond his own people (v. 24; see also 9:36; 10:6; 18:12). There are two tensions in this story: they involve crossing both ethnic and gender boundaries. The cry of the Canaanite woman, *eleēson me*, “Have pity on me,” recalls Psalm 109:26 and the pleas of the blind men (9:27; 20:30, 31) and the father of the boy with epilepsy (17:15). This is also a liturgical formula, which may reveal tensions in Matthew’s community not only over Gentile inclusion but also over the role of women in the liturgical and theological life of the community.

Jesus’ retort (v. 26) may allude to Isaiah 56:10, where those who are blind and without knowledge are like “dumb dogs.” Or it may allude to the tension between Galileans and coastal peoples, as the Galileans often saw their grain exported to Tyre and Sidon, leaving themselves without enough (see Acts 12:20). The woman’s clever response displays her great and tenacious faith (v. 28), which contrasts with that of the disciples, whose fearfulness so often displays their “little faith” (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). Perhaps Jesus’ confrontation with this woman was a turning point in his understanding of his mission to all peoples (28:19).

### **15:29-39 Healing and feeding more multitudes**

This episode replays 14:15-21 with slight differences. Unlike the Markan feeding stories (6:34-44; 8:1-10), where the first takes place in Jewish territory and the second on the Gentile side of the lake, Matthew makes no such distinction. For him, Jesus’ mission is still restricted to Israel (10:5; 15:24). As in

14:15-21, the feeding is linked with healing. This time there is also a didactic element. Jesus sits on a mountaintop (v. 29), a teacher akin to Moses (see also 5:1; 17:1; 28:16). The disciples seem to have progressed in their understanding. This time they do not propose to Jesus that the crowd be sent away to find food for themselves. They are ready with seven loaves, and, as before, they help Jesus distribute them. While the same theological motifs are in play as in 14:15-21, there is slightly more emphasis on messianic fulfillment, as the kind of healings Jesus does echo those of the messianic age described in Isaiah 35:5-6. Also, the messianic banquet is to be set on a mountaintop (Isa 25:6-10).

### **16:1-12 The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees**

That the feedings of the multitudes were meant to be teaching moments for Jesus' disciples is clear from the dialogue in verses 5-12. This conversation is preceded by a confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders. By the time Matthew is writing, the Sadducees are no longer an entity. After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, their priestly ministry and power base disappeared. Matthew's linking of Pharisees and Sadducees (as at 3:7-10) is a sweeping expression to include all rival religious leaders. Jesus' denunciation of them reflects the conflicts in Matthew's day between the followers of Jesus and those still adhering to synagogue affiliation. The rival religious leaders question Jesus not with sincerity but with the intent to test (*peirazō*) him, as the devil did (4:1, 3). Even though they have signs, they are predisposed not to respond with faith. See 12:38-47 on the sign of Jonah as a reference to Jesus' death and resurrection.

The disciples, in contrast, struggle to move from "little faith" (v. 8; similarly 6:30; 8:26; 14:31) to understanding and belief. Jesus' query about their not remembering (vv. 5, 9) is not so much pointing out a lapse in memory as it is an accusation of disobedience. Unfaithfulness to the covenant is repeatedly spoken of in the Old Testament as forgetfulness of God or of the commandments (e.g., Deut 4:9; 8:11; 9:7; Isa 17:10; Jer 18:15). The symbol of leaven for corruption occurs often in the Scriptures (see 13:33). In contrast to Mark's version of this episode (8:1-10), Matthew's disciples do finally grasp what it is that Jesus, the authoritative teacher, is telling them (v. 12).

## **JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES ON THE WAY TO JERUSALEM**

### ***Matt 16:13–20:34***

#### **16:13-28 Following the Messiah to the cross**

This episode constitutes a major turning point in the Gospel. It begins in the northernmost region of Israel, Caesarea Philippi, a city given to Herod the Great by Augustus and rebuilt by Herod's son Philip, who renamed the city after himself and the emperor. The scene moves from the question of Jesus to his disciples about his identity (vv. 13-20), to the first prediction of the passion (vv. 21-23; reiterated at 17:22-23; 20:17-19), to Jesus' instructions to his disciples about taking up the cross (vv. 24-28). The expression "From that time on" (v. 21) signals a major shift in the story. This same phrase, which introduces Jesus' public ministry in Galilee (4:17), now points attention to Jesus' ministry and death in Jerusalem.

On Jesus' identity as "Son of Man" (v. 13) see the comments on 8:20; for his relationship with John the Baptist and Elijah, see 3:1-17; 4:1-11; 9:18-26; 11:1-19; 14:1-12; 17:9-13. Matthew is unique in drawing parallels between Jesus and Jeremiah through his explicit quotations of the prophet (2:17; 27:9) and his allusions to him (7:15-23; 11:28-30; 23:37-39). The declaration of Jesus' messiahship (v. 16) is not a new revelation in Matthew (see 1:1, 17, 18; 11:2). But the nature of Jesus' messiahship as entailing his suffering and death (v. 21) is articulated here for the first time.

As frequently in Matthew, Peter takes a prominent role as spokesperson for the disciples (see also 14:28; 15:15; 17:4, 24-27; 18:21; 19:27; 26:33). The blessing of Peter in verses 17-19 is unique to Matthew. It plays on the meaning of his name, *Petros* ("rock") in Greek, *Cephas* in Aramaic (1 Cor 15:5), and counters the worship for which Caesarea Philippi was known. It had a sanctuary for the god Pan, with a large rock-faced cliff with carved niches that held statues. Jesus' blessing of Peter exalts the emerging rock-like faith, not only of Peter but of the whole community of disciples. This is the unshakable foundation (see 7:24-27) for those who cling to the "stone that the builders rejected" (21:42; Ps 118:22). Jesus assures the community that God will stand behind their decisions about membership, regulations, and forgiveness (see 18:18, where all the members are given the power to "bind" and to "loose").

Peter's reaction to Jesus' prediction of the passion highlights the fact that the formation of the disciples is not yet complete. The "rock" falters when confronted with the stumbling block (*skandalon*, 18:6, 7) of the passion. Jesus then builds on the instructions begun at 10:38-39 in the mission discourse. To be his disciple entails willingness to lose even life itself. To take up one's cross does not refer to enduring whatever suffering comes in life; rather, it refers specifically to the willingness to suffer the consequences for proclaiming and

living the Gospel. So it is not a saying that encourages persons who are victimized or suffering to simply bear it as their way of identifying with Jesus.

As we have seen in the Gospel, Jesus always healed and alleviated the suffering of all such persons. Likewise the saying about denial of self is not simply self-denial in the sense of choosing to giving up certain pleasures; rather, it concerns the disciples' choice to lose themselves entirely in Christ—to take on his way of life and mission and his very identity as one's own. Paradoxically, this is the way that truly leads to life. A reminder about judgment and the imminent coming of the Son of Humanity (vv. 27-28) underscores that the choice to follow Jesus or not carries eternal consequences.

### **17:1-13 The transfiguration of Jesus and the coming of Elijah**

The question of Jesus' identity and what that means continues to loom large in this episode. On the heels of Jesus' teaching that he must suffer and die and then be raised up (16:21), the reader is given utter assurance that Jesus' execution does not mean that he is accursed (Deut 21:23) or in any way rejected by God. The brilliance of his face and clothing (v. 2) indicates his righteousness (see 13:43). The voice from heaven (v. 5) reaffirms the message heard at Jesus' baptism (3:17): he is God's beloved one. The instruction "listen to him" (v. 5) echoes Deuteronomy 18:15 and insists that Jesus is the correct interpreter of the Law and the Prophets, signified by the figures of Moses and Elijah (v. 3).

Matthew further highlights the portrait of Jesus as the new Moses with the details of the high mountain (v. 1; see also 5:1; 15:29; 28:16), Jesus' shining face (v. 2, like that of Moses after his encounter with God on Mount Sinai, Exod 34:29), and the overshadowing cloud (v. 5, like that which signaled God's presence with Israel in their sojourn to freedom, Exod 16:10; 19:9, etc.). Matthew specifically labels this experience a vision (v. 9), and the disciples react in much the same way as Daniel did to his apocalyptic visions (Dan 8:17-18; 10:7-9).

The discussion about Elijah (vv. 9-13) reflects a debate about the correct interpretation of Malachi 4:5 (3:23 Hebrew), which speaks about the coming of Elijah before the Day of the Lord. For Christians this has taken place in the person of John the Baptist (see also 3:1-17; 9:18-26; 11:1-19; 14:1-12).

### **17:14-20 The power of little faith**

The tragic situation of a child who suffers from what is probably epilepsy (the Greek word *selēniazomai* literally means "moonstruck") becomes an

occasion for further training for the disciples. The father's plaintive "Lord, have pity" echoes the pleas of other sufferers in the Gospel (8:2, 5-6, 25; 14:30; 15:22, 25; 20:30-31). While the disciples have been given the authority to cure every disease and illness (10:1), Matthew has not yet reported that they were ever able to do so (cf. Mark 6:13, 30). Jesus' harsh words for the disciples echo those of Moses as he voiced his exasperation with Israel (Deut 32:5). Jesus redirects the disciples away from focusing on what they lack, toward claiming and exercising the power they do have with their little faith (see also 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 21:21-22). See 13:31-32 for the parable of the mustard seed.

### **17:22-23 Second prediction of the Passion**

The reaction of the disciples to this second prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection is not denial, as in 16:21-23, but overwhelming grief. Their progress in comprehension and acceptance advances as they move with Jesus toward Jerusalem (contrast Mark 9:2).

### **17:24-27 The temple tax**

This story is peculiar to Matthew's Gospel. The issue is the payment of a yearly tax of a half shekel that was obligatory for all Jewish males over twenty years old (Exod 30:11-16). This served for the upkeep of the temple, as well as a sign of solidarity among Jews both within Israel and in the Diaspora. Controversy over this payment may have stemmed from disapproval over the manner in which the money was used by the Sadducees or the shaming of those who were too poor to contribute. Jesus' exchange with Peter makes it clear that as children of God, whose house the temple is, they are exempt from taxes for the temple. Nonetheless, for the sake of not causing scandal, Jesus pays the money. The fantastic detail of finding a coin in the mouth of a fish gives the story the air of a folktale.

### **18:1-14 Greatness in God's realm**

The fourth great block of teaching concerns life in community. The first section (18:1-14) focuses on the need for humility and for the care of the most vulnerable. The second (18:15-20) outlines a procedure for reconciling aggrieved members of the community, followed by a parable (18:21-35) about unlimited forgiveness. While these teachings are addressed to "the disciples" (v. 1), the nature of the instruction is to those with leadership responsibility, not to the "little ones."

In the first part (vv. 1-5) Jesus teaches leaders to cultivate humility by consciously identifying themselves with the concerns of the least important in the community. Children are certainly valued in families, but they are the most vulnerable and the least able to contribute to the sustenance of the group, at least until they are older. A second way to exercise humility is by showing hospitality toward those who are “nobodies” (v. 5). Lavishing care on them with the same attentiveness and openness that one would show to an important guest is the way of true leadership. Finally, leaders must be wary of putting any stumbling block (*skandalon*, vv. 6-9) in the way of a “little one.” The consequences for doing so are dire. Matthew does not spell out precisely who the “little ones” are. They may be new converts or those whose faith is not yet strong. At 10:42 they are Christian missionaries. One’s treatment of “the least” is the basis for reward or punishment at the last judgment (25:40, 45).

A further lesson in prizing each of the “little ones” is presented in the parable of the shepherd who goes to extraordinary lengths to recover a lost sheep (vv. 10-14). Christian leaders are to emulate God’s care for Israel (Ps 23; Isa 40:11) and Jesus’ compassion for people who are “like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). They are not to be like the shepherds that Ezekiel (34:12) denounces for placing their own welfare above that of the “flock.” They are to seek out the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6). The emphasis in Matthew’s version of the parable is not on the repentance of the sheep (cf. Luke 15:7), but rather on the urgent task of the shepherd who follows God’s will and experiences great joy in finding the lost (vv. 13-14).

### **18:15-20 A process for reconciliation**

This section presents steps to be taken in the community when one member sins against another. The first step is direct confrontation, begun by the one who is offended (v. 15) and approaches the other with a willingness to forgive. The best case scenario is that this first confrontation brings about the needed repentance, and then reconciliation results. If it fails, however, the next step is to involve one or two others from the community (v. 16). The aim is to establish the truth, relying on impartial witnesses or facilitators. If this does not work, then the matter is brought before the whole community (*ekklēsia*, “church,” used only here and in 16:18 in the Gospels). If that fails, then the person is to be treated like “a Gentile or a tax collector” (v. 17). It is not clear whether this means to exclude the person or to emulate Jesus’ practice of befriending such people (see 8:5-13; 9:9-13; 11:19; 15:21-28).



Here Jesus may be advocating that Christians be willing to sit and break bread together, even while they are working toward resolving their differences. Note that Matthew does not indicate the nature of the offense. Such a strategy would not work for every kind of sin. Note that the whole community has a role in binding and loosing offenses (18:18), and the whole body is involved in praying for reconciliation.

### **18:21-35 Forgiveness aborted**

The process sketched above is lengthy and arduous. Peter asks Jesus how often you have to do all this—as many as seven times? In biblical terms, seven is a perfect number, signifying here an endless number of times. Jesus' exhortation to forgive seventy-seven times (v. 22) contrasts with the threat of Lamech, who vowed vengeance “seventy-sevenfold” (Gen 4:24).

The parable plays out in three acts. In the first (vv. 23-27) a king decides to call in his “loan” (*daneion*), that is, the money due him from a slave who is a high-level bureaucrat (indicated by the amounts of money with which he deals, v. 24). This slave is evidently responsible for exacting tribute from other subjects. He builds networks and works the system to his and the king's advantage. The king, in a pure display of power, wants to collect ten thousand talents, approximately six to ten thousand days' wages. His purpose is to remind the servant of his subservience. The slave's response is exactly what the king wanted (v. 26). He does homage to the king and acknowledges his dependence and loyalty. The king is satisfied and returns him to his position. Word will spread both of the king's power and his generosity.

In the second act (vv. 28-30) the forgiven bureaucrat replicates the king's actions with his subordinates. This one owes him one hundred times less than the amount he owed the king. The point is not the difference in amount but that both are unable to pay. Although the second underling responds in exactly the same way his master did to the king, the latter carries through his threats with a vengeance instead of forgiving the debt.

In the final part (vv. 31-34) the fellow servants report everything to the king, who becomes enraged. If his servant has understood the meaning of his previous actions, then he should have replicated them. If the slave wants loyalty, adulation, and recognition of his power, the king has shown him how to exact it. Instead, he has shamed the king by not imitating him. He has said by his actions that the king's method of exerting power is not effective. If the slave thinks that physical abuse, debasing another, and brutal imprisonment are the ways to gain

power, then the king will show him just that. The conclusion (v. 35) was likely added by the evangelist.

As with all metaphors, the king is both like and unlike God. Unlike the monarch in the parable, God does not work for his own self-aggrandizement, but for the well-being of all creation. But like the king, God, through Jesus, has graciously forgiven all debt of sin (for which Jesus teaches the disciples to pray in 6:12). The only response to such mercy is to let it transform one's heart so as to be able to act with the same kind of graciousness toward others. This kind of power is through vulnerability and a willingness to forgo vengeance to work toward reconciliation. Those who do not learn to imitate godly ways in their dealings with one another will be treated by God in the way they have treated others.

### **19:1-15 Teaching on divorce and blessing of children**

In his journey toward Jerusalem, Jesus takes the route along the eastern side of the Jordan River, as did most Jews, to avoid going through Samaria (v. 1). As at 16:1, rival religious leaders put a question to Jesus to test him (*peirazō*, as also 4:1, 3). Jesus' teaching on not divorcing was already introduced in the Sermon on the Mount (5:31-32). Now the question centers on whether there are any exceptions (v. 3). The exchange is cast as a rabbinical debate, such as the one between the first-century rabbis Shammai and Hillel. The latter held that a man could divorce his wife even for spoiling a dish for him, whereas the former argued that only sexual misconduct was grounds for divorce.

In his reply Jesus first cites Genesis 1:27 and then Genesis 2:24, arguing that God's intention from creation is for man and woman to remain united. Jesus' opponents, also citing Scripture, come back with a text from Deuteronomy 24:1-4, where Moses permits a man to divorce his wife by handing her a written bill of divorce. Jesus distinguishes between God's positive command in Genesis, which reveals God's intent, and Moses' concession to Israel because of their inability to achieve the ideal. As at 5:32, Jesus characterizes divorce as adultery, unless the basis for separating is *porneia* (v. 9). The meaning of this word is not certain. It may refer to sexual misconduct, such as adultery or marriage to close kin, which was forbidden in Jewish law (Lev 18:6-18; see also Acts 15:20, 29). If it is the latter, then the question concerns some Gentile converts who wished to become Christian but who were in such forbidden marriages. Would they first have to divorce to enter the community?

The reaction of Jesus' disciples reveals the radical nature of his teaching. "It is better not to marry" (v. 10) is akin to the hyperbole in 18:8-9, which states that it is better to cut off a hand or foot or eye rather than cause a little one to sin. Jesus acknowledges that not all can accept this teaching. It has long been debated whether the saying in verse 12 refers to those who choose to remain celibate or to those who do not remarry after the death or divorce of a spouse. In Jewish tradition marriage was the norm, although some groups, such as the Therapeutae and the Qumranites, evidently practiced celibacy.

The reason why a Christian might make such a choice is for the sake of the mission. Many widows in the early church chose to live together and to devote themselves to ministry rather than remarry (see Acts 9:39, which may refer to such a situation, and 1 Timothy 5:3-16 for regulations regarding them). For women in Jesus' day, his stricter teaching on divorce may often have served a compassionate end, safeguarding women from being cast aside for no good reason and from being placed in a vulnerable position socially and economically. By the same token, painful decisions about divorce in a contemporary context must take into consideration Jesus' prime concern for the well-being of each person as a valued son or daughter of God in the community of believers.

In verses 13-15 the lens widens to the most vulnerable members in the family unit. When linked to the previous scene, Jesus' blessing and prayer for the little ones recognize that they may be the ones who suffer most when the parents are contemplating divorce. A reason why the disciples wanted to prevent the children from coming to Jesus is not given. In a pronouncement reminiscent of 18:3, Jesus speaks about their importance in God's realm.

### **19:16-30 Discipleship and possessions**

The exchange between Jesus and the rich young man and the ensuing discussion with the disciples speak soberly about the obstacle that possessions can pose for discipleship. In Matthew's account (cf. Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30), the rich man asks Jesus about doing good, one of the evangelist's favorite themes (5:16; 7:17-19; 12:12, 33-35; 13:23, 24; 26:10). Keeping the commandments is a first step in doing good. The young man's question, "Which ones?" rings false, since all the commandments must be kept equally. Jesus' invitation to him to go beyond simply keeping the commandments and to "be perfect" (*teleios*, as also at 5:48) concerns becoming "whole" or "complete." As at 5:48, this is not an invitation for a select few, nor is it presenting a contrast between Judaism and Christianity. In the Old Testament, although riches are

regarded as a sign of God's blessing (Deut 28:1-14), there are also the same dire warnings about the corrosiveness of riches (Ezek 7:19; Amos 6:4-8; Prov 15:16).

In Matthew's perspective, being a disciple of Jesus entails faithfulness to the Jewish Law as interpreted by Jesus, which demands radical attachment to him. It is as difficult for a rich person to do this as it is for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle (v. 24). The popular interpretation that there was a gate so named in Jerusalem has no basis. Jesus' response to the disciples' astonishment (similarly, 19:10) is to refocus their attention on God's initiative and power with them, enabling them to do what is good—the question with which the rich man began (v. 16). See also the beatitude of the poor in 6:3 and the admonitions that the heart lies where the treasure is (6:21) and that one cannot serve both God and mammon (6:24). The treasure to seek above all is the realm of God (13:44). The theme of reward for disciples runs throughout the Gospel (5:12, 46-47; 6:1-6, 16, 18; 10:39-42; 25:21, 23, 34). Here the focus is eschatological. Disciples share in the glory and the final judgment by the Human One, as their self-emptying for God's realm has prepared them to receive the eternal inheritance God wills for all.

### **20:1-16 Justice in the vineyard**

This parable and the previous episode conclude with the same saying about reversal (19:30; 20:16). This is a floating proverb that is tagged on to various New Testament passages in diverse contexts (see also Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30). It does not supply the meaning for the parable. In the story the first hired are paid last because the point of the story depends on their seeing what the last hired receive. The complaint of the workers in verse 12 voices what is so puzzling about this parable. Does not justice demand that those who worked more earn more? The vineyard owner has promised that he will pay what is just (*dikaios*, v. 4) and insists that he is doing no injustice (*ouk adikō se*, v. 13). He then asks, "Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?" (v. 15).

Two important points are made in the landowner's reply. If he is a figure for God, his actions show that God's generosity, which is not merited, is freely lavished on those most in need. God's generosity does no injustice, but neither can it be calculated or earned. The story is about people getting what they deserve: all have the right to eat for the day. From the position of the day laborers, who are on the lowest economic rung and who stand waiting all day (v. 6), wanting to work but not hired, the wage given them enables them to feed

their family for one more day. Less than a denarius would be useless. From their perspective, those who were hired at the beginning of the day, though they have worked longer and harder, at least had the satisfaction of knowing all day that come sundown they would be able to feed their families. In God's realm, justice means that all are fed as a sign of God's equal and inclusive love; it does not mean getting what we deserve, either in terms of retribution for wrongdoing or recompense for good deeds.

The second point is that "evil-eye" envy is the most destructive force in a community. The question in verse 15 is, literally, "Or is your eye evil that I am good?" In a first-century worldview of limited good, anyone's gain means another one's loss. While the grumblers focus on their perceived loss, they miss the limitless goodness and generosity of the landowner. Linked with the previous discussion about the danger of riches, this parable challenges those disciples who have enough to meet their daily needs to reject acquisitiveness and attend to the needs of those who are in desperate straits.

### **20:17-28 To drink the cup**

The third prediction of Jesus' passion is more detailed than the others and occurs as Jesus and his disciples near Jerusalem. In the first prediction (16:21-23) Jesus told his disciples that he would be killed at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes. In fact, the Jewish leaders did not have the authority to carry out capital punishment (see John 18:31). Jesus will actually be handed over to the Gentiles (v. 19), who will put him to death (cf. the second prediction, where Jesus spoke in general terms of being betrayed into human hands, 17:22-23).

It is jarring to have the disciples bickering over the places of honor in the kingdom after this sober prediction. Matthew redacts the story (cf. Mark 10:35-45), so that the mother of James and John makes the request, thus softening the critique of the disciples and making their mother the ambitious one. It is ambiguous whether the other ten are indignant at the audacity of the request or whether they are upset that these two beat them to it (v. 24).

The metaphor "cup" is used often in the Scriptures to speak of the suffering of Israel (Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15; 49:12; 51:7; Lam 4:21; *Mart. Isa.* 5:13). In 26:39 Jesus implores God to let "this cup" pass him by. Jesus then instructs the disciples on the manner of leadership they are to exercise. They are not to "lord it over" any others; rather, like Jesus himself, they are to serve the rest of the community. Jesus' service is service to the death, a giving of his life as ransom

for all. The word *polys*, “many,” does not exclude anyone. It reflects a Semitic expression where “many” is the opposite of “one,” thus the equivalent of “all.” The notion of Jesus giving his life as ransom draws on the image of a slave who buys back his freedom for a price. These last verses of the Gospel are aimed at leaders who have some degree of power, privilege, status, and choice. Their choice to take the lowly position of service is liberating when accompanied by empowerment of those who are otherwise powerless. These sayings must not be used to reinforce the servitude of those who are enslaved in whatever way.

### **20:29-34 A final healing**

This is the last healing story in the Gospel. It mirrors the one in 9:27-31, where two blind men also cried out to Jesus, “Son of David, have pity on us!” (see also 12:23; 15:22). After having instructed his disciples on servant leadership (20:25-28), Jesus demonstrates for them the kind of descendant of King David he is. As in 9:27-31, Jesus engages the two men in conversation; he does not merely touch them and keep going. Jesus treats them not simply as objects of compassion but with dignity, as people who are able to articulate their need (v. 32). These two who see and follow (v. 34) model the response needed of disciples as Jesus now prepares to enter Jerusalem as Son of David (21:9, 15) to begin the ordeal that will culminate in his reign with God.

## **JERUSALEM; JESUS’ FINAL DAYS OF TEACHING IN THE TEMPLE**

### ***Matt 21:1–28:15***

#### **21:1-11 Entry into Jerusalem**

Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, begun at 16:21, climaxes with his enthusiastic reception by a very large crowd (vv. 1-11), and his action in the temple (vv. 12-17). Both scenes are eschatological in tone and are heavily interlaced with quotations from the prophets, so that the significance in terms of fulfillment of Scriptures is most evident. Jesus enters the city from the east. The Mount of Olives, according to Zechariah 14:4 is the place where the final eschatological struggle will take place. Matthew seems to speak of two animals (v. 2), but he is preserving the parallelism of Zechariah 9:9 (quoted in v. 5), which actually describes only one beast. The prophet tells of the Messiah entering the city “riding on an ass, / on a colt, the foal of an ass.” Jesus’ action is a parody of that of a conqueror over a vanquished city. The Hebrew word *hôši.ânā*’ means “save, please!” Here it is not so much a plea for help as an acclamation of praise. The

shouts of adulation of the crowd (echoing Ps 118:26 in v. 9) contrast with the mounting antagonism of the Jewish leaders. The reaction described in verse 10, “the whole city was shaken (*eseisthē*),” points ahead to the aftermath of the death of Jesus, when “the earth quaked (*eseisthē*,” 27:51).

### **21:12-17 Confrontation in the temple**

In Matthew’s account, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem culminates with his action in the temple (cf. Mark 11:15-19, where Jesus waits until the next day). Scholars still speculate on the nature of the abuse that Jesus was protesting. The interpretation of each evangelist differs slightly. In Matthew’s account, Jesus interrupts the commercial activity in the temple area (v. 12). Buying and selling of animals was necessary for temple sacrifice. Doves were the poor woman’s offering after childbirth (Lev 12:6-8; Luke 2:24). Greek and Roman coins had to be changed into Tyrian shekels, not because they lacked an offensive image, but because they had the highest silver content.

Matthew interprets Jesus’ action (v. 13) by combining quotations from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. The first speaks of the messianic ideal of the temple being a perfect place of prayer for all peoples (though Matthew omits that last phrase; cf. Mark 11:16). The second was a warning to the people of Judah, who continued trusting in the efficacy of temple worship while their deeds toward one another were rampantly unjust. Jeremiah warned that their corruption was defiling their “hideout,” the temple, and predicted its destruction. In verses 12-13 Matthew’s Jesus is a fiery prophet bent on rectifying abuse. In verses 14-17, unique to Matthew, Jesus is the compassionate healer of those who are least welcome in the temple (see Lev 21:18, where the blind and the lame are forbidden to offer sacrifices).

Jesus fulfills the messianic promise of Isaiah 35:5-6, where all, including those who are blind and lame, are healed and march exultantly into Jerusalem. Typically, the response to Jesus is divided. The leaders become indignant, while the children (see also 18:1-4; 19:13-15) sing “Hosanna to the Son of David” (see the use of this title in healing stories at 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31). Jesus responds by quoting from Psalm 8:3.

### **21:18-22 The withered fig tree**

This strange story may have evolved from the parable of the fig tree in Luke 13:6-9. Fruitful figs and vines are a symbol of peace and prosperity (1 Kgs 4:25), and Matthew frequently uses the metaphor “bear fruit” to speak of doing

righteous deeds (cf. 3:8; 7:15-20; 12:33-37; 13:23; 21:19, 33-43). In the Matthean setting, there are strong eschatological overtones from chapter 21 forward. The time has arrived when there must be evidence of “good fruit,” or else there will be destruction of the temple and condemnation of those who lead people astray (see also Jer 8:13; Hos 9:10, 16). The last two verses shift emphasis, so that the story becomes one about the power of faith (see also 7:7-11; cf. 6:30; 8:25, 26; 14:30, 31; 16:8; 17:20, where Jesus chides the disciples for their lack of faith). Jesus does not promise that the object of every prayerful request will be granted; rather, he assures believers that when they pray with faith in God’s gracious goodness, God will always be with them (1:23; 28:20). God’s power is at work in believers, even when they confront the most insurmountable obstacles.

### **21:23-27 The authority of Jesus**

Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the authoritative teacher whom many people follow but whom the leaders reject. Now there are open confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities. The chief priests and elders (v. 23) are the leading opponents in the passion narrative (the Pharisees drop out of view after chapter 23). Their trap backfires, and they themselves are trapped by Jesus’ question. Three parables follow, the first two of which indirectly answer the question about the source of Jesus’ authority.

### **21:28-32 Saying and doing**

The technique Jesus uses is like that of Nathan (2 Sam 12:1-12), whereby the hearers are asked for their opinion and end by pronouncing judgment on themselves. The parable seems a simple one at first. Both children (the word in verse 28 is *teknon*, “child,” not *huios*, “son”) fall short of the ideal. But the one who appeared to *do* the father’s will was the first.

However, in a culture that highly prizes honor, the answer is not so clear. In some manuscript variants of this parable, the one who gives the correct answer is the second child. The first child shamed the father publicly, a worse fault than failing to carry through on one’s word. At 7:21-27 Jesus insisted to his disciples that saying *and* doing are necessary; now he directs this message to religious authorities who do not practice what they preach (23:3). Verses 31-32 contrast the leaders, who should most exemplify righteousness, with those who are thought least able to do so. But there is still time for the leaders to repent. Those who initially refuse to say yes to Jesus and do the will of God can still change



their minds.

### **21:33-43 Treacherous tenants**

Matthew reworks Mark's version (12:1-12), making the parable more allegorical and more pointedly christological. It is a familiar story, echoing Isaiah 5, but with a new ending. In Isaiah 5 Yahweh decides to destroy the vineyard after disappointment over the yield of sour grapes from Israel, the carefully cultivated vine. In Jesus' parable the tenants are destroyed; the vineyard remains and is entrusted to others. The eschatological time (*kairos*, v. 34) demands that fruit be evident now (see 21:18-22). The repeated sending of the servants (vv. 34-39) is like God's repeated sending of the prophets to Israel. Prophets were called "servants" of God (Jer 7:25; 25:4; Amos 3:7; Zech 1:6), and their fates match those in the parable (see Jer 20:2; 26:20-23; 2 Chr 24:21).

The sequence of actions in verse 39 corresponds to the details of Jesus' passion. He is seized (26:50), taken outside the city limits (27:31-32), and then killed (27:35). The murderous plans of the tenants in the vineyard match the intent of the chief priests and Pharisees (21:46; 22:15) toward Jesus. The chief priests and elders pronounce their own self-condemnation (v. 41), but the future tense verbs show that the possibility is yet open so the Jewish leaders can still change their minds (as also 21:29, 32). They could still be among those "other tenants" to whom the vineyard will be entrusted.

Jesus' question in verse 42 (see also 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16) underscores the conflict between Jesus' interpretation of Scripture and that of the opposing religious leaders. The quotation from Psalm 118 in verse 42 recalls God's unlikely choice of David as king, the prototype for the Messiah, and points toward the leadership of the new Israel as coming from those rejected as unimportant. At the conclusion (vv. 45-46) the chief priests and Pharisees clearly understand the parable (cf. 13:51), but instead of heeding Jesus' invitation, they plot his arrest.

### **22:1-14 Dressed for the feast**

This is the third of three parables that Jesus addresses to the religious leaders in Jerusalem after they challenged his authority (21:23-27). The parable is highly allegorized and has a number of unrealistic details. The image of a wedding banquet recalls Matthew 9:15, where Jesus was likened to a groom, whose presence demands feasting, not fasting. This metaphor is frequently used in the Scriptures to signify God's abundant care, both now and at the end time

(e.g., Isa 25:6-10; 55:1-3). The repeated invitation is reminiscent of the multiple envoys in 21:33-46 and has an echo of Lady Wisdom inviting all to her banquet (Prov 9:5). The custom of a double invitation (see Esth 5:8; 6:14) allowed the potential guest to find out who the other guests were and whether all was being arranged appropriately. It also gave them time to decide if they would be able to reciprocate. The time lapse also allowed the host to determine the amount of food needed.

Unlike Luke 14:15-24, there are no detailed excuses offered by the invitees. Their mistreatment and killing of the king's servants (vv. 5-6) and the king's enraged response (v. 7), are allegorical allusions to the killing of John the Baptist and the prophets and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The king's retaliation can be expected in an honor-and-shame system, in which one responds in kind to an affront. But his second response (vv. 8-10) is shocking. In a first-century Mediterranean world like eat with likes, since eating together signifies sharing of values and of social position. The king sends his servants out to the places where the main road cuts through the city boundary, going out to the countryside (v. 10). This is where the poorer people lived, while the elite (5 to 10 percent of the population) lived in the center of the city. Like the parables in 13:24-30, 47-50, both "good" and "bad" are gathered in, and then there is sorting out.

The last scene (vv. 11-14) is entirely unrealistic but highlights Matthew's ethical concern: one must be ready at all times for the end-time banquet, clothed with good deeds (similarly Rom 13:14; Gal 3:27; Col 3:12). More is required of a disciple than initial acceptance of the invitation to be a "friend of God and prophets" (Wis 7:27). See also 20:13, where the grumbler is called "friend," as is Judas at the moment of betrayal (26:50). In the Matthean narrative context, the parable is a warning to the religious leaders who are offered repeated invitations to accept Jesus. The seriousness of their refusal is painted with vivid metaphors: they will be cast into the outer darkness (see also 8:12; 25:30), where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (8:12, 13:42, 50; 24:51; 25:30). The proverbial saying in verse 14 does not entirely capture the meaning of the parable. The focus is on how those who are expected to respond to the invitation (the religious leaders) refuse, while the unexpected invitees (the socially marginal) have accepted.

## **22:15-22 Taxes to Caesar**

This is the first of four more controversies between Jesus and the religious

leaders. Their flattering words (v. 16) are true but insincere, as they proceed to lay a deliberate trap (v. 15). The question is a sticky one. Since the Roman occupation of Palestine in 63 B.C., Jews were obliged to pay tribute, or a head tax, in Roman coinage, on each man, woman, and slave. If Jesus opposes this payment, he would be advocating revolt against Rome. If he advocates payment, then he would be seen as a collaborator with the enemy. Jesus sees the malice and hypocrisy of his questioners, who have set this trap (v. 18). His clever response can be understood in one of three ways: (1) one should pay nothing to Caesar because everything belongs to God (Lev 25:23); (2) one should pay the emperor because he is God's representative (as Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17); (3) one can pay Caesar but recognize that his authority is relative and that loyalty to God takes precedence. The last is the most likely meaning. As in 17:24-27, Jesus advises paying the tax, but this is not a vote of support for the occupying power. The amazed response (v. 22) of the Pharisees' disciples (see also 8:27; 9:33; 15:31; 21:20) underscores Jesus' skill in outwitting his opponents.

### **22:23-33 The question of resurrection**

In this second controversy the Sadducees pose a question that derides belief in the resurrection. Ideas about the afterlife were diverse in Jesus' day. The notion of resurrection of the dead first appears in the book of Daniel (12:2), written in the second century B.C., and was accepted by the Pharisees but not the Sadducees (see Acts 23:6). The situation posed by the Sadducees, citing Deuteronomy 25:5-10, is absurd (although see Tobit 3:8; 6:14, where Sarah, the daughter of Raguel, outlives seven husbands). Like the previous question, it is set up to try to make Jesus contradict his own teaching or the Scriptures. It is a Bible battle in which Jesus emerges as authoritative teacher.

Jesus responds by accusing his opponents of not knowing the Scriptures or the power of God. He cites Exodus 3:6, 15-16 to argue that Israel's ancestors, who were physically dead at the time that God spoke to Moses, continued to be in relationship with God, and so they were in some sense among the living. Jesus also asserts that the Sadducees do not understand the nature of resurrection. By God's power new life will be created that is continuous in some way with the life we have known, yet it will be brought to fullness in ways we do not yet know.

### **22:34-40 The greatest commandment**

In Mark's account (12:28-34; cf. Luke 10:25), the scribe's question is

sincere, but in Matthew it leads to another controversy. The Pharisees gather together (v. 34), signaling a plot against Jesus (see 2:4; 22:41; 26:3; 27:17, 27; 28:12; possibly this also alludes to Ps 2:2). The question they pose is meant to test him (see also 22:15). All commandments are important; all must be kept. The query is not whether some laws can be disregarded, but whether Jesus, like some teachers, would sum up the Torah in a simple statement, as did Rabbi Hillel: “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor” (*b. Šabb.* 31a).

Jesus summarizes the whole of the Law in two commandments (see also 7:12). The first, the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-9), was recited twice a day by Jews. It enjoins love of God with one’s whole heart, soul, and strength. The heart (*kardia*), was considered the seat of all emotions, the soul (*psychē*), the center of vitality and consciousness, and strength (*ischys*) denotes power or might. The second command, love of neighbor, is from the Holiness Code (Lev 19:18), which asserts that love of God is manifest in love toward the neighbor. The modern Western notion of the necessity of self-love would have been a foreign concept to people of the biblical world. They did not understand themselves in individualistic terms, but rather as enmeshed in a particular family, clan, and religious group. Dependent on others for their sense of self-identity, love of self and love of others are inseparable.

### **22:41-46 David’s son**

In the fourth and final controversy, Jesus is the one who initiates the questioning. Again, the debate centers on the correct interpretation of Scripture. The text in question is Psalm 110:1, a coronation psalm, in which God assures the new king of special honor (sitting at the right hand) and a vanquishing of his enemies (making them subservient, “under your feet”). The speaker in the psalm is David, who says that the “Lord” (*kyrios*), meaning Yahweh, is speaking to “my lord” (*kyrios*), meaning the new king.

Jesus stumps his opponents by asking that if David, inspired by the Spirit, calls the new king (here equated with the messiah) “lord,” then he must be more than simply his son. The notion that the messiah would be a “son of David” is found in Isaiah 11:1, 10; Jeremiah 23:5. Although this is a favorite Matthean title for Jesus (1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15), “Son of David” is not adequate to express all that Jesus is. This text brings together several important christological titles intimating that Jesus is also Messiah, Son of God, and Lord. The silence of Jesus’ opponents indicates a victory for him. There will be no further exchanges with the leaders until the passion narrative, as he speaks now

only with the crowds and his disciples.

### **23:1-12 Warning against hypocrisy**

The whole of this chapter is a stinging denunciation by Jesus of the scribes and Pharisees, who have been cast as his opponents throughout the Gospel. Matthew expands a brief critique of scribes from Mark 12:38-40, weaving in material from Q and Luke 11:37-52. In the New Testament, scribes are religious leaders who are learned in Torah. Pharisees, lay religious leaders, differed from Sadducees in their belief in resurrection (see 22:23-33) and in oral interpretation of the Law. The excoriating tone of Jesus' rebuke reflects the vehemence of the conflict between the Christians of Matthew's community, who were predominantly Jewish, and the Jews of emerging rabbinic Judaism.

Jesus takes on the role of a prophet, much like Amos (5:18-20; 6:1-7) or Isaiah (5:8-10, 11-14), who uses the classic "woe" form to denounce the wrongdoing of a group of his own people, with the intent to turn them from evil and toward right relation with God. Jesus' words are a warning to the crowds and his disciples (v. 1) not to follow the hypocritical practices of these leaders, who do not practice what they teach (v. 3). In contrast to Jesus, whose burden is light (11:30), they lay heavy loads on people's shoulders (v. 4). They make their phylacteries and fringes noticeable to all (v. 5). (Phylacteries are leather boxes containing the parchment texts such as Exodus 13:1-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-22, which are strapped to the forehead and arm during morning prayer.) Wearing "tassels" or "fringes" at the corners of the outer garments reminds a Jew to observe all God's commands (Num 15:38-39; Deut 22:12; Matt 9:20; 14:36). Jesus also criticizes the leaders' love of places of honor and deferential titles (vv. 6-10)—only he and God are to bear these titles. Like many other reform movements, there was an impulse in early Christianity toward egalitarianism and status reversal (vv. 11-12; see also 18:1-4; 19:13-15; 20:20-28).

### **23:13-36 Seven woes**

In the seven woes that ensue, the religious leaders are repeatedly called "hypocrites"—a term that originally referred to an actor, one who put on a mask to assume another personage. In the first woe (vv. 13-14), Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees not only because they fail to enter into God's realm themselves but, worse yet, they block the way for others. The image of unlocking and locking the way to heaven recalls Matthew 16:19, where Peter is

given the keys to God's realm. For Matthew's community, Peter and the leaders of the emergent Christian community are the authorities to be heeded rather than those of the synagogue.

The second woe (v. 15) is an accusation that the Gentile converts to Pharisaism are twice as zealous and twice as misguided as their teachers. Jesus warns that in the end they will be "child[ren] of Gehenna" rather than "children of God" (e.g., Matt 5:9, cf. 45). The name "Gehenna" derives from "The Valley (*gē*) of Hinnom," which runs south-southwest of Jerusalem. It represented the place of fiery judgment, because it was there that fires of the cult of Molech and later, smoldering refuse, were located.

In the third woe (vv. 16-22), Jesus critiques the meaningless distinctions the Pharisees invented in their oath-taking. In Jesus' world, binding obligations were set not by contracts but with one's word, by public swearing. For the most serious agreements, God's name would be invoked. But devout Jews objected to speaking God's name aloud. Just as Matthew substituted "the reign of heaven" for "the reign of God" (see 3:2), so Pharisees would swear on the gold or the gifts of the temple, objects associated with God, as a way to avoid saying the divine name. Jesus says that these fine distinctions are useless; the effect is the same. See Matthew 5:33-37 on not taking oaths at all.

In the fourth woe (vv. 23-24), Jesus accuses the leaders of not being able to distinguish between what is important and what is not. The texts on tithing (see Lev 27:30-33; Num 18:21-32; Deut 14:22-29) prescribe giving one-tenth of one's produce, flocks, wine, grain, and oil to support the temple, the Levites, and the poor. They do not mention herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin. Jesus teaches his disciples that their observance of the Law must go beyond what is written (Matt 5:21-48), but the point is to arrive at more complete harmony with God and all that God has created (5:20, 48). The Pharisees, by contrast, engage in intensified practices of keeping the Law that lead them away from deeds of justice, mercy, and faith. Thus they become "blind guides," not seeing the way clearly themselves and leading others onto a destructive path. The outrageousness of their practice is captured in the hyperbole "swallow the camel."

The fifth woe (vv. 25-26) contrasts outer practices with inner dispositions. Jesus uses a strong term, *harpagēs*, "pillage, plunder," to speak of the corrupt inner state of the scribes and Pharisees, who misuse their power to exploit others. He also accuses them of *akrasia*, "lack of self-control" and "want of power" (see v. 25). The reference is to sexual activity or intemperance in

general. By contrast, the interior disposition Jesus has taught his disciples is purity of heart (5:8), the ability to forgive from the heart (18:35), and love of God with all one's heart (22:37).

The sixth woe (vv. 27-28) continues in the same vein as the fifth. The Pharisees and scribes present a lovely exterior, seeming to be in right relation with God and others, while their interior disposition is rotten with hypocrisy and evil-doing. Like white-washed sepulchers, they hide putrid decay within. White-washing sepulchers made them easily visible, so that Jews could avoid contact with them and thus maintain ritual purity (see Lev 21:1, 11).

In the seventh and last woe (vv. 29-36), the Pharisees and scribes pretend to honor the prophets and righteous ancestors with decorated monuments and protest that had they been alive earlier, they would never have done what their ancestors did to the prophets. In truth, Jesus says, they are no different from their forebears. They will kill the prophet Jesus just as their ancestors rid themselves of the pesky prophets who denounced their unrighteousness. They show themselves to be not children of God but children of Gehenna (v. 15) and children of murderers (v. 31), linked to all the innocent blood shed from Abel to Zechariah, the first victim of murder in the Bible (Gen 4:8) to the last. There is some confusion about the identity of Zechariah. The Old Testament prophet Zechariah was the son of Barachiah (Zech 1:1), but as far as we know, he was not murdered "between the sanctuary and the altar" (v. 35), as was Zechariah, son of Jehoiada (2 Chr 24:20-22).

The theme of responsibility for innocent blood is an important one in the passion narrative as Judas tries to return the blood money (27:4), Pilate tries to wash himself of guilt for Jesus' blood (27:24), and the people say to Pilate, "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). At the Last Supper Jesus offers to his disciples his "blood of the covenant" (26:28) for the forgiveness of sins.

### **23:37-39 Lament over Jerusalem**

The tone shifts from vehement denunciation of the leaders to profound sadness for the city which destroys God's messengers and which, by Matthew's day, lies in ruins. The poignant image of a mother bird yearning to gather her rebellious young under her wings is a common metaphor in the Scriptures for God's loving care (Deut 32:11; Ruth 2:12; Pss 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; Luke 13:34-35). But like a mother who never abandons even the most wayward child, Jesus, quoting Psalm 118:26, holds out the promise that they will see him again when they can receive him as did the disciples when he first entered Jerusalem

(21:9).

The denunciations and woes in this chapter must always be read in the context of a bitter internal family dispute between the Jewish Christians and Jews who did not join them in Matthew's day. Jesus is a prophet admonishing his own leaders and inviting them to a change of heart. His words still sound a warning against hypocrisy to any religious leaders.

### **24:1–25:46 The apocalyptic discourse**

Jesus has been teaching his disciples and warning and disputing with other religious leaders since 21:23. He now leaves the temple area and directs his instruction only to his disciples (24:1, 3). He speaks of the calamities that presage the coming of the Human One (24:1-33) and tells three parables (24:45–25:30) that emphasize the need for watchfulness. The parable of the final judgment (25:31-46) brings this last block of teaching to a climax.

### **24:1-14 The beginning of the end**

The tension between Jesus and the temple leadership has been mounting. He has performed a prophetic action of purification in the temple (21:12-17), he has engaged in debates with the temple leadership (21:23–22:46), and he has warned his disciples about their hypocrisy (23:1-36). This comes to a head as Jesus now predicts the very destruction of the temple (24:1-2), an occurrence that Jeremiah (7:1-15) associated with the messianic age. In Matthew's day this has already occurred. At his interrogation before the Jewish leaders, false witnesses accuse Jesus of making threats against the temple (26:61) and passers-by deride him about this in the crucifixion scene (27:40).

Jesus then speaks about the signs of the end times. He is seated, as authoritative teacher (see also 5:10; 15:29), on the Mount of Olives, the place associated with the final judgment (Zech 14:4). As in the parable discourse (13:10-17), Jesus' disciples receive private instruction. He paints a picture of massive chaos and destruction, with a proliferation of false messiahs, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, hatred because of Jesus' name, sin, betrayal, deception, lawlessness, and loss of fervor. Strife comes both from within and from without.

In almost every age people see these signs and wonder if they herald the end. A similar theme is found in the mission discourse (10:16-25, 34-39), where Jesus also assured his disciples not to fear anything because of God's constant care for them (10:26-33). Here as well, Jesus tells them that if they persevere to



the end, they will be saved (v. 13). These birthpangs (v. 8) are the prelude to new life. For Matthew, this end is not imminent—the Gospel must first be preached throughout the whole world (see also 28:16-20).

### **24:15-31 Signs of the coming of the Human One**

There will be unmistakable signs when the end actually does come. It will be as evident as lightning across the sky (v. 27) or vultures circling over a corpse (v. 28). One sign will be like the one spoken of by Daniel, the “desolating abomination” (v. 15; Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). In Daniel this referred to the statue that Antiochus IV Epiphanes placed in the temple in 167 B.C., which sparked the Maccabean revolt. Still fresh in the memories of Matthew’s community is that the emperor Caligula threatened a similar action in A.D. 40.

A future event of this caliber will signal the end. This is a time when immediate flight is the response to the danger (as in 2:12-13, 10:23). As is so often the case, it is mothers and children who are the most adversely affected. The disciples are to pray that it not happen at a time when the hardship would be intensified, such as winter or the sabbath. Fleeing on the sabbath (v. 20) may have drawn attention to the community and put them at risk. Or it could be a cause of division if some thought flight would break sabbath observance.

Cosmic signs (as in Isa 13:10; 34:4; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:4; 4:15; Amos 8:9; Hag 2:6, 21) preface the final sign before the coming of the Human One (see comments at 8:20). Why mourning (v. 30) will accompany this sign is not clear—is it because of the tribulations or because people are repenting? The motif of God gathering in the elect at the end time is a common one (Deut 30:3-4; Isa 11:11-12; Ezek 37:21; 39:27-29; Zech 2:6-12).

### **24:32-51 Parables of watchfulness**

A series of parables and figurative sayings exhorts disciples to watchfulness. The fig tree (vv. 32-35), which is different from other trees in Palestine (most are evergreens), sheds all its leaves in winter. Just as its budding is a sign of the arrival of summer, the signs in the previous verses alert disciples to the coming of the Human One. There is a tension between verse 34, which assures that the end is imminent, and verse 14, which asserts that the Gospel first has to be preached to the whole world. Disciples need to be both ready and steadfast, trusting in Jesus’ words, which will never pass away (similarly the Torah, 5:18). The timing of the end is unpredictable, so disciples need to stay awake (see also 26:38, 40, 41).

While the previous verses emphasize watchfulness for the coming of the master, the parable of the faithful servant (vv. 45-51) exhorts disciples to vigilance in day-to-day tasks that must be fulfilled in the in-between time. One of these is the daily distribution of food (v. 45). This detail may be an allusion to the difficulties in the early church over food and eating, such as conflicts over Gentile and Jewish Christians eating together (Gal 2:11-14) or having people of differing social status at the same table (22:1-14). Alternatively, giving food may be understood as a metaphor for teaching (so 1 Cor 3:2; John 6:25-33), and the parable as an exhortation to leaders to exercise their teaching ministry well. The warning to those who gorge themselves on the resources meant for the community is dire; such a one will be dismembered (*dichotomēsei*, literally, “cut in two,” v. 51) as a condemned person.

### **25:1-13 Ready maidens**

A second parable advising preparedness for the coming of the Human One casts Jesus in the role of a bridegroom (as 9:15; see Isa 54:5; Jer 31:32; Hos 2:16, where Yahweh is the bridegroom of Israel). In Jesus’ day, weddings took place in two stages. First was the betrothal ceremony at the home of the father of the bride, at which the groom presented the marriage contract and the bride price to his future father-in-law. The bride continued to live in her father’s house until the second step, when she would move to the home of her husband, about a year later. This is the stage depicted in the parable. The maidens are waiting while the groom and the bride’s father hammer out the final negotiations. Upon reaching a final agreement, the wedding party would go in procession to the house of the groom, where the feasting would commence.

The waiting women are friends of the groom; the bride is never mentioned in the story. The word *parthenos* refers to a virgin, a young woman of marriageable age (twelve or in her early teens). The contrast between wise and foolish recalls the builders in 7:24-27. It is not clear whether the women are carrying torches (the usual connotation of *lampades*) wrapped with oil-soaked rags or hand-held oil lamps with lighted wicks. Matthew 5:14-16 provides a clue to interpreting why the women cannot share their oil. There light is equated with good deeds that are visible to others and lead to praise of God. Similarly, at Matthew 7:24-27 the wise are those who hear and act on Jesus’ words. Just so, the wise maidens in this parable are those who have faithfully prepared for the end time. No one can supply this preparation for another. One is either ready or not at the eschatological moment.

### **25:14-30 Investing talents**

This parable is often interpreted as an exhortation to use all one's God-given gifts to the full. However, the Greek word *talanton* has no other connotation than a monetary unit or weight measurement. In the parable it denotes a very large sum of money. What the parable depicts are two servants who invest and double the money with which they are entrusted, which wins them their master's approval, a share in his joy, and further responsibility. The third servant, by contrast, buries the money, which was considered the best way of safeguarding valuables in antiquity. Yet he earns harsh punishment from the master.

Key to understanding the parable is that Jesus did not live in a capitalist system, where it was thought that wealth can be increased by investment. Rather, people had a notion of limited good: there is only so much wealth, and any increase to one person takes away from another. The aim in life for a peasant was to have enough to take care of his family. Anyone amassing large amounts for himself would be seen as greedy and wicked. In the parable, then, if the master is not a figure for God, it is the third servant who is the honorable one—only he has refused to collaborate with his master in his unfettered greed. The parable warns rich people to stop exploiting those who are poor, and it encourages poor people to take courageous measures to expose greed for the sin that it is. The last verse is sobering, depicting what can happen to those who oppose the rich and powerful. It can encourage disciples to find ways to stand together as they confront unjust systems. There is still opportunity, since the end time has not yet arrived.

### **25:31-46 Final judgment**

This is the last of Matthew's parables and is unique to this Gospel. The time of judgment has arrived as the Human One comes in his glory (v. 31). This scene is intimately linked with 28:16-20, where Jesus instructs his followers to make disciples of all nations (*panta ta ethnē*, 28:19), a command that this parable presumes has been fulfilled. All the nations (v. 32) are now assembled to render account. The reason why the sheep are separated from the goats is not clear. Both were very valuable. Nor is there any evidence that after pasturing them together during the daytime, a shepherd would separate the two at night. (See 3:12; 13:24-30, 47-50; 24:40-41; 25:1-13 for other images of end-time separation.) Since most people were right-handed and developed greater strength and skill with this hand, the right side came to symbolize favor, blessing, and

honor.

The image of Jesus shifts from shepherd to king (v. 34; see 2:2; 21:5). And, like Moses, who laid out before the Israelites the choice of blessing or curse (Deut 11:26), Jesus separates those “blessed by my Father” (v. 34) from those “accursed” (v. 41). This is not predestined; rather, God’s invitation goes out to all (5:45; 13:3-9), and the choice to accept or reject it rests with each. For those who accept the invitation, which is visible in their deeds, blessing and inheritance in God’s realm await.

In light of the saying at 24:14, it is likely that Matthew envisions the completion of the great commission (28:16-20); all people, including Israel, Gentiles, and Christians, have heard the Gospel and are now judged according to their deeds. The “least brothers” (v. 40) and “least ones” (v. 45) most likely refer to other Christians rather than to just any person in need. See 11:11; 18:6, 14, where “little ones” and “least” refer to vulnerable members of the Christian community, and 10:41-42, where Jesus promises the reward of a righteous person for those who receive the needy ones sent out on mission. The basis of judgment, then, is how one receives Jesus through his followers who proclaim the Gospel (see 10:40).

## **26:1–27:66 The passion and resurrection**

Matthew’s usual formula at the end of a block of teaching, “When Jesus finished . . .” (26:1, as also 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1), marks the transition to the passion narrative. There is also an echo of Deuteronomy 32:45, where Moses finished his instruction to Israel and then prepared for his death. In these final scenes Matthew follows Mark closely, while adding his own unique touches. Jesus is portrayed as knowing what will happen and as being in control of the events. As Matthew is wont to do, he interprets each action as fulfilling the Scriptures.

### **26:1-16 Preparation for death: Treacherous plotting and prophetic anointing**

For the fourth and last time (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19), Jesus predicts his death. The prime movers are the chief priests and elders (v. 3), along with the high priest, Caiaphas (v. 3), who held office from A.D. 18 to 36. The Pharisees and scribes, who have been Jesus’ opponents up to this point in the narrative, drop out of view until 27:62. The people are still basically favorable toward Jesus (v. 5).

In strong contrast to the leaders' treachery is the action of an anonymous woman who anoints Jesus in the home of Simon the leper. This takes place in Bethany, a village just east of Jerusalem, over the Mount of Olives. In the Gospel of John this is identified as the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (John 11:1–12:12). By anointing Jesus' head, the woman takes on the role of priest and prophet. She both prepares Jesus for burial (v. 12) and commissions him as messianic king (see Sam 16:12-13; 1 Kgs 1:39). Jesus affirms her action, over the objection of the disciples. There is no question of a lack of concern for the poor by Jesus (see 5:3, 42; 6:2-4, 24; 19:21; 25:31-46); rather, the issue is the timing and the woman's recognition of Jesus' fate. She embodies the understanding and loyalty of the women disciples who, in contrast to the others (26:56), remain to see the crucifixion (27:55-56), keep vigil at the tomb (27:61), and are the first to encounter the risen Christ (28:1-10). Her pouring of oil on Jesus' head (v. 6) prefigures Jesus' pouring out of his blood for all (v. 28). While her action is remembered (v. 13), her identity is not.

In strong contrast is the act of Judas (vv. 14-16), who negotiates with the chief priests to hand Jesus over to them. No motive is given (cf. John 12:6). Once again Matthew interprets this deed through Scripture. Thirty pieces of silver is the worth of a slave (Exod 21:32). But probably the allusion is to Zechariah 11:12-13, where this is the amount of a shepherd's wage, which Judas casts back into the treasury (see 27:3-10).

### **26:17-35 The Last Supper**

As the woman prepared Jesus for his passion, so now Jesus prepares his disciples. In the first scene (vv. 17-19), the disciples approach (*prosēlthon*, the reverential stance also of the woman in v. 7; also 4:3, 11; 5:1; 8:2) Jesus and ask about Passover preparations. Jesus' reply has an apocalyptic nuance, as Matthew uses both *kairos*, "appointed time" (8:29; cf. 13:30; 16:3; 21:34), and *engiken*, "draws near" (cf. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 21:34; 24:32-33) in reference to the end time.

The meal begins with a notation that Jesus is with his disciples (v. 20). His words and actions interpret for his intimate followers ("Twelve" is symbolic for all, as also 10:1-4) how he is still present with them ("Emmanuel," 1:23; cf. 28:20), even when his earthly life ends. Tragic predictions of betrayal (vv. 20-25) and denial (vv. 31-35) by his closest disciples frame Jesus' eucharistic words and actions (vv. 26-30). In verses 20-25 there is a contrast between the obedience of Jesus (v. 24) and the disobedience of Judas, who calls Jesus "Rabbi" (vv. 25 and 49), after Jesus has instructed his disciples not to use that

address (23:8). The allusion to Psalm 41:10 in verse 23 captures the anguish of betrayal by an intimate friend. Typically, Matthew signals the dire consequences of not acting justly with a pronouncement of woe (as 11:21; 18:7; 23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:19). Unique to Matthew is the personal exchange between Judas and Jesus (v. 25; also 26:49-50). Jesus' enigmatic "you have said so" is the same response he gives to the high priest (26:64) and to Pilate (27:11).

The institution of the Eucharist (vv. 26-29) is the core and climax of this section. Jesus' gift of self in the form of bread is reminiscent of the feedings of the multitudes (14:13-21; 15:32-39) and of the similar actions by Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17: 8-16; 2 Kgs 4:42-44), as well as of God's provision of manna in the desert for Israel (Exod 16). The cup in which all participate symbolizes both his death (see 20:22; 26:39, 42) and a ratification of a renewed life in covenantal fidelity. Blood, as the symbol of life (Deut 12:23), was sprinkled by Moses on the altar and on the people (Exod 24:8) to seal the covenant.

A unique element in Matthew's account is the interpretation that this action is "on behalf of many, for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 28). This is an allusion to the servant in Isaiah 53:4-12 (see also 12:17-21; 20:28). The "many" (*pollōn*) is a Semitic expression meaning "all"; no one is excluded from the saving effects of Jesus' death (see 1:21). Forgiveness is possible even for those who hand Jesus over to death. The gift of bread and wine also sounds an eschatological note, as the messianic banquet of Isaiah 25:6-9 is in view. Jesus assures his disciples that while the intimacy of eating and drinking together, which they shared during his earthly life, is ending, they will yet experience this with him in the realm of God (v. 29).

The scene shifts to the Mount of Olives (v. 31; see 24:3), where jubilant singing (Psalms 114–118 are sung at the conclusion of the Passover meal) gives way to a sober prediction by Jesus that all the disciples will have their faith shaken (*skandalizesthai*, literally, to find Jesus a "stumbling block" or "obstacle." See also 11:6; 13:57; 15:12). A quotation from Zechariah 13:7 that speaks of the disintegration of the community is accompanied by a promise of its renewal. Galilee is the place where Jesus first gathered disciples (4:18-22) and commissioned them (10:1-42) and where he appears to them for the last time, sending them to the whole world (28:16-20). Peter, representative of the whole (see 16:16-23), boasts that this will never happen (vv. 33-35). The irony is strong, as in the next scene the disciples sleep instead of keeping watch (vv. 36-46) and flee (v. 56), while the women disciples stay the course (27:55-56, 61; 28:1-10).

## **26:36-46 Prayer at Gethsemane**

Arriving at Gethsemane (meaning “olive press”) with his disciples (v. 36; see 26:20), Jesus separates himself from them to pray, taking along Peter and the sons of Zebedee, namely, James and John. These three were among the first called and sent (4:18-22; 10:2) and were privileged witnesses at the Transfiguration (17:1-8). They are also singled out as the ones who struggled most to understand Jesus’ passion (16:22; 20:20-23). The separation of Jesus from the rest of the disciples may be an allusion to Genesis 22:5, where Abraham tells his servants to stay back while he and Isaac pray. While Abraham is exemplary in his faithfulness, he misinterprets what action God desires. Jesus is both faithful to God and understands what action will bring liberation for his people. For him there will be no rescuing angel (26:53).

Three times Jesus implores God (on the metaphor of “Father” for God, see the comments on 6:5-15) to let the cup (a metaphor for death; see 20:22; 26:27) pass from him without drinking it. His grief is extreme (quoting lament psalms 42:4-5; 43:5 at v. 38), and his struggle is real. Jesus is not a puppet in the hand of God. His death is not inevitable. He wrestles with the final choice to proceed with handing over his life.

Jesus’ faithfulness in seeking and following God’s direction stands in contrast with the frailty of his disciples. They fail to keep watch (see chs. 24–25) and do not pray, as Jesus had instructed (v. 41 and 6:13), to be delivered from the test (*peirasmos*)—both the present crisis and the eschatological trial. Yet they will be restored and empowered by the risen Christ (28:7, 16-20). The final scenes of intimacy between Jesus and his followers began with Jesus noting at the supper that his appointed hour was at hand (26:18). They now close with his declaration that both the hour and the one handing him over are at hand (vv. 45-46).

## **26:47-56 Jesus’ arrest**

Jesus’ words are immediately fulfilled with the arrival of Judas and a large, armed crowd, who come on the authority of the chief priests and elders. With so many people in the city for the feast, Judas has prearranged a signal so that there will be no confusion. A kiss, normally given by a disciple to a teacher as a sign of respect, turns treacherous. And as at the Last Supper (26:25), Judas addresses Jesus as Rabbi (v. 49), against Jesus’ instructions (23:8). The tone of Jesus’ response (v. 50) is not clear. It can be understood as an ironic question, “Friend, why are you here?” (KJV) or an instruction that emphasizes Jesus’ control of the

scene: “Friend, do what you have come for” (NAB). Or, by addressing Judas as “friend,” he reminds him of their intimate relationship and holds out to him the possibility of forgiveness, recalling that Judas has partaken in the cup of his blood that is shed for forgiveness of sins (26:28).

A desperate attempt on the part of a disciple to halt the arrest (v. 51) serves to underscore once again a lack of understanding. Jesus has taught his followers not to counter violence with violence (5:38-48), which he reinforces here with a pronouncement unique to Matthew: “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (v. 52; similarly Rev 13:10). Moreover, Jesus withstands the temptation to call upon angelic rescuers (v. 53, as at 4:6). As always, Matthew explains that all these seemingly incomprehensible events happen to fulfill the Scriptures (v. 54, 56). The fallibility of the disciples culminates with their desertion and fleeing (v. 56; but see 27:55-56, 61; 28:1-10, where the Galilean women continue to follow and serve).

### **26:57-68 Interrogation before the Sanhedrin**

The arresting party brings Jesus to the high priest, scribes, and elders (the Pharisees have dropped from view in the passion narrative and only reappear at 27:62). The mention of Peter (v. 58) prepares for the next scene, in which he denies Jesus (vv. 69-75). The Jewish leaders do not have authority to put a person to death (John 18:31). While Matthew gives the scene the aura of a trial, it is more a strategy session to prepare the case they will present to Pilate. In Christian tradition, the blame for Jesus’ death increasingly has been taken off the Romans and put on the Jewish leaders. Matthew paints the Jewish leaders as vile, seeking *false* testimony (v. 59; cf. Mark 14:55) against Jesus.

Two witnesses are necessary for a death sentence (Deut 17:6). The accusation that Jesus said he can destroy the temple and rebuild it (v. 61) is both false and ironically correct. Although he performed a prophetic act in judgment on the temple (21:1-17) and remarked about its coming destruction (24:2), he did not say that he himself would destroy it. But since destruction and restoration of the temple were thought to be a sign of the messianic age, the accusation is actually true. Jesus’ initial silence toward the high priest (v. 63) recalls that of the servant in Isaiah 53:7. At 27:40 the charge will be made again by passers-by reviling the crucified Jesus.

The high priest shifts the focus, demanding that Jesus respond under oath to the charge that he is Messiah, Son of God (v. 64). That Jesus is Messiah has been affirmed from the opening line of the Gospel (1:1, 17, 18; 2:4; 11:2; 16:16;



22:42; 23:10). “Son of God” underscores his unique relationship with God (2:15; 3:17; 11:25-27; 17:5), his healing power (8:29), and his authority (see 14:33; 16:20, where the two titles occur in tandem). Jesus had taught his disciples not to take oaths (7:33-37). He replies to the high priest with the same enigmatic phrase, “You have said so” (v. 64), that he had said to Judas (26:25) and to Pilate (27:11). His further response underscores his identity as the coming Human One. Blending Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13, he moves the discussion to an eschatological plane. At this the high priest accuses Jesus of blasphemy, that is, abusing the divine name or insulting God (v. 65), an offense the leaders deem worthy of death (v. 66). They themselves begin to abuse Jesus (cf. Mark 14:65, where it is an anonymous “some”) and mock his identity as prophet and Messiah (vv. 67-68), an element unique to Matthew.

### **26:69-75 Peter denies Jesus**

The utter failure of Peter is not unexpected; Jesus has warned that this will happen (26:31-35). Peter has been in the lead as one of the first disciples called (4:18-22) and was a privileged witness at the Transfiguration (17:1-8). He was the spokesperson for the disciples in declaring Jesus “messiah” (16:16), and the one to whom Jesus entrusted the “keys to the kingdom of heaven” (16:19). But he has also been the prime example of a disciple who struggles to understand and fails miserably (16:22-23; 26:33-35). Not once but three times he denies being with Jesus, and he does so with an oath (see 5:33-37, where Jesus forbids oath-taking). Matthew adds that Peter makes the denial “in front of everyone” (v. 70; cf. 5:16; 10:32-33). This is the last mention of Peter in Matthew’s Gospel. Presumably his bitter tears (v. 75) are tears of repentance, and he is among the disciples to whom the women announce the good news (28:7-10) and among those who are commissioned to preach to all the nations (28:16).

### **27:1-2 The council hands Jesus over**

After a night of interrogation and abuse, the chief priests and elders fulfill what Jesus had predicted at 20:18-19. They hand Jesus over (*paradidōmi*, 10:4; 26:15, 25; 27:3, 18, 26) to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who ruled from A.D. 26 to 36.

### **27:3-10 The death of Judas**

Seeing Jesus condemned prompts a change of heart in Judas. Ordinarily the verb *metanoein* is used for repentance, whereas here it is *metamelētheis*, “deeply

regretted” (v. 3). But it is likely that Judas’ words in verse 4 indicate true repentance and not simply regret. Judas, like the leaders Jesus warned in 23:35-36, is responsible for shedding innocent blood. (See 27:24, where Pilate will try to make himself innocent of Jesus’ blood.) The leaders dissociate themselves from Judas’ attempt to return the money (see 27:24 for Pilate’s use of the same phrase, “Look to it yourselves”). In desperation, Judas flings the money into the temple and tragically ends his life. A rather different version is found in Acts 1:15-20. The quotation in verses 9-10 interpreting the purchase of the “Field of Blood” is actually an adaptation of Zechariah 11:12-13, although Matthew attributes it to Jeremiah. Perhaps Matthew makes the association because of a similarity with the slaughter of the innocents (2:17-18), interpreted with Jeremiah 31:15. Or Matthew may mean to recall Jesus’ critique of the temple and its leadership (21:13, quoting Jer 7:11). Alternatively, he may be alluding to the story of the potter’s field in Jeremiah 18–19.

### **27:11-14 Trial before Pilate**

Resuming the action begun at verse 2, Matthew now tells of the interrogation by the Roman governor. His question is different from that of the Jewish authorities and concerns Jesus’ kingship. Once again Jesus answers enigmatically, “You say so” (v. 11; see 26:64), and then remains silent when the chief priests and elders testify against him (as also 26:63). Jesus’ silence is evocative again of the servant of Isaiah 53:7, whose appearance caused amazement (Isa 52:14-15; v. 14).

### **27:15-26 Choice of Barabbas**

Beyond the Gospel references, there is no other evidence of a custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover. The choice, according to Matthew, is between Jesus Barabbas and “Jesus called Messiah” (v. 17). Matthew heightens the notoriety of the former (v. 16) and names envy as the motive for handing Jesus over (v. 18). Three other unique elements in Matthew serve to shift the blame away from Pilate and onto the Jewish leaders. The first is the dream of Pilate’s wife, who urges her husband to “have nothing to do with that righteous man” (v. 19). In the opening chapters, dreams are the means by which Joseph, a “righteous man” (1:19), learns God’s desire and by what actions he is to preserve the life of Jesus and his mother (1:20; 2:13, 19, 22). A second element found only in Matthew is Pilate’s handwashing (v. 24), a futile attempt to declare his own innocence and to dissociate himself from Jesus’ death (similarly the chief

priests with Judas, 27:4). A third unique feature of the Matthean account is the climactic cry of the whole people, “His blood be upon us and upon our children” (v. 25).

Until this point the crowds have been basically favorable toward Jesus. Now they demand his crucifixion (vv. 22, 23), and the people as a whole (*laos*, as at 1:21) take upon themselves the responsibility for his blood (v. 25; see Lev 20:9-16; Josh 2:19-20; 2 Sam 1:16; 14:9; Jer 51:35). This verse has been interpreted as a curse upon all Jewish people for all time. This is a grave misinterpretation that Christians have a serious obligation to counter (see the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* 4). In the context of Matthew’s Gospel, “the whole people” refers to those who opposed Jesus during his lifetime as well as Jewish opponents of the early Christian community. Verse 25 reflects the inner family conflict and the struggle of Jesus’ disciples to understand why all Jews did not follow Jesus (similarly Matthew 13; Romans 9–11). Matthew sees a connection between the rejection of Jesus and the events that unfold in the decades following Jesus’ death (“upon our children”), particularly the destruction of the temple. The scene concludes with Pilate releasing Barabbas, having Jesus scourged to weaken him, and handing him over (*paradidōmi*, 10:4; 20:18; 26:15, 25; 27:2, 3, 18, 26) for the last time to the soldiers to crucify him.

### **27:27-31 Mockery by the soldiers**

Just as the interrogation before the chief priests and elders ended with them abusing Jesus (26:67-68), so the Roman trial concludes with abuse by the soldiers of the governor inside the praetorium, the governor’s official residence. A cohort consisted of six hundred men; in verse 27 it likely refers to simply a large group of soldiers. These would have been local men employed by the Romans. They mock Jesus’ kingship, arraying him in scarlet, with a pseudo-crown and scepter. In Mark 15:17 the robe is purple, a color worn by royalty and the rich (see, e.g., Luke 16:19), but Matthew’s detail is more realistic. Roman soldiers wore red cloaks; they simply adorn Jesus in one of their own. The crown of thorns was not so much to inflict pain as to imitate that of an emperor with its rays. The acclamation (v. 29) simulates the greeting toward the emperor, “Ave, Caesar!” The derisive mockery turns to physical abuse (v. 30) and ends with Jesus being led to crucifixion.

### **27:32 Simon of Cyrene**

On the way to the site of crucifixion, Simon of Cyrene (a North African city

in present-day Libya) is pressed into service to help Jesus carry the cross. Likely he was visiting Jerusalem for the Passover feast. While Jesus has said that those who wish to be his follower must take up their cross (16:24), discipleship motifs are not entirely clear in this scene, especially since Simon is forced into carrying the crossbeam. At the same time, the presence of this Simon is a poignant reminder of the absence of Simon Peter, who has struggled to accept the fact that Jesus would die (16:21-23), then declared he would follow Jesus to the death (26:33-35), but has fled (26:56) and denied that he was ever with Jesus (26:69-75).

### **27:33-44 Crucifixion and mockery**

The place of crucifixion, Golgotha, “Place of the Skull,” gets its name either because the hill is skull-shaped or because of the executions that took place there. It was customary to give the condemned person a drink mixed with a narcotic to ease the pain. Matthew makes it wine mixed with gall, so that the action corresponds to what is said in Psalm 69:21.

No details are narrated about the crucifixion itself (v. 35). Matthew’s readers are well familiar with what other contemporary writers describe as the most cruel and painful of all punishments. It was used on slaves, violent criminals, and political rebels. Carried out in a public place, it was meant to be a deterrent. Matthew focuses on how to make meaning of this horrible death. He uses the Scriptures, primarily the lament psalms, to interpret each action. In verse 35 the division of Jesus’ clothing alludes to Psalm 22:18. The wagging heads of the mockers (v. 39) recalls Psalm 22:7.

For the third time (26:67-68; 27:27-31) Jesus endures mockery. First the passers-by (vv. 39-40) resurrect the charge made before the Sanhedrin (26:61) about the destruction of the temple, an event that Matthew connects with the death of Jesus (21:41, 43). Their taunt, “If you are the Son of God,” recalls the same tempting words of Satan (4:3, 6), who urges Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple and let God’s angels rescue him to prove he is truly God’s Son. Both scenes reflect the struggle of believers to explain how Jesus can be the beloved Son of God (2:15; 3:17; 17:5) and yet die such a horrendous death. The taunt of the chief priests, scribes, and elders is a variation of the same (vv. 41-42). The paradox of saving life by losing life (16:25) is visibly played out. It is through losing his life that Jesus “saves his people from their sins” (1:21). While the placard over the cross (v. 37) carries the title “King of the Jews” (the charge made by Pilate, 27:11, and his soldiers, 27:29), the religious

leaders use the more messianically charged phrase “King of Israel” (v. 42). Verse 43, unique to Matthew, employs Psalm 22:8 and Wisdom 2:18 to align Jesus with the righteous sufferer whom God will vindicate. Finally, even the bandits crucified with Jesus join in the abuse (v. 44; cf. Luke 23:40-43).

### **27:45-56 Death of Jesus**

An apocalyptic tone is set as darkness spreads over the land for three hours (see Amos 8:9). Jesus cries out in a loud voice (v. 46), once again using the words of Psalm 22. He has been deserted and opposed by Judas (26:14-16, 48-49), the disciples (26:56), Peter (26:69-75), the religious leaders (26:57-68), the crowds (27:21-22), the Roman authorities (27:1-31), and now even God seems to have abandoned him. His anguished prayer is that of a righteous sufferer. While the end of the psalm, which moves to a note of confident hope in God’s power to save, is not spoken, the Gospel will indeed end with Jesus’ vindication.

The bystanders either misinterpret or deliberately mock Jesus (v. 47) and think he is calling on Elijah. There was an expectation that Elijah would return before the final judgment (Mal 4:5; Sir 48:10). But John the Baptist has already played this role (Matt 11:14; 17:10-13). It is not entirely clear what prompts the offer of *oxos*, a cheap, sour wine used by the lower classes (v. 48), or whether this is a compassionate or mocking gesture. Most likely Matthew includes it as one more way in which Scriptures (Ps 69:21) are fulfilled. As terse as the notice of Jesus’ crucifixion (v. 35) is the statement he “gave up his spirit” (v. 50). This is not a reference to the Holy Spirit but to the life-breath (*pneuma* means both “spirit” and “breath”) that Jesus hands back to God. Matthew portrays Jesus not as an unwilling victim but as faithful Son of God who consciously returns to God.

Four apocalyptic signs follow immediately, powerful demonstrations that God did not abandon Jesus:

1) The curtain of the temple, probably the inner veil in front of the holy of holies (Exod 26:31-35), is torn (the passive voice designates this as God’s doing) from top to bottom. This can be understood as a portent of the destruction of the temple or as opening access to the God of Israel to all the Gentiles.

2) The earth quakes, a portent of the end of the present age and the beginning of the new (4 Ezra 6:13-16; 2 Apoc. Bar. 27:7; 70:8; Zech 14:4-5; Matt 24:7). Cosmic signs accompany the momentous events of Jesus’ birth (2:2), his death, his resurrection (28:2), and his return in glory (24:27-31).

3) Many of the holy dead emerge from their tombs and appear to people in

Jerusalem (vv. 52-53). In verse 52, Matthew, in language akin to that of Ezekiel 37, asserts that it is Jesus' death that makes possible the resurrection of the holy ones. The sequence of events becomes confused in verse 53 because Matthew makes a correction: the resurrection of others cannot happen until the resurrection of Jesus, which Matthew has not yet narrated.

4) The centurion and those with him, who had participated in crucifying Jesus, come to believe in Jesus and declare, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (v. 54; cf. vv. 40, 43). This is all the more significant when their employer, the emperor, allocated this title to himself, seeing himself as agent of the gods.

Not only has God not abandoned Jesus but the many Galilean women disciples have also remained faithful to him (vv. 55-56). They are steadfastly keeping watch (as Jesus exhorts disciples to do in chapters 24-25), after having followed Jesus from Galilee and having ministered (*diakonousai*) to him (see 8:15 for various meanings of this verb). Mary Magdalene heads the list (v. 56; as in Matt 27:61; 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1, 9; Luke 8:2; 24:10; cf. John 19:25; 20:1-2, 11-18). No information is given about her before this point in the narrative. Only Luke 8:2-3 introduces her before the passion account. The common confusion of her with a prostitute or a sinner has no basis in the Scriptures. The other Mary accompanying her is the mother of James and Joseph (cf. Mark 15:40). At Matthew 13:55 there is the mention of Jesus having siblings named James and Joseph. Possibly Matthew is alluding to the mother of Jesus (cf. John 19:25), but if so, he does not develop the significance. The third figure is the mother of the sons of Zebedee, who at 20:20-21 had wanted places of honor for her sons in Jesus' realm. She drops out of the list in 27:61 and 28:1.

### **27:57-66 Witnesses at the tomb**

Another disciple emerges, a rich man (see 19:16-26, where Jesus elaborates on how difficult it is for a rich person to be a disciple) who offers his tomb for Jesus' burial. There is no mention of Joseph having been part of the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus (cf. Mark 14:53). There are many limestone quarries in Jerusalem, some of which were used secondarily as cemeteries. A body would be laid in a niche carved in the rock until the flesh decomposed. Then the bones would be gathered into an ossuary ("bone box"), and the niche could be reused for another family member. A tomb complex would have a number of niches. The stone is rolled across the entrance to prevent grave robbers or animals from entering. No anointing of Jesus' body is narrated, since he has already been anointed for burial by an unnamed woman (26:6-13).

Keeping vigil at the tomb (v. 61) are Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary,” presumably the mother of James and Joseph named in verse 56. They come again in 28:1 to see the tomb. These witnesses serve to verify that Jesus is truly dead and that there is no mistaking the place of his burial.

Unique to Matthew is the request of the chief priests and the Pharisees (who have been absent since 23:39) to Pilate to set a guard at the tomb (vv. 62-66). Their recollection of Jesus’ prediction that after three days he would rise (16:21; 17:23; 20:19) sets the stage for the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances. Their fear of the impact of the disciples’ proclamation that Jesus was raised from the dead (v. 64) is ironic, since this is exactly what occurs. The charge that Jesus was an “imposter” (v. 63) and that his disciples stole the body (v. 64) likely reflects the kinds of arguments Matthew’s community encountered from their opponents.

### **28:1-15 The empty tomb**

The same two women who witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion (27:55-56) and who kept vigil at his burial (27:61) return once again to the tomb. As at the death of Jesus, an earthquake (27:51, 54; see also 24:7), an apocalyptic sign, occurs, accompanied by the descent of an angel from heaven. In the opening chapters an angel conveyed to Joseph the divine interpretation of the puzzling events surrounding Jesus’ birth. Similarly, an angel communicates the meaning of the extraordinary aftermath of Jesus’ death. In an ironic play on words and images, the guards who were supposed to secure the dead body, themselves become like dead men (v. 4).

The angel assures the women not to fear and announces that Jesus has been raised as he said (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19). The passive voice “he has been raised” (v. 6) connotes that God performs the action. The angel then commissions the women to go quickly to give the message to the disciples and to instruct them to go to Galilee, where they will see him (fulfilling Jesus’ words in 26:32). Matthew does not explicitly mention Peter (cf. Mark 16:7; Luke 24:12, 34), though he is presumably among the disciples (v. 7) and the Eleven (v. 16). The women do exactly as instructed; with fear and great joy, they run to announce the message to the disciples (v. 8; cf. Mark 16:8, where they say nothing because of their fear).

Unique to Matthew are verses 9-10, where Jesus meets the women on the way. That they seize his feet is a detail that attests to the reality of his person and his tangibility. He is not a ghost or a spirit; nor is it simply the memory of Jesus

that lives on with them. The women worship (*proskynein*) Jesus (see also 2:8, 11; 14:33; 15:25; 28:17). Jesus' repetition in verse 10 of the message they have already received from the angel (v. 7) is significant in that the women are commissioned directly by Jesus, giving them credentials as prime witnesses and apostles. Matthew's account represents a strand of Christian tradition in the same line as that of John 20:1-2, 11-18, where Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb alone and there encounters the risen Christ and is commissioned to announce the good news to the community of brothers and sisters (20:17). By contrast, in Mark 16:1-8 and Luke 24:1-12 the women do not encounter Jesus but only the angel. Peter is given primacy of place by Luke (24:12, 34) and Paul, who does not list the women among those to whom the risen Christ appeared (1 Cor 15:3-8).

Rounding out the story of the guard at the tomb (27:62-66) is their report to the chief priests of all that had happened (28:11-15). Along with the elders, they gather and take counsel (as 27:1). Just as money figured in the plan to hand Jesus over to death (26:14-16; 27:3-10), so did money figure in the false interpretation of his resurrection (v. 12; see 6:19-34; 10:8-9; 13:22; 19:16-30 for warnings about the dangers of money). The ongoing polemics into Matthew's day between followers of Jesus and their opponents are reflected in the remark in verse 15.

## **FINALE: BACK TO GALILEE; COMMISSION TO THE WHOLE WORLD; JESUS' ABIDING PRESENCE**

### ***Matt 28:16-20***

#### **28:16-20 The Great Commission**

In a scene unique to Matthew, the thread of the story of the women's witness, which left off at verse 10, is resumed. It presumes that they have fulfilled their commission to tell the news of the resurrection to the other disciples and that these have believed them. The juxtaposition of "eleven" with "disciples" creates a tension in the narrative. "Eleven" is a reminder that one of "the Twelve" (see 10:1-4) is no more. Yet "the disciples" (referred to seventy-three times in Matthew) comprised a group larger than the Twelve, among whom were most notably the Galilean women who followed and ministered (27:55). While Matthew has depicted the women as apostles who are commissioned in 28:7-10, he excludes them from the commission to preach to all the nations.

The mountaintop setting (as at 4:8; 5:1; 15:29; 17:1) evokes the image of



Jesus as the new Moses. Like the women (28:9), the Eleven worship Jesus, though unlike them, they (it is not clear in the Greek whether it is all or some of them) doubt or hesitate before the challenge (*distazō*, v. 17; also 14:31). Until this point in the Gospel, Jesus had insisted that the mission was restricted to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6; 15:24); now the disciples are to go to “all nations” (*panta ta ethnē*, v. 19; see 25:32). Some understand Matthew to be saying that the mission is to be directed from now on to the Gentiles exclusively (i.e., that the mission to Israel has ended). But more likely Matthew’s heavily Jewish Christian community sees that Israel is still included among “all [the] nations” to whom they reach out. The mission is to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach.

A liturgical formula from early Christian tradition has been placed on Jesus’ lips (v. 19). As Jesus has been depicted as Teacher par excellence, so are his disciples to follow in his footsteps with his authority (v. 18; see 10:1).

The final verse of the Gospel reiterates the assurance given at 1:23 and 18:20: despite the “little faith” and the failures of his followers, Jesus remains always with the community that gathers and ministers in his name. Not even death can break that bond—ever.

# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO **MARK**

Marie Noonan Sabin

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Author**

The actual author of the Gospel of Mark, like those of all the Gospels, is unknown to us. The manuscripts that survived date from the fourth century; the names of the evangelists were added sometime in the second century. There is reason to believe that the early church was less interested in knowing the actual authorship than in connecting the Gospel narratives with apostolic witnesses. They found the names “Matthew” and “John” within their respective Gospels, and the name “Luke” as one mentioned by Paul as his traveling companion. For Mark they relied on a fragment written by a second-century bishop named Papias, who spoke of Mark as the “interpreter” of Peter. This suggestion dovetailed with the observation in Acts that Peter had visited the home of someone in Jerusalem named “John who is called Mark” (Acts 12:12). Some also found support in the reference in the first letter of Peter to “Mark, my son” (1 Pet 5:13). Not all scholars accept these inferences, yet the link with Peter is supported by internal evidence.

### **Audience**

Since we do not know for certain who wrote the Gospel of Mark, we also cannot be certain of its intended audience. The link with Peter has led some scholars to speculate that it was addressed, like Peter’s first letter, to the church in Rome. But there are many other bases for speculating both about Mark’s Gospel and Peter’s letter. Among them is the fact that Peter is known in Acts as the head of the Jerusalem church; an argument could be made that Mark was a member of that early Jewish-Christian community.

## Language

Language offers some internal clues as to both the author and his intended audience. Mark's manuscript, like the other Gospels, has come down to us as a Greek text. Why, one might wonder, would the evangelists have written in Greek instead of in Hebrew or Aramaic, the Semitic idiom common in Galilee? The most probable reason is that from the time that Alexander of Greece conquered the Mesopotamian world, three centuries before the time of Jesus, Greek was the language of educated people. In fact, in the time of Alexander, the Jews translated their Bible into Greek. They called it the "Septuagint" (meaning "seventy"), because they developed a legend that seventy scribes had been asked to do the translation in isolated cells and all came up with identical words, thus proving the inspiration of God. Educated Jews knew the Bible in Greek as well as in Hebrew and Aramaic. There is good evidence that when the evangelists quote or refer to the Jewish Bible, they are following the Septuagint.

Mark's Gospel is not written in fluent Greek, however. Indeed, it contains numerous "semitisms," that is, phrases that are awkward in Greek but would read well if translated into Hebrew or Aramaic. The overall impression it leaves, therefore, is that of an author who thought in one language and was trying to write in another. In addition, Mark's Gospel is the only one that uses Aramaic phrases at key moments of the narrative: *Talitha koum*, meaning "Little girl, rise up!\*" (Mark 5:41); *Ephphatha*, meaning "Be released"\* or "Be opened" (Mark 7:34); *Abba*, meaning "Father" (Mark 14:36); and *Eloi, Eloi*, meaning "My God, my God" (Mark 15:34).

## Date and historical setting

The date of Mark's Gospel is also a matter of speculation. Most, although not all, scholars believe that Mark's was the earliest of the Gospels, written around 70 C.E. and followed in the eighties by Matthew and Luke, and in the nineties by John.

The year 70 was significant for all Jews, including the Jewish followers of Jesus, because it was the year that the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. The destruction was the traumatic end to the four-year revolt of the Jews against Rome. The Temple had been destroyed once before by Babylon, six centuries earlier, and the effect had been devastating. The Roman destruction was also a watershed in Jewish history.

This time the Temple was never rebuilt. The leaders of the revolt (the Zealots), along with the temple leaders (priests and Sadducees), disappeared or

scattered. Judaism itself might have disappeared had it not been for the Pharisees. The Pharisees' reputation in the New Testament as rigid legalists is ill-deserved. They were, in fact, a devout lay group who had developed a flexible and creative approach to the interpretation of Scripture and had also fostered ways of bringing the prayers of the Temple into Jewish homes. When the Temple was lost, they provided the foundations for a continuing and vital Judaism. As the ancestors of modern rabbinic Judaism, they deserve the respect of modern Christians.

Why, then, are the Pharisees vilified in the New Testament? The answer does not lie in the time of Jesus. Indeed, many of the teachings of Jesus are so close to those of the Pharisees that some scholars have proposed that he is shown arguing with them because he was a member of their school. Judaism before the fall of the Temple was tolerant of many different forms of expression, and historical studies suggest that Christianity did not begin as a consciously separate religion, but as a new formulation of the ancient Jewish faith. After the Temple fell, however, Judaism regrouped, and the Pharisaic leaders became less tolerant of diversity within their ranks. In that new atmosphere, Jewish followers of Jesus were regarded with suspicion and put out of the synagogues. The Christian-Jewish community responded with anger. In the context of the post-seventies, the Pharisees appeared hostile to Jesus, and it is that hostility (and their own anger) that the evangelists retroactively projected into their accounts of Jesus' time.

Modern Judaism and modern Christianity may have developed along clearly different paths, but readers of the Gospels need to understand that Jesus and his disciples, as well as the evangelists Mark, Matthew, and John (Luke was Gentile), saw themselves as faithful Jews. Matthew's diatribes against "the scribes and the Pharisees" and John's scornful use of "the Jews" must be understood in the context of their own times, not that of Jesus.

The way each Gospel expresses its attitude toward Jews and Judaism is one criterion for dating it. John's denunciation of "the Jews" is one reason for placing his Gospel at the end of the century. Luke's way of distancing Christianity from Judaism (especially in Acts) suggests that he is not writing in its earliest moments. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew, on the other hand, are clearly composed in the context of a deep regard for Judaism itself. So, while all the Gospels are steeped in the Jewish Scriptures, Mark and Matthew especially present Jesus in the light of them.

## **The relevance of the “Old Testament” to the New Testament**

It is helpful to know that in the first century all Jewish thought about God was centered in Scripture. Jews believed that the Bible contained all of God’s revelation but that no one person or one faith community could grasp all of that revelation at any single time. It was a pious habit of mind to seek to understand every new and significant person, teaching, and event in Judaism through the lens of Scripture. At the same time, it was a religious task to consider how these new persons, teachings, and events brought to the surface new depths in Scripture hitherto unseen. It was, in fact, considered important for each new generation to reopen the Scriptures and search for new meanings in the light of its own time. The new meanings that surfaced were not considered replacements of older interpretations but enrichments of them.

Christians reading the New Testament today will miss much of its meaning and most of its richness if they are unfamiliar with the references to the “Old” or First Testament that form its framework and substructure. This commentary, therefore, tries to present the reader with all the scriptural quotes, allusions, and echoes that provide the basis of Mark’s theological thought. Some explanation of the full context of these biblical references is always given. For readers who desire more complete understanding, the biblical citations are offered as well.

Readers of Mark’s Gospel need to be aware that Genesis is always in the background. Mark is always thinking of God as the Creator, whose primary concern is to create, sustain, and restore life. His Gospel is filled with reminders of “the beginning.” It is structured around the idea that God desires to lead us back to the original Garden. Particularly important to Mark is God’s creation of human beings in God’s image (Gen 1:27). He presents Jesus as a new Adam (“son of man”) and as image of the divinity (“son of God”).

Mark also connects Jesus to the central prophets of Jewish tradition—Moses and Elijah. In terms of narrative structure, Jesus’ relationship to John the Baptist is patterned after the Elijah-Elisha cycle in the two books of Kings, a cycle which, in its own way, echoes biblical narrative from Genesis to Kings. The miracles that Mark shows Jesus performing have their connections to Elijah’s raising up a young man from death (1 Kgs 17:17-24), to Elisha’s multiplication of loaves (2 Kgs 4:42-44), and to his cleansing of a leper (2 Kgs 5:1-14). When Mark shows Jesus in his state of transfigured glory, he shows him in conversation with Moses, the giver of God’s word, and with Elijah, the prophet who, according to biblical legend, never died but was taken up to heaven.

Mark also places Jesus in the tradition of the prophets seeking the reform of the Temple. By means of interweaving quotations from Scripture, Mark links Jesus to the warnings of Jeremiah and the vision of Isaiah. He shows Jesus warning that the Temple would be destroyed unless the Temple authorities gave up their idolatrous connections with foreign power and wealth. At the same time, he shows Jesus sharing Isaiah's vision of a sacred space where all peoples will join together in worshipping the one God.

When Mark composes the narrative of Jesus' death, he makes use of a range of Scriptures that depict God's righteous servant put to death by evil forces. First and foremost, he interprets Jesus' death through the lens of Isaiah's "Suffering Servant." In certain passages known as "The Songs of the Suffering Servant" (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12), Isaiah draws a portrait of God's faithful servant who is tortured, mocked, and killed by the obtuse kings of the world, who do not understand the identity of the one whom they are killing. They also are slow to understand that his death atones for their sins and that after death he will be raised up and exalted by God.

Mark also draws on similar patterns in the Psalms. And he surely had in mind the opening of the Wisdom of Solomon, where "godless men" put "the righteous one" to death because his goodness makes their lives uncomfortable and because "he styles himself a child of the LORD" (Wis 2:13) and "boasts that God is his Father" (Wis 2:16). In this work, the righteous one is not only exalted by God but given immortality as well (Wis 2:23).

In general, the most significant background comes from the Wisdom writings. In Catholic tradition, there are seven Jewish Wisdom writings: Proverbs, Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Each of these works is distinct, yet they share certain significant things in common. They are all set in domestic situations and everyday life. Many of them use a pithy, aphoristic style of speech. They are all focused on how to live a wise and holy life. They all agree that "fear of the LORD [in the sense of holy awe] is the beginning of wisdom." Most important, three of them (Proverbs, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon) imagine God's Wisdom as a personified attribute that walks on earth and dwells among human beings. God's Wisdom was there from the beginning and created the world and all that is in it. God's Wisdom is imagined as a maternal figure—life-giving, nurturing and healing, restorative and transfiguring. When Mark wanted to communicate the significance of Jesus, it was quite natural for him to present him as God's Wisdom made flesh.

## Genre

A grasp of Mark's overriding reference to Scripture should keep the reader from regarding his Gospel as an eyewitness account or as any conventional form of biography or history. What Mark gives us is far richer. In keeping with the Jewish practices of his time, Mark interprets Jesus in the light of the Hebrew Bible. He uses Scripture as an interpretive framework. At the same time, he shows Jesus reinterpreting Scripture. Out of this two-way exchange, Mark offers us a Wisdom book.

Like other Wisdom books, Mark's Gospel derives its meaning from the Hebrew Bible. It takes place, for the most part, in the everyday settings of sea and synagogue, home and table. Its central figure, Jesus, offers wisdom in parables, riddles, and short pithy sayings called aphorisms. At the same time, Mark shows Jesus to be not only a teacher of Wisdom but Wisdom itself. Jesus calls his followers to an unconventional wisdom, a way of living (and a way of dying) that he himself exemplifies.

In modern terms, Mark's work is theological. As such, it is purposefully put together. An attentive reader cannot fail to notice Mark's craft: the repetition of certain significant words and the shaping of the narrative into symbolic events and meaningful patterns. There is a theological focus to his overall design.

## Key words

Mark is given to the repetition of certain key words or phrases. For example, he uses some form of the verb "release" to indicate both the forgiveness of sin and the healing of a disease. In chapter 1 he says that John the Baptist was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the *release*\* of sins" (1:4). Later in the same chapter, when Jesus cures Simon's mother-in-law, Mark says, "the fever *released*\* her" (1:31). In chapter 2, when Mark describes Jesus' healing of the paralytic, he notes that Jesus said, "Child, your sins are *released*" (2:5). The word is not translated this way because it is not idiomatic English, but the literal meaning conveys two aspects of Mark's interpretation of Jesus. First, it suggests an equation between healing and forgiveness. Second, it indicates Mark's view that Jesus continually sets people free. At the end of chapter 7, when Mark shows Jesus engaged in a healing action that summarizes much of what has gone before, he calls attention to the importance of the episode by quoting Jesus in Aramaic: *Ephphatha!*—that is, "Be opened" or, literally, "Be *released*"\* (7:34).

In chapter 15, Mark returns to the theme, using it in an ironic way as part of

the speech of Pilate. As Pilate strives to please the crowd, he keeps asking them which prisoner he should “release” to them (15:9, 11) until he finally “releases” Barabbas (15:15). When Jesus dies, however, Mark says he “released” his last breath (15:37), thus implying that in dying, Jesus himself is set free.

The various forms of “rise up” or “be raised” are significant because together they form a running refrain that points to Jesus’ resurrection. Mark uses the phrase “raised up” repeatedly. In chapter 6, for example, when Herod is speculating on the identity of Jesus, he says, “It is John whom I beheaded. He has been raised up” (6:16). By using the word here, Mark hints at the future “raising up” of Jesus. In chapter 14, Mark notes that Jesus says to his disciples, “After I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee” (14:28). At the end of his Gospel, Mark indicates that an angel repeats these words to the women who came to the tomb: “He has been raised; he is not here” (16:6). In other places, Mark consistently uses some form of the same verb to denote the effect of Jesus’ healing miracles. Unfortunately, English translations often blur this meaningful refrain by using synonyms. As a consequence, this commentary will go out of its way to call the reader’s attention to its presence.

When Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law, for example, Mark says he “raised her up”\* (1:31). When Jesus cures the paralytic, Mark notes that Jesus said, “Rise up”\* (2:11). Jesus uses the exact same words to the man with the withered hand (3:3) and to Jairus’s daughter, the little girl whom everyone had given up for dead (5:41). By using this word again and again, Mark suggests that Jesus’ healing miracles are related to the great miracle of his resurrection.

Another word that is important to Mark is “straightway.” The word sounds odd to modern ears, and most English translations, including the New American Bible, either translate it as “immediately” or “at once” or omit it entirely. But it echoes the message of the prophetic voice in chapter 1 that cries out in the desert, telling the people to prepare for God’s coming by making “straight” his “ways” (1:3). Mark was so intrigued by this pun (which works in both Greek and English) that he uses it forty-three times in his Gospel.

In the first part of his Gospel (chs. 1–8), Mark uses the word to signal an act of moral urgency. In the first chapter alone, Mark uses this word eleven times. Mark says that Jesus ascended from the baptismal waters “straightway”\* (1:10). The Spirit drives Jesus into the desert “straightway” (1:12). When Jesus calls Andrew and Simon, they leave their nets “straightway” (1:18), and Jesus calls to James and John “straightway” (1:20). He goes into the synagogue “straightway” (1:21), where “straightway” he is approached by a man with an unclean spirit



(1:23). Jesus' reputation spreads everywhere "straightway" (1:28). When he leaves the synagogue, Jesus proceeds "straightway" to the house of Simon's mother-in-law (1:29), where "straightway" Simon and Andrew tell Jesus about her sickness (1:30). When Jesus touches the leper, "the leprosy left him *straightway*" (1:42), and "being deeply moved," Jesus "*straightway* sent him forth" (1:43). In the first chapter everything happens as it should, and God's ways are made straight.

In the passion narrative of the Gospel, Mark uses the word sparsely and ironically. Judas arrives to betray Jesus "straightway"\* (14:43) and approaches him with a kiss "straightway" (14:43). After he has denied Jesus three times, Peter hears the second cockcrow "straightway" (14:72). The high priest calls the council to condemn Jesus "straightway" (15:1). If one recalls Mark's earlier use of the word, the irony here seems heavy. At the same time, by using it Mark is signaling a larger irony by which, in spite of all appearances, God's plan is going straight.

Another key word translated literally in this commentary is *ecstasy*. If one analyzes the elements of this word, one sees that it is made up of two parts—*ek*, which means "out" in Greek, and *stasis*, which is related to the Greek word for "stand." Thus to experience ecstasy means to "stand outside" oneself, to be outside one's normal state of being. Mark uses one form of this word when he wants to indicate that someone is "out of his mind." When Jesus cures the paralytic, for example, Mark first describes his cure as a kind of resurrection, saying that the man "*rose up,\** picked up his mat *straightway*, and went away in the sight of everyone" (2:12a). He then says, "They were all *out of their minds\** and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this' " (2:12b). A similar use occurs in chapter 3 when Mark says that those close to Jesus thought that Jesus was "*out of his mind*" (3:21).

Mark uses a different form of the same word to indicate moments when something Jesus does or says causes people to experience an abnormal state of awareness and joy. He uses both forms of the word to describe the scene in which Jesus raises up the daughter of Jairus. When Jesus arrives, people are already lamenting her death. Then, Mark tells us, "[He] said to her, '*Talitha koum,*' which means 'Little girl, *rise up\*!*' " Then Mark describes the reaction of those witnessing this event: "The girl, a child of twelve, *rose up straightway\** and walked around. At that, they were *out of their minds with ecstasy\**" (5:41-42).

At the end of the Gospel, when three women come to Jesus' tomb to anoint

him, they discover that his body is not there, and a young man in white tells them, “He has been raised” (16:6). Mark then describes their response as one of “trembling and *ecstasy*” (16:8). Mark has prepared his readers for this response by the earlier episodes. Like the crowd that witnessed the paralytic rise up from his mat and the crowd that saw the dead child come back to life, the women are overwhelmed by joy.

By means of these episodes, linked by the word “ecstasy,” Mark indicates the way in which realization of God’s power to restore life transforms the human consciousness.

### **Patterns and design**

Mark shapes his narrative in patterns of twos and threes. The reader will be first aware of doublets. Sometimes this is a matter of repeating episodes; sometimes it is a matter of echoing words. There are, for example, two instances in Mark when Jesus calms the sea (chs. 4 and 6). Twice he multiplies bread for a hungry crowd (chs. 6 and 8). There are two occasions when people discuss who Jesus is (chs. 6 and 8). There are two instances in which Jesus gives specific instructions to his disciples (chs. 6 and 8). And there are numerous other examples, which this commentary will point out along the way.

At the end of chapter 8, Mark seems to give a reason for his method when he describes Jesus’ healing of a blind man in two stages. Here he dramatizes the idea that the blind man cannot shift from darkness to vision all at once; he needs to go through a process of coming to sight. In the same way, careful readers will find that each repetition enlarges their understanding. At the conclusion of the commentary, we will talk about how Mark’s whole Gospel is divided into two parts and how Mark has worked out this structure to shift the reader’s perceptions from a conventional to an unconventional way of seeing.

Mark also likes to pattern things in threes. There are three healing miracles, for example, in chapter 1, three questions asked of Jesus in chapter 2, three seed parables in chapter 4. Jesus makes three predictions of his death (in chs. 8, 9, and 10). Three times Mark shows Jesus being called “the beloved son” (in chs. 1, 9, and 12). Jesus has three chief disciples (Peter, James, and John), whom he takes with him on three key occasions (the raising of Jairus’s daughter in chapter 5, his transfiguration in chapter 9, and his agony in the garden in chapter 14). There are also three key anonymous women who are healed in the first part of the Gospel (in chs. 1 and 5). In the second part, three women (two Marys and Salome) follow Jesus to Jerusalem, watch where he is laid in the tomb, and then come to

anoint him (chs. 15 and 16).

As with the doublets, there are numerous other examples, which we will note as we go along. If readers become alert to this pattern, they will see that Mark always uses the middle of these triads to shed light on the other two. Again at the conclusion of the commentary, we will suggest how Mark's whole Gospel might also be viewed as having three parts. The middle of this large triad, shedding light on both sides, is the scene of Jesus' transfiguration.

### **Transfiguration at the center**

Given Mark's careful choice of words and patterns, it is surely no accident that he places the scene of Jesus' transfiguration exactly in the middle of his Gospel (9:2). The transfiguration of Jesus is Mark's way of imaging his resurrection. On one side of this scene, Mark shows the ecstatic response of those who see the paralytic rise up from his mat and those who witness a little girl rise up from her deathbed. On the other side, he shows the ecstatic response of the women who have come to realize that Jesus himself has been "raised up." The scene of Jesus' transfiguration overshadows both parts of the Gospel, emphasizing God's creative, transforming, transfiguring power to restore life.

Mark's Gospel is sometimes called "the Gospel of the Cross," so it is worth noting that the Transfiguration overshadows the cross. Mark arranges events so that the scene of transfiguration follows right after Jesus speaks to his disciples about taking up the cross, and it completes his meaning. Jesus says: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it" (8:34-35). Mark does not explain this saying but dramatizes the paradox it contains by following this call to "lose" one's life with this scene of transfigured life. Mark does not show Jesus elevating the cross for its own sake, but rather embracing it as a means to Transfiguration. In Mark, the whole teaching of Jesus is *death-and-resurrection, cross-and-Transfiguration*.

### **Conclusion**

Rich in Scripture, theological in purpose, and brilliant in design, Mark's Gospel invites its readers to become followers of Jesus' transfiguring wisdom.

## **NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION**

### **Literal or root meanings**

The Church encourages translators to return to “the original texts of the sacred books” (*Dei verbum, The Dogmatic Constitution on Sacred Revelation*, #22). That recommendation has been followed scrupulously in this commentary, to the point where the commentator often renders the meaning of the biblical words in a more literal way than the New American Bible translation printed above it. In each instance, the reader should be aware that the commentator has looked at the root meaning of the original word and consciously chosen a more literal translation over one that is more conventional or even more idiomatic. This kind of conscious choice is particularly evident in the four key words listed in the Introduction: “release,” “rise up” or “raised up,” “straightway,” and “ecstasy” or “ecstatic.” Liturgical Press believes that its readers will be enriched by being offered these alternative translations.

### **Capitalization**

In some instances, the difference between the commentator’s translation and that of the NAB involves capitalization. The reader should know that we have no original manuscripts of the Gospels, and that of those we do possess, the best were written entirely in capital letters called “uncials.” Thus all modern capitals are the choice of a later editor. Such editorial emendations are, like translations, forms of interpretation. This commentator has chosen not to capitalize certain words in order to highlight what she believes to be Mark’s theological view.

For example, she does not capitalize “son of man” because she believes that it is not used by Mark as a special title, but rather in its usual Hebrew sense of *ben adam*, which literally means “son of Adam” or “human being.” (She also sees it as sometimes following the Aramaic custom of using it as an alternative to “I.”) She believes that Mark’s habit of constantly associating the term with Jesus expresses his theological perception of Jesus as a second Adam. She does not capitalize “messiah” because she wants to emphasize that Mark redefined that term in the process of using it, and she would like to encourage the reader to reflect on that redefinition. She does not capitalize “holy spirit” because she wants to remind the reader of its use throughout the Hebrew Bible. While the modern Christian of course sees this phrase in relation to the Trinitarian understanding of the fourth-century creed, Mark’s first-century audience would have heard it in terms of the biblical tradition they knew. Again Liturgical Press hopes that the reader’s grasp of the depth of Mark’s text will be enhanced by these alternative understandings.

# COMMENTARY

## BEGINNING

### *Mark 1:1-45*

#### **1:1 Beginning**

In the Greek text of Mark, the word “beginning” has nothing in front of it, neither “the” nor “a”; the Gospel starts abruptly with the simple word “Beginning.” By this device Mark calls attention to this word and emphasizes it. In this way he recalls the opening of the Hebrew Bible—“In the beginning”—the moment of Creation. In Jewish tradition the word “beginning” was equated with Wisdom, because in the book of Proverbs personified Wisdom says, “The LORD made me *the beginning* of his way” (Prov 8:22). So some Jewish teachers paraphrased Genesis 1:1 to read, “In *Wisdom* God created the heavens and the earth.” Mark’s opening is thus rich in meaning, identifying the gospel (or “good news”) of Jesus with Wisdom, and that Wisdom with a new Creation.

#### **1:2-3 As it is written**

Mark brings together here three voices from the Hebrew Scripture. The messenger who “goes ahead” suggests the angel God sent to lead his people to freedom in the story of the Exodus (23:20). The messenger sent to “prepare the way” suggests the figure whom God promises through the prophet Malachi and who will purge the people of their sins (Mal 3:1). The “voice of one crying out in the desert” is the herald described by Isaiah who is to give “comfort” to God’s people (Isa 40:1). In just two verses Mark sums up a biblical tradition whereby angelic or human figures are sent to draw the people to God through preparation, through purgation, and through comfort. The messenger here is John the Baptist, who appears, in the next verse, as Isaiah’s “voice . . . crying out in the desert.”

#### **1:4-8 John the Baptist**

The description of John in 1:6 makes him resemble Elijah, who is similarly dressed in the Second Book of Kings (1:8). It was said that Elijah never died but ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs 2:11). By interpreting John as another Elijah, Mark indicates John’s greatness as a prophet. Elijah passed on his gift as a prophet to a successor, Elisha; so here, Mark introduces Elijah as a prophet who will be succeeded by another—Jesus. In the Elijah-Elisha stories, however, Elijah is pictured as the greater prophet; here, John’s proclamation

about Jesus reverses that order. The Elijah-Elisha context places Jesus in the tradition of the prophets, with their long habit of pressing for religious reform.

### **1:9-11 The baptism of Jesus**

The scene that Mark portrays reinforces the idea that Creation is happening again: as in Genesis 1, God's spirit hovers over the waters. In describing the opening of the heavens, Mark uses an unusual word for that opening that means "rend"\* or "split apart"\*; he uses the word again near the end of his Gospel when he describes the splitting open of the sanctuary veil after Jesus' death (15:38). The echoing word links the two scenes, suggesting that Jesus is opening up God's dwelling place.

In a Jewish writing of the time (*The Testament of Judah*) the heavens are opened "to pour out the spirit as a blessing of the holy Father." Here God's spirit descends "like a dove," a term used for the beloved in the Song of Songs. The idea of God's beloved becomes explicit here in the "voice from the heavens" saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

The phrase "beloved Son" also brings to mind the story of Isaac, where God asks Abraham to "take your son, your only son, your beloved son" and offer him up as a sacrifice (Gen 22:2). In ancient Passover liturgy, Isaac's sacrifice is referred to as a voluntary act on Isaac's part; Isaac merges with the Passover lamb as it is said that Isaac's blood was placed on the doorposts so that the angel of death would spare the Israelites. So the echo here points to Jesus' sacrificial death and its saving consequences.

### **1:12-13 Temptation in the desert**

As the baptism scene recapitulates the opening of Genesis, so the reference to temptation for "forty days in the desert" encapsulates the key experience of Israel in the book of Exodus. There is no suggestion here, however, that Jesus' encounter with Satan involves a struggle. Rather, Mark gives us a static picture, the human figure of Jesus steadfast between "wild beasts" and ministering angels. It is an icon of original humanity, only this time not sinning.

### **1:14-15 "The gospel of God"**

Jesus' ministry picks up where John's leaves off; "the gospel of God" suggests their continuity. While we tend to restrict the term "gospel" to the story of Jesus, Mark uses the term to refer to the broader narrative of all God's deeds among his people; it is the gospel or "good news" of God that both John and

Jesus proclaim. Jesus, like John, calls the people to repentance. In both Greek and Hebrew the word translated here as “repent” carries the sense of “turning” or change of heart. Jesus calls people to this change not as a warning but as a promise: it is the “time of fulfillment,” the time of God’s “kingdom.” In biblical thought, God’s kingdom is not a particular place but a condition of living according to God’s will. While it tends to be projected into the future, it can also denote a timeless state of being. Similarly, the “time of fulfillment” is not restricted to a particular moment but designates a realization of God’s presence. Both these ideas are further unfolded in Mark’s story.

### **1:16-20 The call of the first disciples**

In the ancient world, it was not customary for teachers to seek their disciples; on the contrary, teachers attracted disciples. Jesus’ action here is therefore striking, for it suggests the action of personified Wisdom, who, in the book of Proverbs, does go about calling her followers. Wisdom calls those who are in need of her—“the simple ones” (Prov 1:22). So Jesus here calls simple fishermen. As Wisdom promises her followers a higher life, so Jesus promises his disciples that they will do a more advanced kind of “fishing.”

The response of those called is equally striking. Without inquiry or hesitation, they leave both livelihood and family. Their quickness to respond is enhanced by a word omitted in most translations: Mark says that “*Straightway\** they left their nets and followed him” (1:18). As we noted in the Introduction (pp. 11–12), the word “straightway” echoes the message of the voice crying in the desert, telling the people to prepare for God’s coming by making “straight” his “ways” (1:3). The ready commitment of Simon and Andrew, James and John is thus shown to be the ideal response of anyone called by God. It is worth noting that we never see any of these disciples make this ideal response again. Throughout most of Mark’s Gospel they are singularly slow to understand or to follow Jesus. But Mark sets up this opening scene to suggest their ideal capabilities.

### **1:21-45 Three miracles of healing**

Studies of the structure of Mark’s Gospel have shown that he likes to link events, teachings, and sometimes words together in a pattern of three. When he does so, the middle event, teaching, or word always functions as the key one, shedding light on the other two. So here, at the conclusion of Mark’s opening chapter, when we find three miracles of healing, it is important to notice how

and for what purpose they are linked together.

**1) The casting out of “an unclean spirit” (1:21-28).** Although the NAB caption speaks of the “cure of a demoniac,” Mark’s text does not use the word “demon” here but “unclean spirit.” The use of this term indicates the perception that possession by evil is an unnatural or pathological state, a perception that predominates in Mark’s Gospel. In chapter 3, as we will see, Jesus implicitly contrasts possession by an unclean spirit with possession by God’s holy spirit (3:29-30). Here in the synagogue, it is because he sees the man’s natural state to be a holy one that Jesus heals the man by simply commanding the unclean spirit to leave him.

The unclean spirit, for its part, knows itself to be destroyed by the simple confrontation of “the Holy One of God” (1:24). It is significant that Jesus commands the unclean spirit to depart with the same word that he later uses to command the storm to “be still” (4:39).

The incident is enclosed in descriptions of the people’s reaction to Jesus’ power. They speak of his act of exorcism as “a new teaching” (1:27). Mark seems to imply that there is something new in Jesus’ perception that possession by evil is reversible.

The word that Mark then chooses to describe the crowd’s state at seeing the cure (here in verse 27 translated simply as “amazed”) is also part of a pattern of three. Mark uses it again to describe the feelings of the crowd that sees Jesus immediately after his transfiguration (9:15) and again to describe Jesus’ own disturbed emotions in Gethsemane (14:33). It might best be translated as a state of “shock” or enhanced consciousness.

**2) The raising up of Simon’s mother-in-law (1:29-31).** Short as this incident is, it is the middle and therefore key event of these three healings. Unfortunately, its full drama is obscured by the translation. The Greek word used to describe the woman’s condition (1:30) is frequently used to describe someone already dead, and the Greek word used to describe her cure (1:31) is best translated “raised up.”\* (It is the same word used to describe Jesus’ own resurrection in 16:6.) Finally, the phrase translated as “waited on them” would more accurately be rendered “served”\* or “ministered to”\* them (the Greek verb used is related to the word for “deacon”). So translated, the incident distills the essence of what Jesus is about: he takes a dead woman by the hand and raises her up, not only to new physical health but to a new spiritual status. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says repeatedly that he has come “not to be served but to serve.” This woman is the first person in the Gospel to act as Jesus does.



**3) The healing of the leper (1:40-45).** In his first miracle Jesus heals a man within the synagogue; here he heals a man who has been ostracized from the synagogue because of his illness. Jesus' relation to the synagogue here is complicated. On the one hand, by touching the leper he violates a religious prohibition against touching the "unclean"; on the other hand, Jesus sends the man back to the priests and the prescribed rituals for lepers. To complicate matters further, Jesus tells the healed man to "tell no one anything" (1:44) and yet suggests that the man's healed body will serve as a "proof" or "witness." And in fact the man does become a witness, spreading the word of Jesus' action. Jesus thus heals more than the man's body—he restores him to his community and changes him from someone who was alone and alienated to one who, it seems, cannot help bearing witness to God's healing power.

### **Summary of the healing miracles (1:21-45)**

In the first instance, the unclean spirit within the man cries out upon being confronted by Jesus' holiness; in the second instance, friends bring Jesus to the woman who is sick; in this third incident, the sick man himself approaches Jesus and asks for help. Both the first and last healings involve bringing someone back to acceptance within the synagogue. In the first, Jesus touches uncleanness within; in the last, he touches uncleanness without.

The first and last healings involve people who, because they are considered "unclean," are forced to live on the fringe of Jewish religious society. What point, then, is Mark trying to make by placing the miracle of Simon's mother-in-law in between them? Is he not suggesting that the place of women in this society is on a par with them? The woman, it may be noted, does not even have a name; she is only known by her relationship to a man—in this case, not even her son but her son-in-law. Situated between a demoniac and a leper, the caricature of "the mother-in-law," we might guess, was an ancient joke. But Jesus, we have noted, not only cures her but changes her: he "raises her up."\* By his use of this language, Mark signals to us that all of these miracles of healing are forerunners of Jesus' resurrection. Or to put it another way, Jesus' resurrection comprehends the raising up of all humanity.

### **1:32-39, 45b A rhythm of healing, preaching, and prayer**

In between the healing of the mother-in-law and the leper, Mark tells us that Jesus continually healed the sick and drove out demons, and, when he could, withdrew to "a deserted place" to pray. Yet he also tells us that when Simon and

others came to tell him that everyone was looking for him, he returned to the villages to preach, noting that this was his purpose. In this way, Mark indicates a tension in Jesus' life between outreach and withdrawal, or a rhythm of action and prayer. In the last part of the final verse, Mark suggests that this division collapses and that even in the desert Jesus is not away from the crowds that need healing.

### **Summary of chapter 1**

In chapter 1, Mark sets out the framework for his whole Gospel: the traditions of Creation and Wisdom. He indicates that in Jesus, God is initiating a new beginning, a new creation. Through Jesus' connection with John and John's resemblance to Elijah, Mark suggests that Jesus is not, however, breaking off from Jewish tradition or the Jewish Bible but is acting in continuity with the prophets. Indeed, Mark suggests in many ways that Jesus is reenacting the history of Israel. In the scene of Jesus' baptism, Mark shows Jesus to be God's "beloved son," as Israel always named itself, and like Isaac, who also represents Israel in Jewish legend, to be a son destined for a sacrificial death that will be saving for many. Through the brief scene of Jesus' being tempted in the desert, Mark recalls the Israelites' experience of the Exodus.

Mark also shows that Jesus embodies the Wisdom traditions. Through his dramatization of Jesus' calling of his disciples, he suggests the figure of God's Wisdom calling the simple to be her followers. Through his presentation of Jesus as a healer, Mark expands upon the idea of Wisdom as one who seeks to restore God's creation. Although Mark describes Jesus as teaching and preaching, what he actually shows us is Jesus totally given over to making people whole. Through the language of "raising up"\* in a key miracle, Mark indicates that he sees resurrection as the ultimate act of Wisdom's way of restoration or re-creation.

## **JESUS' ACTS OF RESTORATION AND RE-CREATION**

### ***Mark 2:1-28***

#### **2:1-4 Breaking through the roof**

As chapter 1 concludes with the description of a crowd coming to Jesus even in "deserted places," so chapter 2 opens with so many people gathered in Jesus' home that "there was no longer room for them, not even around the door" (2:2). As a consequence, Mark tells us, the four friends bringing a paralytic to

Jesus resort to opening up the roof above him (2:2-4). Although the vocabulary is not identical, there is an interesting parallel here to the heavens opening up at Jesus' baptism; it is typical of Mark's theological slant to suggest that Jesus continually opens things up. In the rest of this chapter, Mark shows Jesus opening up new meanings in sinfulness and forgiveness.

### **2:5-7 “Your sins are released”**

It is in keeping with this view that Mark shows Jesus telling the paralytic that his sins are “released”\* or “let go.”\* The word is not translated that way because it is not idiomatic English, but it is literally correct and more accurately reflects Mark's view that evil binds but God sets free. The same verb is used by Mark to describe John's baptism “for the *release*\* of sins” (1:4), the action of Simon and Andrew in *letting go*\* of their nets (1:18), and the fever *letting go* of Simon's mother-in-law when Jesus raises her up (1:31).

### **2:6-7 “Who but God alone can forgive sins?”**

This reflection of the scribes is sometimes taken as Markan irony—that is, it is suggested that by phrasing it the way he does, Mark makes the challenge of the scribes unwittingly point to Jesus' special and divine powers. But another possible interpretation is that Mark is making the scribes raise an old theological question so that he can then show Jesus answering it in an unconventional way. When we read the Gospels as eyewitness accounts, we often miss the carefully constructed rhetorical patterns common in the ancient world. It is worth reflecting that from Plato on, it was a common teaching technique to construct a dialogue between a master teacher and an obtuse listener; the questions of the obtuse listener serve to draw out the thought of the master teacher. So here, the question of the scribes serves as a catalyst for Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. And Jesus teaches more than once in Mark's Gospel that human beings are called to forgive one another in imitation of God's forgiveness of them. If one argues to the contrary that only God can forgive, one could use this idea to dodge the obligation to forgive others.

### **2:9 “Which is easier to say . . . ?”**

In typical Jewish fashion, Jesus often answers a question with a question. The question he raises here is something of a riddle, for while forgiving sins is clearly the harder thing to do, it is by far the easier thing to say because it requires no visible proof. (No one can check on whether or not sins have been

forgiven, but the cure of paralyzed limbs is either seen or not seen.)

By means of quoting this riddle, Mark also suggests that Jesus equates the act of forgiveness with the act of healing—that is, he shows that Jesus taught that to forgive someone is to heal them. Mark thus implies that all of Jesus' acts of healing are theological symbols of God's desire to forgive us and make us whole. The miracles of healing have a theological dimension.

In the ancient world, moreover, people often believed (as indeed, some people still do) that illness or injury was a punishment inflicted by God for some sin. By coupling forgiveness with healing, Mark shows how Jesus taught that it is God's will to forgive rather than to punish, to heal rather than to hurt.

### **2:10 “The son of man”**

What does Jesus mean by saying that “the son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth”? Many scholars have noted that in Mark, “the son of man” is the way Jesus most often refers to himself; they have then interpreted this phrase as a special title. But recent scholarship has pointed out that in Hebrew and Aramaic the phrase simply means “human being,” as in Psalm 8:5:

What is man that you should be mindful of him,  
or *the son of man* that you should care for him?

It has also been noted that in Aramaic the phrase was often used as a form of self-reference. Still others note that in Hebrew the phrase literally equals “son of Adam.” All these facts suggest that in using it, Mark was not giving Jesus a special title but rather emphasizing his common humanity. If he attaches any special role to it, it is not that of apocalyptic agent but rather that of second Adam, a representative of humanity giving us all a fresh start.

When Mark quotes Jesus saying that “the son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth,” he seems to be suggesting that all human beings have the power to forgive and that Jesus as the second Adam is modeling this role for all of us. This function of the phrase “son of man” needs to be kept in mind when we see it again at the end of this chapter (2:27).

### **2:11-12a “Rise, pick up your mat, and go home”**

Once again Mark chooses the same verb for “rise up”\* in a healing miracle that he will use to describe the raising up of Jesus. The immediate response of the paralytic is intensified in Mark's text by the additional word “straightway”\*; the straightening of the man's limbs is presented as one more instance of

“making straight the way of the LORD.”

### **2:12b “They were all astounded . . .”**

The word translated here as “astounded” is literally “out of their minds”\* or ecstatic. This response of the crowd is echoed in the later response of those who witness the raising up of a little girl (5:42) and, at the very end of the Gospel, in the response of the three women who come to realize the implications of the empty tomb (16:8). The experience of being ecstatic thus forms a pattern in Mark. Its implications need further exploring.

### **2:13-17 The calling of tax collectors and sinners**

This is the second time in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus calls disciples to himself; there will be a third calling in chapter 3. The calling of disciples is thus a Markan triad, and knowing the pattern, we can anticipate that the middle incident—which is this one—will be key, shedding light on the meaning of the other two. We have seen that in the first, the disciples respond in ideal fashion (“straightway”). In the third calling (3:13-19), Jesus not only calls disciples to himself but sends them out “to preach and to drive out demons” (3:14-15). We are also given the names of the twelve apostles, including that of Jesus’ betrayer. In this middle incident, Mark dramatizes the fact that Jesus calls not saints but sinners.

### **2:13-14 Levi**

The first to be called is Levi, “sitting at the customs post.” To understand the implications of this call and why Levi would have been regarded as a public sinner, it is necessary to know something of the history of the Jerusalem Temple and the Jewish priesthood in the time of Jesus and of Mark.

From the eighth century before the time of Jesus until the time of the Gospels, every major power in the Mediterranean world conquered the Jews and occupied Jerusalem: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Babylon destroyed Solomon’s Temple in the sixth century. Under the Persian king Cyrus, the Jews were allowed to rebuild it. In the first century, Herod expanded it, but the Romans destroyed it again in the year 70. Both the Greeks and the Romans were especially hostile to the Jewish faith because they felt that it detracted from their secular power. The Greeks under Alexander III began to undermine the power of the Temple by appointing the high priests. No longer was the priesthood the sacred legacy of Aaron, no longer was it handed down to the

special tribe of Levi. It became a political appointment, a job up for sale like any other appointment in the world of power and money.

The most anti-Jewish of the Greek rulers was a man named Antiochus IV. His attempt to wipe out Judaism through the banning of circumcision together with acts of sacrilege in the Temple occasioned the revolt of the Maccabees (whose victory and purifying of the Temple is still celebrated each year at Hanukkah). At the time of Jesus and of Mark, the Romans had taken up where the Greeks left off. They continued the practice of appointing the high priests, and they also attempted to desecrate the Temple in other ways.

In this context, tax collectors were hated, not just because they took money but because they took it from the Jewish people for the benefit of Rome. Levi, “sitting at his customs post,” is an apt symbol of the Roman corruption of the Jewish priesthood. Instead of being a religious leader as Levites had originally been destined, this Levi has sold out to the enemy and collects taxes for them.

## **2:15-28 Three questions of Wisdom**

**1) “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (2:15-17).** Modern readers sometimes regard this question as one that reveals the Pharisees’ legalism and rigidity, but we should recognize it instead as one that is not unnatural for any pious member of a religious community. We might ask ourselves: How readily would today’s churchgoers welcome an enemy collaborator into their midst? It also helps our understanding to realize that because the dietary laws were well defined in Judaism, eating with non-Jews was complicated and potentially an occasion for religious backsliding. The question, then, does not reflect so badly on the Pharisees; yet Jesus’ response does emphasize his radical inclusiveness.

Jesus’ response (“Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do,” 2:17) is designed by Mark to reveal more of his identity. His reply here is the kind of pithy aphorism that one finds in the book of Proverbs and other Wisdom writings. By showing Jesus speaking in this style, Mark is dramatizing Jesus as a teacher of Wisdom. Even more, when he quotes Jesus as saying, “I did not come to call the righteous but sinners,” he is placing Jesus in the role of Wisdom herself, who seeks out all those who have need of her, especially the unwise or the sinner.

Modern readers sometimes interpret Jesus’ statement by saying that he really meant the “*self*-righteous.” How, they think, could he possibly exclude the righteous? But their thinking betrays a certain literalism. If we realize that Mark

is intent upon presenting Jesus to us as God’s Wisdom incarnate, then we can hear these words, not as those of an ordinary religious leader, but as the speech of Wisdom herself—Wisdom seeking out the foolish sinner.

**2) Feasting or fasting? (2:18-22).** The second question asked of Jesus here comes not from the Pharisees but from the people. The question is typical of all people who have made a religious commitment, because it is natural for pious folk to assume that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things. If they see two religious leaders whom they respect doing things differently, they naturally want to know which one is right. Jesus’ indirect reply (again a question answered by a question) suggests that there are no absolutes here but simply seasons of appropriateness. His response is again reminiscent of the Wisdom writings—this time, of Ecclesiastes:

There is an appointed time for everything . . . .  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn, and a time to dance (Eccl 3:1, 4).

The point is bolstered by two more Wisdom sayings: “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak” (2:21) and “No one pours new wine into old wineskins” (2:22).

Like so many of the concise truths of Proverbs, these sayings are homey, seeming to arise from close observation in a domestic setting. They are not in themselves profound, but they support the perspective implicit in the reply about fasting or feasting that there are seasons in the spiritual life. This pair of sayings also suggests that there can be a tension if we try to force a new style upon an old one.

Many Christians have been tempted to read in here a contrast between the “Old Testament” and the New Testament or between Judaism and Christianity, but such contrasts would have made no sense to Mark. At the time Mark was composing, there was no division between testaments; what we now call the “Old” or First Testament constituted all the Scripture there was. There was, moreover, not yet an established Christian church that sharply distinguished itself from Judaism. So the tension between “old” and “new” here cannot be taken as a Jewish-Christian conflict; it is simply a wise observation about the unsettling effects of new patterns upon old ones. It is worth noting, moreover, that Jesus suggests here that his disciples will eventually and appropriately return to fasting (2:30). The time of the bridegroom is not here permanently—at least, not yet.

The image of the bridegroom suggests the Song of Songs as well as the marriage feast between God and humanity described in Isaiah, some of the other prophets, and some of the psalms. The new clothing and the new wine go along with the image of this feasting. Through this series of aphorisms Mark seems to be suggesting two different time frames—one present and one future. Jesus as “bridegroom” anticipates humanity’s future with God, and to the extent that his followers perceive him as such, they feast in the light of this future promise. But that future has not yet arrived, and the dissonance between that future promise and the present reality is experienced as the tension of new cloth pulling at old or new wine causing familiar containers to burst open.

**3) “Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” (2:23-28).** The third question comes like the first from the Pharisees, and also like the first, it expresses moral outrage. This time the outrage comes from Jesus’ direct violation of the Sabbath laws, which forbade all work of any kind, from picking grain to cooking it. Modern Christian readers tend to dismiss these laws as superficial and again condemn the Pharisees as legalists. But the Sabbath laws were designed to foreshadow the end time, when, according to God’s promise, there would be no work, no war, no illness, and no distinctions in authority and power, but all—male and female, slave and free—would sit down together as equals at God’s banquet and share in God’s rest. This “rest” was not conceived of as the mere absence of work but as a joyous sharing in God’s timeless presence. One did not heal on the Sabbath because symbolically the Sabbath was a time without illness.

Once again Mark uses a question that gives him the opportunity to set forth Jesus’ teaching on the Sabbath. Jesus’ teaching indirectly reminds the Pharisees that the essential purpose of the Sabbath is to anticipate and celebrate the wholeness for which God originally created human beings. Thus, he implies, satisfying human hunger is more in keeping with the purpose of the Sabbath than all the rules and rituals, even the sacred bread.

Jesus’ final saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” sums up this idea of original humanity as the apex of God’s creation. The final saying, “The son of man is lord even of the Sabbath,” should thus not be taken to mean that only Jesus is lord of the Sabbath; rather, it summarizes Jesus’ role throughout the Gospel of Mark as the second Adam, the representative of humanity restored to its original wholeness. It is saying that God made the Sabbath for human beings as a symbol of their final destiny—a love feast with him and with one another.



## **Summary of chapter 2**

In chapter 2, Mark dramatizes the way that Jesus, like Wisdom, restores human beings to wholeness, both physical and spiritual. In the opening incident, he shows Jesus equating forgiveness with healing. He next shows Jesus, again like Wisdom, seeking out sinners to be his followers. In particular, he shows Jesus singling out Levi, who stands for all the Jewish religious leaders who were selling out to Rome and thus weakening Jewish faith. By calling him to be his follower, Jesus/Wisdom is implicitly calling him, and Israel in general, to turn away from worldly power and back to the wisdom of their fathers.

Mark then sets up three questions asked of Jesus by perplexed people around him. These questions give Mark the opportunity to set forth Jesus' teaching on sin and forgiveness, religious behavior, and the purpose of the Sabbath. Mark shows Jesus responding in the style of Wisdom, both in terms of his aphoristic speech and in terms of his active seeking out of those who need him. The middle question about fasting or feasting gives Mark the opportunity to indicate the tension Jesus causes by his unconventional ways and how that unconventionality is the result of Jesus' anticipation of the future of humanity, when human-kind, restored to original wholeness, will be gathered at the marriage feast of God. By means of the final question, Mark sets forth Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath. In his response Jesus teaches that the Sabbath was created for the benefit of humanity and as a sign and foretaste of its eternal banquet with the divine.

By these means, Mark develops the themes of Wisdom and Creation he introduced in the first chapter. In the second chapter he shows Jesus acting and speaking like God's Wisdom, God's co-creator in Proverbs (Prov 8:30), restoring people to wholeness, unsettling people from their familiar ways, and teaching that human wholeness is central to God's purpose.

## **JESUS' CHALLENGE OF CONVENTIONAL WISDOM**

### ***Mark 3:1-35***

#### **3:1-3 Healing the man with a withered hand**

The image of something "withered" is a repeated one in Mark; it is part of his Creation theme, contrasting the withering of created things with their intended fruitfulness. In chapter 4, for example, the seed sown in shallow soil withers up (4:6); in chapter 9, "withering away" is one of the effects of an unclean spirit (9:18); in chapter 11, it becomes one of the seasons of the cursed

fig tree (11:20-21).

In curing this man's withered arm, Jesus is acting out the restorative role of God the Creator, a role usually assigned to God's Wisdom. Jesus' first act here is to ask the man to "rise up"\* (a resurrection word again) and to come forward "into the midst"\* of the community. The implication is that the withered arm of the man had alienated him (like the leper) from the religious community, or at least put him on the fringes of it. Jesus' action here thus defies the conventional shunning of the physically disabled; it is doubly restorative.

### **3:4-5 The purpose of the Sabbath**

This scene of healing is also used by Mark as an extension of Jesus' teaching on the sabbath. Mark implies that many who witnessed this healing in the synagogue were once again more concerned about the Sabbath rules than about the purpose of the Sabbath. He shows Jesus challenging them explicitly: "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?" (3:4) The large and absolute terms Jesus uses here seem to echo the moment in Deuteronomy when God sets before his people the large issues of life and death: "I have set before you life and death. . . . Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live" (Deut 30:19). Jesus' question here, in other words, is framed so as to echo this proclamation of God. His argument is clearly not a small one over specific rules but a large one over the purpose of human worship.

Mark goes on to describe Jesus as "looking around them with anger and grieved at their hardness of heart" (3:5a). This particular mixture of anger and grief is also reminiscent of God's feelings as they are frequently portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. God is not portrayed there as unmoved and immovable, but as loving, jealous, angry, grieving, and forgiving. "Hardness of heart," on the other hand—the unmoved and immovable heart—is a common phrase the Hebrew Bible uses to express the human condition of sinfulness.

Further, when Mark shows Jesus in the actual act of curing the man, he quotes him as saying, "Stretch out your hand" (3:5b), a phrase that echoes the moment in Exodus when God tells Moses to stretch forth his hand over the sea to prepare a path for the Israelites' escape (Exod 14:16). The echo here is evocative, suggesting that Jesus not only cures the arm but gives the man new freedom. In all these different ways, Mark describes Jesus as a reflection of God.

### **3:6 The Pharisees and the Herodians**

Mark sets up these two groups as particularly in opposition to Jesus. It is a surprising combination. The Pharisees were laypeople and scholars of the Bible. In spite of their later Christian reputation, they were in fact flexible interpreters of Scripture, believers in resurrection, and devoted to the cause of bringing Temple holiness into the home. The Herodians, on the other hand, were nominally Jews, but, in practice, collaborators with Rome; they were successively appointed by Rome to be tetrarchs of Palestine. The Romans called each tetrarch “the king of the Jews.” The Herodians were obvious opponents of Jesus, but the Pharisees were not. Some scholars have even wondered if Jesus is shown arguing so much with the Pharisees because he belonged generally to their school of thought.

It is worth noting that the Pharisees do not show up again in Mark’s description of Jesus’ arrest and death. Judas makes his deal with “the chief priests” (14:10), with whom the Pharisees were not connected. It is true that the Pharisees do reappear with the Herodians here, trying to entrap Jesus by their question about paying taxes to Caesar (12:13). Yet Mark, more than any other evangelist, seems to implicate Rome in Jesus’ death. We know that Matthew’s anger against the Pharisees is directed not to those of Jesus’ time but to those of Matthew’s day who were putting the Jewish followers of Jesus out of the synagogues. It is possible that the same phenomenon accounts for their characterization here. Thematically, of course, the plotting of Jesus’ death signals their negative response to the choice set before them between death and life.

### **3:7-10 The crowds that follow Jesus**

In between key episodes and teachings, Mark interweaves passages about the crowds that follow Jesus. These passages serve to balance the picture of a few Jewish leaders plotting against Jesus with the picture of the large Jewish crowds who push to be close to him.

### **3:11 The unclean spirits that proclaim Jesus “Son of God”**

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, the unclean spirits recognize Jesus’ holiness, and even before he commands them to leave, they feel instantly displaced by his presence. We have already heard one such spirit cry out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” (1:24). It is part of Mark’s irony that he shows the unclean spirits to have such clarity about Jesus’ identity, while he shows the human followers of Jesus to be

confused and uncertain. The fact that Mark shows them calling Jesus “Son of God” should not be taken as a proclamation of Jesus’ role in the Trinity, because that doctrinal formulation was not arrived at until the fourth century. Rather, Mark is indicating that the spirit world saw Jesus clearly as God’s image. (There is an early Jewish tradition that when God showed the angels the first human being, they saw God’s reflection so clearly that they knelt in worship.)

### **3:12 “He warned them sternly not to make him known”**

Much has been made by some readers of Mark over the repeated way he shows Jesus trying to silence those who recognize his holiness. This has been interpreted by some to mean that Jesus wanted to keep his identity hidden, and this theory is referred to in some books as “the messianic secret.” But such an interpretation assumes that Mark is simply recording what Jesus said and did; it gives no credit to Mark as a shaping author and theologian. If, on the contrary, we assume that Mark has a theological purpose in mind, then we will hear these admonitions to silence differently. They serve two theological functions. First, by showing Jesus repeatedly asking others not to talk about his holiness or his ability to heal, Mark sets Jesus off from the typical hero who demands recognition of his powers. Second, Mark makes the spread of Jesus’ reputation even more significant because it grows in spite of him.

### **3:13-19 The third calling of disciples**

As the last of a triad, this calling should be read in connection with the other two (1:16-20; 2:13-17). As we noted before, in the first calling episode, the disciples appear to be saints responding in an ideal way, but in the second calling scene, it is clear that Jesus is seeking out sinners. This time Mark expands upon the scene by suggesting the purpose of Jesus’ calling and by giving us the names of those called. Mark tells us that Jesus “appointed twelve” in order that “he might send them forth to preach and to have authority [or power] to drive out demons.” When Mark describes Jesus ascending a mountain to do this, he evokes the memory of Moses; when he emphasizes the number twelve, he evokes the twelve tribes of Israel. He thus implies that Jesus’ gathering and sending forth of twelve followers is an act in continuity with Jewish tradition. The actions of preaching and casting out of demons are in continuity with the prophets.

Some of the names of the twelve are also significant. Peter, James, and John are the three whom Jesus will take to see the raising up of a child (5:37), his

transfiguration (9:2), and his distress in Gethsemane (14:23). They also are given different names, always a signal in the Hebrew Bible of an inner transformation. Yet at the end we are also given the name of his betrayer. So Mark, in giving us a list of names, is giving us more than practical information. He is confirming what he suggested in the first two calling episodes, namely, that Jesus' disciples are a mixed lot, with one who would ultimately betray him and others who would ultimately be transformed by him. The reappearance of these four in other episodes of Mark's Gospel is worth tracking.

### **3:20-21 “He is out of his mind”**

Once again Mark links episodes with a comment about the crowds pressing in on Jesus, this time to the point where no one could eat. Mark then comments that Jesus' relatives (literally, “those who were close to him,” so perhaps his disciples) “set out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’ ” The Greek word that is translated “out of his mind” literally means “out of himself”; it is related to the Greek word for “ecstasy,” on which we have commented before (see 2:12b). By using it, Mark suggests that Jesus has a more heightened consciousness than those around him.

### **3:22-30 Satan, forgiveness, and the holy spirit**

By quoting the protests of the scribes to Jesus' exorcisms, Mark presents more of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. The scribes say that Jesus himself must be possessed by Satan in order to drive out demons. Implicit in their statement is the idea that good and evil are so distinct and opposite that the “good” person should not go anywhere near “evil” persons. This thought is a logical extension of the idea that if Jesus were truly a person of God, he would not eat with sinners.

Jesus refutes this point of view in several ways. First he asks the commonsense question, “How can Satan drive out Satan?” He goes on to make the observation that “A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand” (3:23-24). Next he uses the analogy of “the strong man”: “But no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house” (3:27). Some interpretations of this analogy assert that “the strong man” is Satan, and Jesus is the one who ties him up. But this would turn Jesus into a plunderer as well as a violent enforcer of his will—roles that violate everything we know of Jesus' teachings. Rather, it makes more sense to see that the violent intruder is Satan, and “the strong man” is the normally good

person who is bound and robbed by him.

This view is borne out by Jesus' final words here about forgiveness—that “all sins and all blasphemies” will be forgiven except the blasphemy “against the holy spirit” (3:29). What Jesus means by “the sin against the holy spirit” has been puzzled over for centuries. The problem probably arose from capitalizing “holy spirit” and then assuming that “the sin against the Holy Spirit” was a special offense. But Mark would not have been thinking in terms of a Trinitarian formula. He would have been using “holy spirit” to mean simply God's spirit, as it appears in Psalm 51:11:

Cast me not out from your presence,  
and your holy spirit take not from me.

The clue to Jesus' meaning here lies in the final explanation Mark gives: “For they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit’ ” (3:30). By means of this explanation, Mark stresses the opposition between an “unclean spirit” and God's “holy spirit.” As Psalm 51 attests, it was common Jewish belief that every human being naturally possesses God's holy spirit. Jesus is teaching that the opposite of this state, that is, possession by an “unclean spirit,” is thus unnatural or pathological. The “blasphemy against the holy spirit” is the denial of the fact that possession of God's holy spirit is every person's natural state. There is therefore no clearcut division, such as the scribes have implied, between good and evil persons; there are only people in varying states of pathology or wellness.

So Jesus, by driving out the unclean spirits, can restore people to their original wholeness. Sinners are invaded and bound by Satan; Jesus sets them free.

### **3:31-35 Jesus' “brother and sister and mother”**

In the final section of chapter 3, Mark shows Jesus redefining the meaning of family. Mark first shows the crowd around Jesus using the conventional meaning of “family” as those who are related in blood. Mark sets up this usual understanding so that he can present Jesus' unconventional teaching that “whoever does the will of God” is his “brother and sister and mother.” This statement does not, of course, denigrate his blood relatives but simply elevates the essential quality of their kinship with him.

Mark initiates here what will become a growing theme in his Gospel, namely, that people cannot be labeled according to prefixed assumptions; they

can only be defined by what they do. So no one can presume who constitutes a member of Jesus' family according to some external criterion. Jesus' brothers and sisters are simply those who act like him in relation to God and others. Later in his Gospel, Mark will show that this existential relationship with Jesus also applies to discipleship.

### **Summary of chapter 3**

In chapter 3, Mark shows how Jesus challenges conventional ways of wisdom. Instead of shunning the man who is alienated from the religious community by his physical disability, Jesus summons him to the midst of the synagogue. In curing the man, he not only restores him but restores the Sabbath to its original purpose of celebrating God's creation of human life. Instead of fighting with unclean spirits and demanding their subservience to his powers, Jesus treats them as a human pathology, and once having cast them out of a person, he asks for their silence. For his disciples, he calls together a mixed lot of people, including his future betrayer. He seeks out closeness with people to the point where his family or his disciples consider him "out of his mind." He asserts that all sins will be forgiven except the sin of thinking that the holy spirit is not the natural possession of every human being. He finds his family not in blood bonds but in spiritual kinship. In all these ways, Mark shows Jesus to be at once the restorer of human wholeness and the challenger of conventional wisdom.

## **JESUS AS WISDOM TEACHER**

### ***Mark 4:1-41***

#### **4:1-34 The three seed parables**

Parables are common to the style of the Wisdom writings, so it is in keeping with Mark's presentation of Jesus that he shows him teaching by means of them. It helps to know that in Jewish tradition a "parable" was a set form with a set purpose, not just an illustrative story. Most often it was a succinct way of suggesting what God, or God's kingdom, is like. And very often it formed this comparison by weaving together small pieces or echoes of Scripture. The suggestive analogy that emerged was one that interpreted the Bible passages at the same time that it used them to point to God's kingdom. The rabbis described parables as "making handles for the Torah," meaning that parables were intended to open up the meaning of the Bible—to help people "get a handle" on

it.

Because parables were generally considered interpretations of the Bible, it was common practice for Jewish teachers to place several parables on the same theme next to each other so that the student could reflect on different possibilities of meaning. It was said that they placed them together “like pearls on a string.” So when we see three parables on seeds placed together, we should assume that they are intended to be read in relationship to one another. This interrelated reading becomes even more urgent in view of Mark’s habit of expressing himself in triads.

#### **4:3-9 The parable of the sower**

This parable is based on the common biblical image of God as a farmer sowing his seed. For example, in Isaiah 55:10-11, God says:

For just as from the heavens  
the rain and snow come down  
And do not return there  
till they have watered the earth,  
making it fertile and fruitful,  
Giving seed to him who sows  
and bread to him who eats,  
So shall my word be  
that goes forth from my mouth;  
It shall not return to me void,  
but shall do my will,  
achieving the end for which I sent it.

And underlying the poetic description of Genesis 1 is a similar image of God creating the whole universe by his word alone. God has only to say “Let there be light” and “there was light” (Gen 1:3). In these passages, God is a sower and his word is the fertile seed that creates the world.

In the parable that Mark shows Jesus telling first, the sower’s seed is only partially successful. Unlike God’s word in either Genesis or Isaiah, the seed does not entirely “achieve the end” for which God sends it. It is thwarted by birds (4:4), by “rocky ground” (4:5), and by “thorns” (4:7). Only when it falls on “rich soil” does it produce fruit (4:8). This divided result is at odds with the purpose of the Creator in Isaiah and in Genesis.

The vocabulary used to describe these results, moreover, intensifies the division. The birds “consume” the seed (4:4); the sun “scorches” it, so that it “wITHERS” (4:6); the thorns “choke” it (4:7). On the other hand, the seed that falls



on good soil yields a superabundant harvest—“thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold” (4:8). The clearcut and exaggerated difference in results suggests an apocalyptic scenario—that is, a frightening view of the end time in which all people are revealed to have been predetermined to either eternal damnation or eternal bliss. Is that the teaching of Jesus here? We need to suspend our judgment until we have read the other two seed parables.

#### **4:26-29 The parable of the seed that grows by itself**

This parable is unique to Mark’s Gospel. If we read it in connection with the first seed parable, we find that it offers a picture so opposite that it is comic. In this scenario, the seed is so fertile it sprouts no matter what. Even while the farmer sleeps, the seed goes on growing, “he knows not how” (4:27). The words suggest something that has its own rhythm—“night and day” (4:27)—and cannot be stopped. Indeed, the phrase rendered here as “of its own accord” is literally in Greek “automatically”\* (4:28). On automatic, the seed grows larger and larger until “the harvest has come” (4:29).

The first parable would make us wary and worried about our final destiny. This second parable reassures us that all shall be well. This kind of uncalculating trust in God suggests the wisdom that “the Preacher” arrives at in Ecclesiastes, when he says:

One who pays heed to the wind will not sow,  
and one who watches the clouds will never reap.  
Just as you know not how the breath of life  
fashions the human frame in the mother’s womb,  
So you know not the work of God  
which he is accomplishing in the universe.  
In the morning sow your seed,  
and at evening let not your hands be idle:  
For you know not which of the two will be successful,  
or whether both alike will turn out well (Eccl 11:4-6).

The first parable presents the scary, apocalyptic view of an end time in which souls are predetermined to eternal bliss or damnation. The second presents the reassuring perspective of Wisdom that in spite of our limited ways, God is making all things work together for good.

This perspective is further emphasized by the fact that the line about wielding the sickle to cut the ripe harvest (4:29) actually echoes a passage in the prophet Joel where the harvest is sin and the sickle represents God’s vengeance (4:13). Joel is giving the harvest imagery an abnormal, almost perverse meaning.

Mark is reversing this reversal and turning the harvest imagery back into something positive and good.

As the middle parable, this second one is the key to the meaning of the triad. To understand the fullness of what Mark is presenting here as the teaching of Jesus, we need to look at the last one.

#### **4:30-32 The parable of the mustard seed**

The mustard seed as “the smallest of all the seeds” was proverbial in Palestine. What grows from it, however, while large for a plant (about eight feet), is not very tall in comparison with a tree. So the oft-repeated interpretation of this parable, that it is about a tiny seed growing into a huge tree, is misleadingly simplistic. Jews in Mark’s audience would have been struck by several other aspects of this parable. First, they would have been surprised that anyone would have bothered to plant the mustard seed at all because it was so common. Mustard seed bushes grow all around the Lake of Galilee. Second, in the description of branches large enough to give shade to “the birds of the sky,” they would have heard a direct echo of passages in Ezekiel and Daniel.

This echo, in fact, would have given them the real clue to the parable’s meaning. In Ezekiel, God plants “a noble cedar” so grand that “beasts and birds dwell in its shade” (Ezek 17:22-23). In context, this grand tree is clearly a symbol of the Davidic kingdom. In the Book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar asks Daniel to interpret a dream that includes this description of a tree:

I saw a tree of great height at the center of the world. It was large and strong, with its top touching the heavens, and it could be seen to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, providing food for all. Under it the wild beasts found shade, in its branches the birds of the air nested; all men ate of it (Dan 4:7b-9).

The tree echoes the forbidden tree of Genesis 2, while its heaven-reaching top and nourishing of all flesh suggest “the tree of life” sealed off in the Garden.

By means of these echoes of Ezekiel and Daniel, the parable connects the common mustard seed plant with David’s kingdom and with the tree of life in the first Garden. The real surprise in the parable is not the shift from small to large, but the paradoxical joining of the common and the ordinary with the divinely appointed grandeur of David and the divinely created nourishment of the original Garden. Through this imagery from the Bible, the parable suggests that the kingdom of God is analogous to something very common transformed

into something grand and divinely life-giving.

### **Summary of the three parables**

If we now read the three parables as a connected unit, we can see how they form a conversation about God's kingdom. The first parable presents a view of God's kingdom that was typical of apocalyptic writing of the time—that is, it suggests that God has created many people in this world but not all of them will be saved or arrive at God's kingdom. Some are destined to be lost. The labored allegorical explanation that is given in 4:14-20 may or may not be Mark's; many scholars think that it was added later. But whether it was or not, the parable itself invites that kind of exposition; it makes salvation the responsibility of the individual soul (or soil). The soil (or soul), moreover, appears predestined. There is no suggestion that the soil could change or that God's grace might intervene.

The second and third parables, however, present an entirely different point of view. The second parable, in fact, as we have seen, functions as a direct, almost comic refutation of the first, suggesting that no matter what, God's seed will grow and God's harvest will come. Its insistence on the unstoppable dynamism of God's seed prepares the way for the third parable, in which God's kingdom grows surprisingly out of common and ordinary seed.

It is worth noting that only the second and third parables are compared to God's kingdom (4:26, 30). As Mark presents Jesus' teaching, he does not introduce the first parable the same way. If we assume that all three parables must be read as a connected whole, then it appears that Jesus is not affirming the apocalyptic view here, but is going to some lengths to refute it. He is doing this in a way that is not familiar to us but would have been to a Jewish audience. He strings together three parables about seeds so his listeners will know they are interconnected. In the first, he gives the view that many of his day believed; in the next two, however, he undermines that view and offers some refuting wisdom. Through the second parable, he reminds his listeners of the wisdom of not trying to control everything, but to let go and trust in God's providence. Through the third parable, he reminds them that God created every human being (not just a few special ones) for the fullness of life.

### **4:10-13, 21-25 The purpose of the parables**

In two different places in the chapter, Mark shows Jesus talking about his reason for teaching in parables. His first response seems almost perverse. He seems to be saying that he teaches in parables because he does not want

everyone to understand him. But what he is actually doing is quoting Isaiah, and to understand his meaning, we have to know the context there.

The quotation comes from what is called Isaiah's "call story"—that is, it comes from the place in Isaiah where he recalls how he was first called by God to be a prophet. Every prophet has a similar story, and the stories follow a similar pattern. The prophet is always taken by surprise or put off balance by God's call. He accordingly always resists. Then God acts in some powerful way that makes the prophet realize that he has no choice. In Isaiah's case, he is first given a vision of God seated on a throne, worshiped by seraphim, who cry out, "Holy, holy, holy" while "the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke" (Isa 6:3-4). Isaiah's first response is fear: "Then I said, 'Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' " (Isa 6:5). God then sends one of the seraphim to him with an ember to purge his unclean lips. After that, God asks, "Whom shall I send?" and Isaiah answers, "Here I am . . . send me" (Isa 6:6-8). At that point, God tells him to "Go and say to this people":

Listen carefully, but you shall not understand!  
Look intently, but you shall know nothing!  
You are to make the heart of this people sluggish,  
to dull their eyes and close their ears;  
Else their eyes will see, their ears hear,  
their heart understand,  
and they will turn and be healed (Isa 6:9-10).

In context, God's words are clearly ironic. He is sending the prophet to the people because he wants them to "turn and be healed"; his saying the opposite only underscores how much he wants it. So when Mark shows Jesus quoting that passage here, we should also understand it as irony. Jesus' quotation of Isaiah links him to the prophet's mission and indicates that he, like Isaiah, is speaking so as to touch and heal hearts. He teaches in parables for that purpose.

Mark makes Jesus' intentions clearer a bit later when he has him compare his teaching to a lamp (4:22-25). In the Bible, a "lamp" is frequently used as a metaphor for God's word. The psalmist sings, "Your word is a lamp for my feet" (Ps 119:105), and the author of Proverbs says about one of the commandments, "The bidding is a lamp, and the teaching a light" (Prov 6:23). So here, when Jesus asks if anyone would put a lamp under a bushel basket or a bed, he is suggesting that no one would try to hide God's word. Further, he is indicating that he certainly is not doing so. By implication, he is suggesting that the parable

is a “lampstand” that will show off the light of God’s word. The rabbis also speak of the parable form as a kind of lamp by which one can read the Bible more clearly.

When Jesus then goes on to say that “there is nothing hidden except to be made visible” and “nothing is secret except to come to light” (4:22), he appears to be expressing the Jewish view that the Bible contains God’s revelation and nothing is hidden in the Bible except to be made clear.

The two proverbial sayings that follow—“The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you” (4:24) and “To the one who has, more will be given; from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (4:25)—have a parallel in the Talmud, the most significant collection of the Jewish oral tradition. In the Talmud, it is clear that what is being talked about is the measure of one’s understanding of God’s word.

#### **4:34-41 Jesus himself as parable**

The parable section of the chapter appears to close with Mark telling us that “Without parables he [Jesus] did not speak to them [the crowd], but to his own disciples he explained everything in private” (4:34). The implication of this seems to be that Jesus did not use parables in teaching his disciples. It appears to confirm the earlier statement that Mark quotes Jesus as saying to his disciples: “The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables” (4:11). Yet the assertion is puzzling, because so far in his Gospel, Mark has not shown us Jesus teaching any other way.

What kind of distinction is Mark trying to make between Jesus’ teaching of the crowd and his teaching of his disciples? In what special way has “the mystery of the kingdom of God” been granted to Jesus’ disciples? In the closing verses of chapter 4, Mark seems to provide an answer. He shows Jesus himself to be a living parable. That is to say, in the final episode of Jesus’ stilling the sea, Mark reveals that the person of Jesus provides an analogy to what God is like.

As in the parables that Jesus tells, this parable that he enacts is composed of echoes of Scripture. In this case, the direct echo is of some of the psalms that reflect on God’s power over creation:

LORD, God of hosts, who is like you? . . .  
You rule the raging sea;  
    you still its swelling waves (Ps 89:9a, 10).  
You still the roaring of the seas,

the roaring of their waves (Ps 65:8).  
[The LORD] hushed the storm to a murmur;  
the waves of the sea were stilled (Ps 107:29).

Mark, steeped in the Hebrew Bible himself, surely assumed that when he quotes the disciples saying, “Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?” (4:41), his audience would have heard the answer in their memory of these psalms.

In the first part of chapter 4, Mark shows Jesus teaching in the style of a teacher of Wisdom, teaching in parables. At the end, however, he shows Jesus teaching by his actions. He shows Jesus stilling the sea as God stills the sea in the psalms. He shows Jesus to be “like God.” He shows Jesus to be in himself a Wisdom parable. Those who are his disciples have been granted a direct encounter with “the mystery of the kingdom of God.”

### **Summary of chapter 4**

In chapter 4, Mark focuses on Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God. He shows him teaching in the style of a Wisdom teacher, using parables to shed light on God’s revelation in Scripture. He does so by following a method common to other Jewish teachers. He strings together three parables linked by the image of seeds. They are all based on the biblical image that expresses God the Creator as God the sower. Yet each one imagines God’s sowing and the results differently. The first parable imagines God sowing some seeds that will bear fruit and some that will not. The second parable imagines God’s word as a seed that will come to fruition no matter what. The third parable imagines God’s word as a seed that is common and accessible, yet grows to be shade and shelter for all creatures.

In between the parables, Mark shows Jesus commenting on the purpose of parables. He first quotes the passage in Isaiah where God (by ironically saying the opposite of what he means) indicates how much he wants his word to touch and heal the human heart. He next suggests that the parable form is like a lampstand that shows off the light of God’s word. He indicates that he speaks in parables in order to bring to light what is hidden in God’s revelation.

Mark shows Jesus asking the question of how to find an analogy for God’s kingdom. The second and third parables form one kind of answer. But in the final episode of the chapter, when Mark shows Jesus stilling the sea, he provides a different kind of answer. He shows Jesus himself acting the way God does in the psalms. He suggests that Jesus himself is a kind of parable, a living likeness of God. As a parable, he is like a lampstand that makes more visible the light of

God's word. He is a living metaphor that serves to bring to light what is hidden in God's revelation.

## **THE TRANSFORMING EFFECT OF JESUS/WISDOM**

### ***Mark 5:1-43***

#### **5:1-20 The transformation of the Gerasene demoniac**

No one knows exactly what Mark had in mind by “the territory of the Gerasenes,” but it was clearly pagan territory, being on “the other side of the sea” from Galilee and inhabited by people who tended pigs (an unclean and forbidden animal to Jews). There are fascinating echoes of Isaiah's description of a pagan people who, he says, were “living among the graves,” “eating swine's flesh,” and “crying out, ‘Hold back, do not touch me!’ ” (Isa 65:4-5a). So we find here in Mark's narrative a man “dwelling among the tombs” whom “no one could restrain” (5:3), and who was “always crying out” (5:5). He is not said to be “eating swine's flesh,” but swine do figure prominently in the story. In Isaiah, these pagan practices enkindle God's wrath (Isa 65:5b). Here, however, Mark shows Jesus treating them as evidence of unclean spirits, a pathological state that can be cured.

The narrative is also suggestive of Jesus' metaphor of “the strong man” in chapter 3. You may remember that there, Jesus observes, “No one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man” (3:27). Here in fact is a strong man, powerful enough to have pulled apart his physical chains (5:4), but nonetheless invaded and plundered by unclean spirits. Jesus' response is not to bind but to free him.

The exchange between Jesus and the unclean spirits reveals something about Mark's view of the nature of evil. First of all, like the unclean spirit in 1:24, the unclean spirits here cry out in protest at Jesus' appearance (5:7). Once again Mark indicates that they feel diminished by Jesus' very presence. Second, it should not be passed over that the name of these unclean spirits, “Legion,” is the name of a unit in the Roman army. Surely a Jewish audience would have been amused by this piece of wit at their enemy's expense. Even more, they would have found it a joke that these Roman demons ask to be placed inside a herd of pigs. The final act in this rhetorical comedy is the scene of the pigs rushing headlong into the sea.

The serious side of this story is the pointed suggestion that those who were currently occupying Palestine and meddling with the Temple belong to the devil.

At the time that Mark's Gospel was written down (probably the year 70), it would not have been safe or prudent for anyone to have said such a thing directly. But here and elsewhere, as we shall see, Mark insinuates his view of Rome.

After the unclean spirits leave him, the man who had been possessed reappears "clothed and in his right mind" (5:15). The details suggest that before, he had been naked and crazy; in ridding him of his demons, Jesus has restored him to himself. This restoration is such a profound change that it seems like a transformation. The ultimate sign of his transformation appears in the man's going off "to proclaim in Decapolis what Jesus had done for him" (5:20). Like the cured leper in 1:45, this man is transformed from an alienated human being into one who spreads the word of God's goodness.

### **5:25-34 The transformation of the menstruating woman**

The narrative of the woman who was suffering for twelve years from a menstrual disorder is interjected into the story of the twelve-year-old girl who appears to be dead. This structure of interlocking stories is a device Mark uses for a purpose. We will consider later what that purpose is.

The narrative of this woman is striking because in it Mark shows Jesus dealing openly and compassionately with a female condition that was taboo. Menstruating women were considered ritually unclean and excluded from Temple gatherings. Menstruating women were considered sexually unclean, so husbands were forbidden to have intercourse with them. In biblical writings, a menstruating woman is used as a symbol of idolatry. Thus, to describe a woman who had suffered from a flow of menstrual blood over a period of twelve years is to hold up for consideration a woman who in every way sums up "the unclean" within Judaism—ritually, sexually, and religiously. Her healing contact with Jesus thus has significance far beyond the immediate miracle. Mark suggests that she was changed in two different ways: first, "she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction" (5:29), and second, she receives an affirmation of her faith (5:34).

There are details in the scene worth noting. First, Mark underlines the spiritual significance of the story by his repeated use of "straightway." He tells us that "*Straightway*\* her flow of blood dried up" (5:29) and "*Straightway* Jesus was aware that power had gone out from him" (5:30).

Second, Mark says that the woman approached Jesus "in fear and trembling" (5:33). The phrase anticipates the description of the three women



before the empty tomb and should be kept in mind as a clue to its meaning. Clearly, the woman here is trembling because she has sensed the power that has healed her body; she is not frightened but in awe of it. When we read later that the women at the tomb were also “trembling” (16:8), we should remember that Mark has used the word here to signify the holy state of being overwhelmed by God’s power. Mark confirms this meaning when he quotes Jesus as saying, “Daughter, your faith has saved you” (5:34a). Mark confirms this further by showing Jesus bestowing on her a traditional Jewish blessing: “Go [or walk] in peace . . .” (5:34a). The woman has been transformed by Jesus from someone who was ostracized as “unclean” into a model of faith.

### **5:21-24, 35-43 The transformation of the synagogue leader’s daughter**

After the story of Jesus’ transformation of the possessed man in the pagan, Gentile world of the Gerasenes, Mark says that Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee again, back to the Jewish side (5:21). Here Mark begins the story of Jairus, the synagogue official who begs for help for his dying daughter (5:22-24). Mark interrupts that narrative to tell the one of the menstruating woman, then returns to it after she has been healed and sent off in peace. The interruption serves two purposes: first, it provides a narrative reason for Jesus’ delay in going to see the little girl, an interval that appears to be fatal (5:35), so that, dramatically, Jesus’ miracle here has greater dimensions than a simple healing. Second, it makes the story of the older woman shed light on the meaning of the little girl’s, and vice versa. Intertwined as narratives, they are also intertwined in meaning. In both cases, a female person is brought back from the brink of death.

Mark shapes the narrative of the little girl so as to show that this is a story of resurrection—one that anticipates Jesus’ own. He quotes Jesus as saying three things in the course of the story, each of them pointing to the story’s ultimate significance. Jesus says to the synagogue official, “Do not be afraid; just have faith” (5:36). He says to the weeping crowd, “The child is not dead but asleep” (5:39). And he says to the child herself, “Rise up!”\* (5:41).

Each one of these comments is geared toward transforming common attitudes toward death. To the synagogue official, death was not only an occasion of sadness but of fear, because it was believed at the time that death rendered the human body “unclean” and so made anyone who touched it ritually unclean. To the crowd “weeping and wailing loudly” (5:38), death was final, and to the child herself, life seemed over. Against these views, Jesus’ comments exchange fear for faith, suggest that death is but a temporary and reversible

phase, and call the child back to life.

Once again, as in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (1:31) and the healing of the paralytic (2:11), Mark uses the same word here for "rise" that he uses for Jesus' resurrection. Mark also uses key words to describe the reaction of the witnesses. What is translated here as "They were utterly astounded" (5:42b) is literally "They were out of their minds [or "beside themselves"] with ecstasy."\* The phrase "out of their minds" echoes Mark's earlier description of those who witnessed the paralytic rise up (2:12b) and the place where those close to Jesus think he is "out of his mind" (3:21). Mark will use the word "ecstasy" again at the end of his Gospel to describe the experience of the women overwhelmed by God's power to overcome death.

### **Summary of chapter 5**

In this chapter, Mark shows Jesus having a transforming effect on different states considered "unclean" within Judaism: demon possession, menstruation, and death. Considering these three episodes as another Markan triad, we need to explore how the middle episode is key. The first transforming miracle takes place in the Gentile world; the last is set in the home of a synagogue leader. The first frees a man from his demons and restores him to himself; the last raises up a child thought dead and restores her to her parents. In the middle is the transformation of a Jewish woman whose physical condition has alienated her as completely from Temple and synagogue as demons or death. In curing her, Jesus restores her both to herself and to her religious community. In effect, he brings her back to life.

## **THE RECOGNITION OF JESUS/WISDOM**

### ***Mark 6:1-56***

#### **6:1-6 Jesus as too familiar**

In the preceding chapters, Mark has repeatedly dramatized how people around Jesus are challenged by his unconventional ways. They are challenged by his "new teaching" (1:27) that possession by demons is a pathological state that can be cured (1:21-28; 3:22-30); by his transforming outreach to "the unclean" (1:40-45; 5:1-43); by his "raising up"\* of women (1:29-31; 5:21-43); by his calling of sinners (2:13-17) and his views on sin and forgiveness (3:22-30); by his seeming indifference to religious rules (2:18-28); by his priorities—by the way he continually places human need first (3:1-5); by his redefining the

meaning of “family” (3:31-35); by his teaching in parables (4:1-34); by his easy command of demons and storms (1:25; 4:39; 5:8).

At the beginning of chapter 6, Mark dramatizes the opposite: he constructs a scene in which the people in Jesus’ hometown find him too familiar to teach them anything. The questions that Mark quotes them as asking are typical of all people who expect (or want) their encounter with the divine to be unusual and spectacular.

Since Mark has been presenting Jesus to his readers as Wisdom herself, there is particular irony in their question “What kind of wisdom has been given him?” (6:2). With further irony, Mark uses their questions to set up Jesus’ Wisdom-saying, “A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house” (6:4). In this pithy observation, Mark shows Jesus also hinting at the destiny of his disciples.

### **6:7-13, 30-31 The commissioning of the disciples of Jesus/Wisdom**

Mark shows that the disciples are instructed to imitate Jesus in preaching repentance, driving out demons, and curing the sick (6:12-13). By implication, the instruction to be detached from their possessions (6:8-9) also reflects the simple lifestyle of Jesus/Wisdom, a point Mark will develop in chapter 10. Mark links this narrative to the scene in Nazareth by showing that Jesus tells them to expect rejection (6:11). Later in the chapter, Mark shows how the disciples return to report and how Jesus invites them to follow him further by withdrawing for prayer (6:30-31).

### **6:14-29 The death of John the Baptist**

As in chapter 5, Mark interweaves different narratives, so that each one comments on the other. As we have seen, one narrative strand is concerned with the disciples—how they are sent forth to be like Jesus and how they return to report. In between we hear the story of John the Baptist. Although at first hearing the transition may seem abrupt and the stories unconnected, with hindsight we can see that Mark has set up the narrative about John and his followers to fore-shadow the narrative of Jesus and his disciples. Mark builds upon the original connections he has made between John and Jesus (1:14; 2:18) to achieve this effect.

Mark uses the device of a conversation about Jesus and John to set up the connections. First we hear people in general comparing Jesus with John (6:14), and then we hear Herod making the same comparison (6:16). In both instances,

these voices speak of John as “raised from the dead.” It is only then, and in retrospect, that we hear how and why John was murdered by Herod.

The story is complex, dramatizing the convergence of many causes. The root cause is classic: a prophet (John) “speaks truth to power.” Nonetheless, we are told, Herod himself would not have injured John on that account, because he “feared John” and “liked to listen to him” (6:20). His wife, Herodias, however, angered at being denounced as unlawful, “harbored a grudge” and looked for the chance to avenge herself (6:19). The opportunity presents itself in the form of Herod’s birthday party, a seemingly innocuous celebration (6:21). There the dance of a young girl (the daughter of Herodias) leads to Herod’s extravagant and thoughtless vow: “I will grant you whatever you ask of me, even to half of my kingdom” (6:23). The plot concludes in a dizzying series of ironies: the young girl acts like a dutiful and docile daughter in repeating to Herod her mother’s murderous request for “the head of John the Baptist” (6:24). The king, although “deeply distressed,” accedes to the request out of a sense of fidelity to his word (6:26). The girl, dutiful to the end, took the prophet’s head and “gave it to her mother” (6:28).

Mark has told the story of John’s death in a way that illuminates how it results from a tragic and ironic mixture of vengeful hatred, chance opportunity, filial devotion, and vacillating weakness. As Mark tells the story, it is clear that while there is certainly some real evil at work (the unlawful marriage to begin with, and then the desire for revenge on the part of Herodias), the murder would never have been accomplished without Herod’s weak ambivalence. Even though he knew John “to be a righteous and holy man,” he had him imprisoned (6:17, 20), and even though he was “deeply distressed” (6:26) by the girl’s savage request, he gave the order for John’s beheading (6:27).

Mark’s narrative and theological purpose in telling this story is revealed in the conclusion: “When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb” (6:29). Mark has put the story of John’s death here as a fore-shadowing of Jesus’ death. The two stories are not, of course, exactly the same, but there are parallels. In the second part of his Gospel, Mark will show Jesus speaking some unwelcome truths to those in power, and he will suggest how some leaders (both Roman and Jewish) were resentful of this criticism, and so looked for a way to get rid of him. He will show the collaboration between these vengeful people and the opportunist Judas (14:10-11). But above all, he will show how it is Pilate’s weakness, especially his desire “to satisfy the crowd,” that results in his condemnation of Jesus (15:15).

Mark also uses this story to illuminate the difference between John's disciples and those of Jesus. Unlike John's disciples, Jesus' disciples do not come as a group to ask for his body and bury it. One person, Joseph of Arimathea, does come, but he is a member of the council that condemned Jesus and so a new and unexpected disciple. All the others have fled. It is with pointed irony that Mark makes this story of John and his faithful disciples part of the narrative in which Jesus' disciples receive their instructions.

Finally, Mark uses this story to foreshadow Jesus' resurrection. He does this through the opening speculation by the people and by Herod that Jesus may in fact be John "raised up." Before this, Mark has introduced the motif of resurrection through the vocabulary of "rising up" and "raised up" that he uses for so many of Jesus' miracles. Here Mark makes the resurrection theme explicit.

It is also worth noting that Mark sets up a structure here that he will repeat in connection with Jesus. He gives a hint of John's resurrection before he tells us about his death, just as he will tell of Jesus' transfiguration before he gives an account of his passion. In this way, too, Mark uses John's story to foreshadow that of Jesus.

### **6:31-44 The feeding of the five thousand**

The motif of food and of eating is a recurring one in Mark's Gospel. It causes criticism when Jesus is seen eating with sinners and tax collectors (2:16). It raises questions when Jesus and his disciples feast rather than fast (2:18-19). It occasions moral outrage when Jesus allows his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath, and the outrage in turn provides the opportunity for Jesus to teach that God's intent for the Sabbath is human wholeness (2:23-28).

All this concern with nurture is part of Mark's portrayal of Jesus as Wisdom—a womanly figure in Proverbs (and elsewhere), who ceaselessly invites guests to the divine banquet. In keeping with these motherly characteristics, Mark shows Jesus' first concern for Jairus's daughter, once he has brought her back to life, is that "she should be given something to eat" (5:43). That verse, which is the conclusion of chapter 5, prepares for Jesus' concern here for feeding the five thousand who have followed him.

Mark constructs a transition from the narrative of Jesus and the disciples to this narrative by noting that they were surrounded by so many people that "they had no opportunity even to eat" (6:31). There is an echo here of the earlier scene where "the crowds gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat" (3:20).

In the earlier instance, Mark tells us that those close to Jesus said, “He is out of his mind” (3:21). In this instance, Mark says that Jesus and his disciples set off “to a deserted place” (6:32) but could not keep the crowds away. Mark then describes a repetition of what happened at the end of chapter 1 when Jesus “remained in deserted places,” and yet “people kept coming to him from everywhere” (1:45b). Here again Mark dramatizes that Jesus cannot escape the crowds. They arrive at his destination on foot before he arrives at it by boat (6:32-33).

In the scenes that follow, Mark suggests in several different ways that Jesus is acting the way God acts in the Hebrew Bible. When Mark tells us that Jesus’ heart was “moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd” (6:34), he is echoing the place in Ezekiel where God pities the hungry sheep and promises to shepherd them himself (Ezek 34:11-15).

When Mark tells us that Jesus ordered the people to “sit down in groups,” the words literally are “meal-sharing groups”\* (6:39). This phrasing is suggestive of God’s instructions for sharing the Passover meal: “If a family is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join the nearest household in procuring one and shall share in the lamb” (Exod 12:4).

Through the threefold repetition of “deserted place” (6:31a, 32, 35), Mark emphasizes that the setting is similar to the wilderness setting of the Exodus journey.

Mark thus tells the story of Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the five thousand in the desert in such a way that it would remind his audience of God’s miraculous way of providing his people with manna in the desert. In this context, Jesus’ invitation to come to the desert (“Come away . . . and rest a while,” 6:31a) is suggestive of God’s command not even to gather manna on the seventh day but to share his Sabbath rest (Exod 16:23).

The overall thrust of the book of Exodus is God’s providential care for his people, not only in leading them out of slavery but in leading them into a space and time apart from ordinary concerns—into a desert place and Sabbath time where they could learn to become dependent on God for food and life itself. By echoing this crucial time in the history of God’s people, Mark suggests how Jesus reflects this nurturing aspect of God.

### **6:45-52 Walking on water**

In describing Jesus’ “walking on the sea” (6:48b), Mark shows Jesus acting like God in Job (9:8 and 38:16) and Sirach (24:5-6). Other miraculous actions of

Jesus have some precedent in one of the prophets: Elisha multiplies bread (2 Kgs 4:42-44) and cures the leper Naaman (2 Kgs 5:1-14); Elijah raises a young man from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17-24). But no prophet walks on water. In describing this scene, Mark is dramatizing his perception that Jesus resembles God himself. Mark intensifies this perception by showing Jesus still the waters once again as he did at the end of chapter 4. There we noted that Mark, through echoes of Psalm 84, suggests that Jesus is a living parable of what God is like. When Mark repeats the scene here, he makes that likeness clear.

The reaction of the disciples, however, to this second incident of Jesus' stilling the sea is markedly less perceptive than the first time around. This time, when they see Jesus walking to them on the water, they are not awed but terrified. (Here Mark uses a verb that means "fright," not "holy fear.") When the wind dies down, they do not ask, as they did before, "Who then is this, whom even wind and sea obey?" (4:41). In the earlier incident, Mark suggests that they might be coming to a deeper understanding of Jesus' identity. In this scene, however, he says that "they had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the contrary, their hearts were hardened" (6:52).

"Hardness of heart," as we have noted before, is a typical way for the Hebrew Bible to express the obstinate resistance of the sinner to God's outreach. Mark has used it before in his Gospel to describe the Pharisees' cold reaction to Jesus' healing of the man with a withered hand (3:5). It is striking that he uses the same phrase here to describe the obtuse response of Jesus' own disciples.

### **6:53-56 Recognition of Jesus at Gennesaret**

Mark concludes the chapter with a sharply contrasting description of the ordinary crowds. Most telling is the phrase "people straightway\* recognized him" (6:54). It is striking because the chapter opens with Mark dramatizing a scene in Jesus' hometown in which people who "know" him cannot recognize him as anything more than "the carpenter, the son of Mary" (6:3).

The importance of the recognition here is underlined by Mark's use of the word "straightway." While Jesus' own disciples fail to understand anything significant in Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, the crowds scurry to bring their sick, and like the woman with the disordered flow of blood (5:28), they "begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak" (6:56).

### **Summary of chapter 6**

In this chapter, Mark dwells on the theme of people recognizing or not recognizing Jesus as God's Wisdom. In the opening scene, he shows people in Jesus' hometown not recognizing him as anyone special because he is so familiar. In the last scene of the chapter, Mark shows ordinary crowds elsewhere recognizing him "straightway." These two extremes frame the chapter.

In between, Mark dwells on the role of the disciples and their variable responses to Jesus and to his actions. Again there is a framework of two extremes: early in the chapter we see the disciples sent forth to imitate Jesus in his preaching, healing, and exorcising of demons, yet at the end of the chapter we find that "their hearts were hardened," so that they remember neither Jesus' miracle of the loaves nor his earlier command of the sea.

The complicated, uncertain nature of the disciples is further dramatized through Mark's device of interweaving the story of John the Baptist into their story. The narrative of John's death and the possibility of his being "raised up" function as a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the same time, Mark sets up the courageous, faithful disciples of John as a contrast to the disciples of Jesus, who, in the end, will become frightened (as they are here) and run away.

And even while he is showing the disciples as repeatedly unable to grasp who Jesus is, Mark is dramatizing more and more clearly that Jesus is the image of God. Jesus feeds the crowds with bread in the desert as God fed the Israelites with manna in the wilderness; he walks on water as God does in Job and Sirach.

## **JESUS' REDEFINING OF THE "UNCLEAN"**

### ***Mark 7:1-37***

#### **7:1-13 Discussion of the sacred and the profane**

In Jewish tradition, there are clear boundaries between the sacred and the profane, between what is to be consecrated to God and what is to be regarded as secular or "common." The Jewish people see themselves as consecrated to God in accordance with God's blessing of them in Exodus 19:6: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation." The Ten Commandments of the covenant, as well as the subsidiary laws designed to support and protect them, are considered a gift to be cherished.

The laws concerning food are part of this larger context. Eating kosher food and using kosher dishes are an acknowledgment that all life, as well as the nourishing of it, is sacred to the Lord. The whole discussion in this chapter



should be regarded in that context and not as an argument over trivial rules. The Jewish custom of washing their hands before eating, and the vessels before using them, was originally more than good hygiene. They were also acts of ritual purification, signaling Jewish desire to consecrate this most basic of human activities.

Unfortunately, verses 3 and 4, which try to give an explanation for these washing rituals, are flawed in the original manuscript. Verse 3 literally reads, “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they have washed themselves *with the fist*\* . . . .” Verse 4 literally reads, “And they do not eat from the marketplace unless they immerse themselves, and there are many other traditions they carry out, the immersing of cups and pots and bronze vessels *and beds*.\*” No translator knows what to do with “the fist” in verse 3 or the “beds” of verse 4. No commentator notes that the word “immerse” here is *baptizo* in Greek. It’s a word that Mark uses for baptism but is ill-suited to this context. Many scholars think that this curious explanation of Jewish customs was probably added to Mark’s manuscript after the first century. Vincent Taylor, one of the best of these scholars, recommends skipping verses 2-4 entirely.

In any case, Mark uses a favorite device here: he cites a question by the Pharisees in order to set up Jesus’ teaching on what is and is not sacred. The Pharisees challenge the eating customs of Jesus’ disciples, just as earlier they had challenged their picking grain on the Sabbath (2:24). The language of this challenge highlights what is at stake: “Why do your disciples . . . eat the bread with unclean hands?” (7:5). The word translated “unclean” here could also be translated “common.” What is “common” is profane and ordinary, not consecrated and sacred. It is a consistent theme of Mark’s that Jesus is like Wisdom, who, in Proverbs, goes into the marketplace to find her followers. Like Wisdom, Jesus does not shun the common and ordinary but seeks to transform it.

In 7:6-7, Jesus critiques his challengers in the language of Isaiah 29:13. In context, Isaiah is expressing God’s frustration that the people of Jerusalem do not trust that God will save them from besieging enemies. God finds the root cause in the fact that the people honor him with their lips, not their hearts. Their worship has become merely “routine observance of human precepts.”

In 7:8, Jesus carries this accusation even further, saying, “You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.” In 7:10-12, Jesus gives a concrete example of this practice. He notes how some fail to honor their parents by withholding support for them on the grounds that the money is “*qorban*,” or dedicated to God. How much this was actually done is difficult to determine. But

the point of Jesus' criticism is clearly part of the larger theme of the chapter. Jesus is pointing out that human relationships are what is truly sacred, and no religious formula can rationalize that sacredness away.

### **7:14-23 What defiles a person**

Just as Mark uses a question by the Pharisees to set the stage for Jesus' teaching on what is sacred, so here he uses a question by the disciples to open up Jesus' teaching on what is defiling. Jesus says to the crowd that "Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person" (7:15). Mark calls this a "parable" or "riddle" (7:17), indicating that it is a saying whose full meaning needs to be unpacked.

At first glance, Jesus' saying appears to challenge the Jewish dietary laws. After all, if nothing that one takes in is defiling, then why refuse to eat certain foods? The parenthetical comment "Thus he declared all foods clean" was probably added later and was intended as just such an explanation. We know, however, from Acts 10:1-11 that the question of which foods were unclean went on being debated in the early church. And as Jesus goes on teaching here, we see that he is presenting something more morally complex. The complexity is contained in what comes "from within people, from their hearts" (7:21). If we grasp the saying as a whole, we realize that the emphasis is not on dismissing what enters a person but on demonstrating the greater evil of "what comes out" (7:20). As in much of Jesus' teaching, his intent appears not so much to disregard external rules as to focus on internal realities.

### **7:24-30 Jesus and the Syrophenician woman; the healing of the daughter with an unclean spirit**

Mark dramatizes Jesus' point here by showing him in pagan or "unclean" territory. Here Jesus converses with a pagan woman and exorcises the unclean spirit that has possessed her daughter. In so doing, Mark is showing Jesus engaged in activities that other pious Jews of his time would have found unconventional, even shocking. Mark softens the shock value of Jesus' outreach to the Gentiles by indicating his reluctance to become involved.

First, Mark tells his audience that Jesus "wanted no one to know about" his journey to Tyre. Second, when the woman asks Jesus to cure her daughter, Mark says that Jesus first put her off by saying, "Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs" (7:27). Jesus' language here indicates that he saw Israel as his priority over the Gentiles. The

“children” are the children of Israel. The term “dogs” was a common and insulting way for Jews of the time to refer to Gentiles.

The woman responds in a bold and witty way by accepting these terms and turning them back to Jesus through a play on words and ideas. She says: “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s scraps” (7:28). This kind of playfulness with words is typically Jewish. Mark perhaps wanted to dramatize that even someone as “unclean” as a Gentile woman with a possessed daughter was capable of parrying on equal terms with a Jew. The healing of her daughter (7:30) is linked to Mark’s way of showing her, not as unclean Gentile, but as a partner in wit.

There is precedent in Hebrew Scripture for Jewish outreach to the Gentiles. In the Second Book of Kings we hear how Elisha the prophet cured the Syrian king of leprosy (2 Kgs 5:1-19). But Mark uses language that indicates that Jesus’ exchange with this woman has more meaning than a simple cure. When the woman first comes to Jesus, Mark says she heard of him “straightway”\* (7:25). The word is translated above as “soon,” but as we have suggested before, “straightway” is Mark’s particular way of indicating moral urgency.

The words of the exchange between Jesus and the woman may also be weighted with special meaning. It was a common Jewish idiom to speak of God’s word as “bread.” And the word translated here as “food” is literally “bread”\* (7:27), so we might understand Jesus to be saying, “It is not right to take God’s word [the “bread”] and throw it to the dogs” [that is, to those who do not know how to understand it]. When Mark shows Jesus conceding to the woman’s wish, he may be indicating Jesus’ willingness to extend God’s word to the Gentiles.

### **7:31-37 Jesus’ healing of the deaf-mute**

Mark shows that Jesus continued his ministry in Gentile territory, this time on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, in Decapolis. In language that echoes the healing of the paralytic (2:3), Mark tells us that “They brought to him a man that was deaf and mute and begged him that he might lay a hand on him.” Mark then describes Jesus’ curing the man through a series of ritual actions known to have been used by both Greek and Jewish healers. The Aramaic phrase *ephphatha* literally means “be released,”\* which links it to Jesus’ saying to the paralytic that his sins are “released” (2:5).

Mark indicates that this healing has moral significance through his use of the word “straightway”\* (translated above as “immediately”): “And straightway

his ears were opened and his tongue was loosed from chains and he began to speak straight” (7:35).

By the use of the word “straightway,” together with the repetition of “straight,”\* Mark indicates that more is happening here than a simple cure. The whole event echoes ideas and language in Isaiah, some of which Mark showed Jesus alluding to in 4:10-13. We have noted before that when Jesus is speaking about the purpose of parables, he quotes the place in Isaiah where God says ironically:

You are to make the heart of this people sluggish,  
to dull their eyes and close their ears;  
Else their eyes will see, their ears hear,  
their heart understand,  
and they will turn and be healed (Isa 6:9-10).

And as we said earlier, of course God actually hopes the people will see and hear, understand and be healed. In a later book in Isaiah, when God is promising to save his people, God says:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,  
the ears of the deaf be cleared;  
Then will the lame leap like a stag,  
then the tongue of the mute will sing (Isa 35:5-6).

In this concluding episode of chapter 7, Mark shows Jesus doing what God has promised. By showing Jesus healing the deaf-mute, Mark is suggesting that Jesus is opening up people to God’s word.

### **Summary of chapter 7**

In this chapter, Mark develops the theme of Jesus’ relationship to the “unclean.” It is a theme that Mark touched on in Jesus’ first healing of the man with the unclean spirit (1:21-27); in his cure of the leper (1:40-45); in his eating with sinners (2:13-17); in the accusation that Jesus himself has an unclean spirit (3:30); in Jesus’ exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac (5:2); and in the power Jesus gives his disciples to drive out unclean spirits (6:7).

This chapter has a triad structure. A homily by Jesus that redefines what makes a person “unclean” (7:14-23) is framed by two conversations on the subject. Before the homily, Jesus has a conversation with men of traditional piety about what is sacred and what is “unclean” or profane (7:1-14). After the homily, he has an unconventional dialogue with a pagan woman and drives out

an unclean spirit from her daughter (7:24-30). Mark shows Jesus responding to the challenge of those who think in conventional terms by redefining what is “unclean.” Mark dramatizes this redefinition by showing Jesus’ outreach to the Gentile woman and her daughter.

In the concluding episode Mark indicates the significance of Jesus’ redefinition by showing him engaged in healing a deaf-mute, an action that symbolizes the opening of people’s ears to the meaning of God’s word.

## **SECOND SIGHT—A SHARPER FOCUS**

### ***Mark 8:1-38***

#### **8:1-10 The second feeding of a crowd**

Mark designs his Gospel so that themes, images, and even events are repeated more than once. With hindsight the reader becomes aware of a pattern of doublets. There is a theological purpose to this design that chapter 8 points to, which we will discuss later. The doublet at the beginning of chapter 8 is striking: once again a large and hungry crowd is gathered around Jesus, and once again he feeds them with scant supplies. Once again there are baskets left over. (Compare 6:34-44.)

There are also some interesting details of difference. In the first scenario, Jesus is “moved with pity” for the crowd because they “were like sheep without a shepherd” (6:34); his initial compassion is for their spiritual hunger. Here Jesus is concerned about the crowd because they have been with him “for three days and have nothing to eat” (8:2). In the first scene, the disciples approach Jesus about the situation (6:35); here Jesus approaches them (8:1-3). In the first scene, they distribute “five loaves and two fish” (6:38); here they distribute seven loaves and “a few fish” (8:6-7). In both instances, Jesus orders the crowd to sit down to be fed, but in the first one he suggests that they form “meal-sharing groups” (6:39), a detail that is omitted here. In both instances Jesus prays over the bread and then breaks it, but in the first scene Mark specifically says that he “said the blessing” over it (6:41), while in the second, Mark says he “gave thanks” (8:6). In both cases, Mark tells us that the people ate “and were satisfied” (6:42; 8:8). In both scenes, the disciples gather up baskets of leftovers, but in the first instance it is twelve (6:43), while in the second there are seven (8:8).

Is there any significance to these small differences? Many scholars have suggested that the first feeding is suggestive of God feeding his people with

manna, while the second is suggestive of the Eucharist. To arrive at this conclusion, they note that the “three days” of chapter 8 suggests Jesus’ three days in the tomb; that saying a blessing over the bread is the conventional description of the Jewish grace before meals, while the giving of thanks over it suggests the Eucharist (which literally means “thanksgiving”); that the number twelve in the first episode suggests the twelve tribes of Israel, while the number seven suggests the sacraments of the church. Yet there are many flaws in these arguments: “three days” was a conventional biblical way of indicating a long period of time; the Jewish blessing over food is in fact a prayer of thanksgiving; and the sacraments of the church were not numbered for many centuries. So it would seem that to call the first miracle Jewish and the second one Christian is strained. What is clear is that Mark wanted his audience to be aware of a miraculous event that repeated itself.

### **8:11-21 Double failures to understand**

What follows are two episodes in which first the Pharisees and then Jesus’ disciples fail to get the point of the miracle he has just performed. Although they are usually treated separately, it is important to see that they are designed to be parallel. They are also equal in irony.

If one is reading the Gospel as a literal account, one could, of course, shrug off the Pharisees’ request for “a sign from heaven” (8:11) by saying that there is no reason to think that the Pharisees were present at the miraculous feeding. But if one agrees that Mark has a theological design, then one perceives the juxtaposition of the feeding miracle and the Pharisees’ request for “a sign from heaven” as Mark’s way of indicating the Pharisees’ obtuseness. When Mark goes on to say that Jesus’ response was to sigh “from the depth of his spirit” (8:12), the reader shares that sense of exasperation.

The episode that follows (8:14-23) shows that the disciples have a parallel obtuseness. Mark dramatizes this in several ways. First, he quotes Jesus warning them against “the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (8:15). Conventionally, “leaven” was considered to be a symbol of puffery or pride, so Jesus is apparently cautioning them against being too self-sufficient to trust in God. The disciples’ response misses the point completely. Taking his words literally, “They concluded among themselves that it was because they had no bread” (8:16).

In describing how Jesus reproached them, Mark uses words that repeat earlier moments in the Gospel. At the end of chapter 6, when the disciples are

frightened by seeing Jesus walk on the water and still the storm (6:49-51), Mark tells us, “They had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the contrary, their hearts were hardened” (6:52). So here, when Mark shows Jesus saying, “Why do you conclude you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Are your hearts hardened? . . . And do you not remember when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand . . . ?” (8:17-19), we hear a repetition of that earlier moment when the disciples missed the point. The repetition serves to underline the disciples’ obtuseness.

### **8:22-26 The two-stage healing of the blind man**

Like the healing of the deaf-mute at the end of chapter 7, the healing of the blind man here has symbolic significance. Particular elements of that earlier healing are repeated here. In both instances, Mark tells us that Jesus took the person aside (7:33; 8:23); in both, Mark indicates a laying on of hands (7:32; 8:25); in both, Mark says that Jesus used spittle as a means of healing (7:33; 8:23). The repeating details are enough to alert the reader to the fact that one healing is linked to the other. On a deeper level, they are linked in terms of the context of Isaiah:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,  
the ears of the deaf be cleared;  
Then will the lame leap like a stag,  
then the tongue of the mute will sing (Isa 35:5-6).

In the earlier healing, Mark shows Jesus clearing the ears of the deaf and opening his mouth; here he shows Jesus opening the eyes of the blind.

The episode here also sheds light on Mark’s structural habit of repeating incidents. The blind man does not see clearly right away; it takes a second laying on of hands before he “could see everything distinctly” (8:25). In the same way, Mark repeats incidents so that the reader can see more readily what he is about. So he describes two episodes that show Jesus is in command of the sea (4:35-41; 6:45-51); he twice describes Jesus miraculously feeding the people in the desert; he offers two healing incidents that dramatize how Jesus enacts the words of Isaiah.

This kind of structure may be related to the structure of Hebrew verse, which often repeats an initial thought in varied words. In Psalm 19, for example, we read:

The law of the LORD is perfect,

refreshing the soul.  
The decree of the LORD is trustworthy,  
giving wisdom to the simple (Ps 19:8).

The second verse repeats but varies the idea of the first, thereby enriching it. One commentator has described this structure as giving us “A, and what’s more, B.” In the same way, Mark’s second, repeating episodes vary and enrich the significance of the first, making us grasp their meaning more clearly. We will discuss later the way in which the whole second half of Mark’s Gospel (chs. 9–16) functions as a second verse, clarifying and enriching the teachings and actions of Jesus in the first half (chs. 1–8).

### **8:27-33 A second discussion of the identity of Jesus**

The question that Mark shows Jesus raising here, “Who do people say that I am?” (8:27), is also a repetition. We have heard it before, although indirectly. In chapter 6, Mark tells us that people are talking about who Jesus is and offering various opinions: “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead . . . . He is Elijah . . . . He is a prophet like any of the prophets” (6:14-15). When Mark gives the disciples’ response to Jesus’ question here, he shows them repeating these opinions verbatim: “They said in reply, ‘John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others, one of the prophets’ ” (8:28). Mark then shows Jesus asking the question directly of his disciples (8:29).

The response that Mark shows Peter making—“You are the Messiah” (8:29)—is strikingly different from the other speculations. Most Christians accept that response in the light of their own faith today. They also tend to perceive it through the lens of Matthew, who first adds to Peter’s confession, “the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16), and who then shows Jesus responding, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt 16:17-18). But readers who see the four evangelists as four different theologians will be sensitive to the different nuances in Mark’s dramatization of what happens next.

In Mark’s version, Jesus does not commend Peter for his reply. Instead, he charges the disciples not to speak about him (8:30) and goes on to tell them, for the first time, how he will suffer, die, and be raised up again (8:31). Mark then describes Peter as so unable to accept this prediction that he “rebuke[s]” Jesus (8:32). Although Mark does not spell it out, the implication seems to be that Peter cannot accept the idea of Jesus’ suffering and death; it does not fit his idea



of a “messiah.” Mark indicates that Jesus, in turn, cannot accept Peter’s interpretation of who he is and that he rebukes him in radically strong language: “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do” (8:33).

Matthew also describes this second exchange between Jesus and Peter, but only after Jesus has commended Peter and told him that he will found his church upon him. What are we to make of this radical difference? If one is reading the Gospels as literal eyewitness accounts, one must resort to examining sources and speculating on how one evangelist took from one source and the other from another. But if one is reading the Gospels as theology (which the church now encourages us to do), one concludes that Mark had a different theological interpretation of this event than Matthew. Since Mark’s is the earliest Gospel, one might then conclude that Mark and Matthew were each responding to the theological needs of their own time and respective faith-communities. In Matthew’s time (probably a decade later than Mark’s), the Christian community was beginning to emerge as a church. (Indeed, the word is used for the first time here in Matthew 16.) Moreover, it was undergoing persecution and needed to be affirmed as a community under God’s care. In Mark’s time, the Jesus-community saw itself as part of Judaism. The pressing issue was not, therefore, God’s providence (which would have been taken for granted), but why Jesus was so important to them and what they meant in calling him “Messiah.”

Contrary to popular belief, recent scholarship has shown that there was no single, fixed concept of “the Messiah” within Judaism of the first century. The term, which in Hebrew simply means “the anointed one,” was used variably, both in the Hebrew Bible and in other Jewish writings that were contemporaneous with Jesus and Mark. Within the Hebrew Bible, it is most often applied to a king, but also to a high priest or a patriarch. Isaiah applied it to the Persian king Cyrus, who allowed the Jews to go home to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon (Isa 45:1). In the Jewish writings outside the Bible, the term is variously applied to a teacher, a warrior, and a judge. The Dead Sea Scrolls anticipated the coming of two messiahs, a king and a high priest. In short, one cannot pin the term down to a particular definition but must acknowledge that it was generally used to indicate any figure whom the faith-community saw as God’s representative, someone who was doing God’s work on its behalf.

The one constant in all these variations was that a “messiah,” as God’s agent, was always imagined as victorious in his work. When Mark shows Peter rebuking Jesus for telling them he would die, he is showing Peter reacting on the

basis of this assumption of victory and triumph. By the same token, when Mark shows Jesus rebuking Peter, he is indicating that Jesus was rebuking him for this assumption. Nowhere in Judaism before Jesus is there evidence of a suffering messiah. (Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" [Isa 52:13–53:12] was not considered messianic.) Only after Christianity was established did the idea begin to develop within Judaism. Here it is Peter's rejection of a suffering messiah that Jesus labels human-minded and not God-minded (8:33).

### **8:34-38 The second commissioning of Jesus' disciples**

Mark shows that in the first commissioning of his disciples, Jesus sends them out to imitate him in preaching repentance, driving out demons, and curing the sick (6:7-13). We noted earlier that when Mark interleaves the story of John the Baptist between this commissioning and the disciples' return from their first efforts (6:14-29), he subtly suggests the destiny of both Jesus and Jesus' disciples. The death of John the Baptist is a foreshadowing of Jesus' death. Since Jesus has just instructed his disciples to imitate him, the placement of John's narrative at this point suggests that they will also be called to imitate him in the yielding of their lives. Here in chapter 8 this indirect suggestion is made clear. Mark shows us Jesus speaking plainly about what is involved in being his disciple: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny self, take up the cross, and follow me" (8:34).

The chapter concludes with Mark indicating that death, however, is not the end of the story. He has just shown Jesus asserting the paradox that "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it" (8:35). Mark develops the implications of this paradox by indicating that at the end of time, Jesus will determine his followers accordingly: "Whoever is ashamed of me . . . the son of man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (8:38). Some would like to read "son of man" here as the title of triumphant, apocalyptic figure, but as in 2:10, it makes sense to read it instead as the Aramaic form of self-reference. The use of the word "ashamed" emphasizes the fact that the cross is not only a painful death but a shameful one, and the followers of Jesus need to be prepared for worldly shame as well as physical suffering. Yet Mark also shows how Jesus implied that the shame of the cross would one day be replaced by the glory of the Father's presence. Mark thus prepares the reader for the transfiguration of Jesus, which follows in chapter 9.

## **Summary of chapter 8**

In this chapter, Mark repeats some earlier events, images, and ideas. In doing so, he does not present exact repetitions but offers variations on the theme. It is a chapter of doublets. The chapter opens with a second episode in which Jesus feeds a great crowd in a deserted place. It is followed by the double misunderstanding of the miracle both by the Pharisees and by the disciples. It concludes with a second discussion of Jesus' identity and with a second commissioning of his disciples. In describing the disciples' failure to understand, Mark shows Jesus asking, "Are your hearts hardened?" (8:17) thus echoing the language of Jesus' dismay in chapter 6.

In presenting a second discussion of Jesus' identity and a second commissioning of the disciples, Mark sharpens the readers' focus. In the earlier discussions of chapter 6, Mark only hints that suffering and death will be significant parts of their destiny. Mark's main focus is on Jesus' power to heal and restore and on his passing on this power to his disciples. The emphasis is on Jesus as a miracle-worker and his disciples as potentially like him.

In chapter 8, however, Mark reverses the emphasis and begins to show that Jesus sees himself and his disciples as destined for a shameful death. Mark has shown Jesus speaking in parables and riddling sayings before. Here he shows him offering the ultimate paradox of losing one's life in order to save it.

This shift and sharpening of focus is symbolized in the two-stage healing of the blind man, itself a variation on the symbolic healing of the deaf-mute in chapter 7. Both healings take their meaning from the passage in Isaiah where God promises the ultimate healing and restoration of his people. Beyond that, the healing of the blind man has special significance because of the way Mark tells the story. By dramatizing the cure of the blind man in two stages, Mark indicates the theological purpose of his structure of doublets. The second time around, Mark strives to make the meaning of Jesus clearer. In the same way, the whole second half of Mark's Gospel (chs. 9–16) serves to clarify the first. The hinge between the two lies here at the end of chapter 8. When Mark shows Jesus speaking of a time of future glory, he prepares the reader for the scene of Jesus' transfiguration.

## **TRANSFIGURATION—NEW PERCEPTIONS**

### ***Mark 9:1-50***

#### **9:1-7 The Transfiguration**

Mark opens this chapter by quoting Jesus' promise that some of those around him will see the kingdom of God before they die (9:1). This assertion is often interpreted to mean that Jesus promised that the end of the world would come soon, or at least that the first followers of Jesus believed that was to happen. But such an interpretation comes from reading the text as a literal account. If instead one sees Mark's shaping hand here, one sees that he was preparing his readers for the transfiguration scene that comes immediately afterward. The Transfiguration does in fact present an imaginative rendering of what God's final kingdom will be like.

The word that is conventionally translated "transfigured" is actually "metamorphosed,"\* which indicates not just a change in appearance but a changed state of being. There is a sense of new beginnings. The time frame of "six days" (9:2) is suggestive of the six days of Creation before God's Sabbath rest. Mark intensifies the sense of a new creation when he describes God's voice saying to Jesus the very same words he spoke at the moment of his baptism (compare 9:7 with 1:11).

The reference to "six days" also recalls the period Moses waited before the divine voice called to him on the mountain of Sinai (Exod 24:12-18). Mark further links Jesus to Moses by describing Jesus talking with him. It is significant that Jesus is pictured conversing with the two greatest figures of Jewish tradition, Moses and Elijah (9:4), representatives of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus, whom Mark has shown to be God's Wisdom, is in conversation with the traditional figures of Jewish wisdom. It is a timeless moment. Mark emphasizes that he sees Jesus as one of them. He perceives Jesus to be a continuation of the wisdom of Israel.

This trio of great figures is matched by a trio of disciples. They are the same three disciples Mark shows Jesus taking with him to witness the raising up of the little girl (5:37); they will be the same three that Mark will show Jesus taking with him into the garden of Gethsemane (14:33). In terms of Markan structure, these episodes form a triad, and the middle or key incident is here in chapter 9. By noting that Jesus took them "up a high mountain" and "apart" (9:2), Mark indicates that Jesus is trying to lead them into his transfigured state. And as Mark describes the scene, they, too, for a brief moment, are changed.

Peter's desire to build three tents (or "booths"\*) may seem puzzling unless one is aware of the Jewish feast of Booths (or "Tabernacles"). It is a feast that follows the Jewish New Year and is intended to celebrate the natural harvest as a sign of God's final harvest. It is a feast of the end time. It takes its name from the

fact that it is observed by the construction of temporary outdoor huts or “booths,” which are decorated with the fruits of the harvest. When Mark shows Peter wanting to build three booths here, he is indicating Peter’s perception that he has entered the end time of God’s final kingdom.

Unfortunately, this meaning of Peter’s question is obscured by the translation “tents.” It is also canceled out by the conventional translation, “He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified” (9:6). The word translated as “terrified” here would be better translated “filled with awe.”\* If it were, one would hear the echo of the end of chapter 4, where the disciples ask each other, “Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?” (4:41). That Mark intends to signal awe rather than fright is indicated by the first statement he shows Peter saying: “Rabbi, it is good that we are here!” (9:5). A feeling of goodness is compatible with awe but not with terror. Mark’s suggestion that Peter was overwhelmed by the goodness of God’s presence is also his way of indicating that Peter, too, has been transfigured, however briefly. As Jesus’ transfiguration looks forward to his resurrection, so Peter’s state here gives promise of his future glory.

The words Mark uses to describe Jesus’ clothing are suggestive of the prophet Malachi’s description of God’s messenger when he comes at the end of time to judge, purify, and gather God’s people (Mal 3:1-3). In that passage God says:

Lo, I am sending my messenger  
to prepare the way before me;  
And suddenly there will come to the Temple  
the LORD whom you seek,  
And the messenger of the covenant whom you desire.  
Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.  
But who will endure the day of his coming?  
And who can stand when he appears?  
For he is like the refiner’s fire  
or like the fuller’s lye.  
He will sit refining and purifying,  
and he will purify the sons of Levi,  
Refining them like gold or silver  
that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD.

As we noted at the time, Mark alludes briefly to this passage in the very opening of his Gospel (1:2). Here he comes back to it by describing Jesus’ garments as “dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them” (9:3). By emphasizing that Jesus’ clothing is whiter than “the fuller’s lye,” Mark links him

to Malachi's prophet of the end time.

### **9:8-10 The descent from the mountain**

The vision of future glory fades abruptly: "Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them" (9:8). Jesus charges them not to tell what they have seen until after he has risen from the dead (9:9). And these disciples, who were the very ones to witness Jesus' raising up of the little girl (5:37), question one another about the meaning of the term "rising from the dead" (9:10). Their descent from the mountain is not only physical but spiritual. They have returned from a brief moment of insight to their usual state of dulled understanding.

### **9:11-13 Elijah**

Elijah is a recurring figure in Mark's Gospel. As we noted earlier, Mark describes John the Baptist in a way that makes him resemble Elijah (1:6). Biblical legend had it that Elijah never died but was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs 2:11) and would return some day to prepare God's people for the end time (Mal 3:23). In chapter 6, Mark tells us that people speculated that Jesus might be Elijah come back (6:15). In chapter 8, he indicates that some of the disciples thought the same (8:28). But in the transfiguration scene, Mark shows Jesus talking with Elijah, thus suggesting that Jesus is compatible with Elijah and yet distinct from him.

As further clarification, Mark shows an exchange about Elijah between Jesus and his disciples. The disciples ask why Elijah had to come first (that is, before the end time). Jesus' response falls into three parts. First he echoes the prophecy of Malachi that Elijah has to come "and restore all things" (9:12). Then he turns the question about and asks why he himself ("the son of man") has to suffer. Finally he declares that "Elijah has come and they did to him whatever they pleased" (9:13).

There are gaps in this reply. Nonetheless, Mark seems to be using it to clarify both the similarities and dissimilarities between Jesus and Elijah. First he shows Jesus acknowledging Elijah as a forerunner. At the same time, he shows Jesus comparing his own sufferings to come with those of Elijah.

The reference to Elijah's suffering makes no sense in terms of the narratives concerning Elijah in the Second Book of Kings. The reference only makes sense as an identification of Elijah with John the Baptist. So the exchange serves to confirm what Mark has been doing throughout his Gospel: he has identified John

the Baptist with Elijah and shown him to be the forerunner of Jesus, not only in his drawing people to God but also in his unjust suffering and death.

We suggested earlier that in chapter 6 Mark inserts the story of John the Baptist's death into the narrative of the disciples' mission as a subtle forewarning of what they themselves should expect (6:19-29). Here Mark makes the connection clear.

### **9:14-29 The healing of the boy with a mute and deaf spirit**

This healing recapitulates and incorporates a number of healings that Mark has shown Jesus performing in the first half of the Gospel. The exorcism of a "mute and deaf spirit" (9:25) recalls the healing of the deaf-mute in 7:33-37. The violently destructive effects of the unclean spirit (9:18-26) are reminiscent of the demonic possession of the man among the tombs in 5:1-20. Jesus' "rebuke" of the spirit (9:25) echoes his first exorcism of the man in the synagogue (1:25). The corpse-like appearance of the boy and the bystanders' insistence that "He is dead" (9:26) recall the apparent death of Jairus's daughter (5:38-43). And Jesus' gesture of taking the boy by the hand and raising him up (9:27) repeats Jesus' way of raising that little girl and bringing her back to life (5:41). The attentive reader has a sense of *déjà vu*.

Mark does not simply provide a repetitive incident, however. He adds to it a whole discussion of how unclean spirits can be driven out. Mark tells us first that the crowd, some scribes, and the disciples were all arguing about it (9:14). He notes that the disciples, although commissioned by Jesus to drive out demons (6:7), have failed in this instance. He shows the disciples asking Jesus why they have failed (9:28), and he provides Jesus' answer as the climax to the episode: "This kind can only come out through prayer" (9:29).

Accordingly, Mark places great emphasis here on the importance of faith as part of the healing process. He shows Jesus sighing over the disciples' lack of faith (9:19). He gives Jesus' reply to the boy's father: "Everything is possible to one who has faith" (9:23). He dramatizes the father praying, "I do believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24).

In the first part of his Gospel, Mark shows Jesus performing one miracle after another easily and, as it were, automatically. But here he indicates that miracles are not automatic events; rather, he indicates that healings are a process that involves faith and prayer.

### **9:30-32 Jesus' second prediction of his death and resurrection**

This prediction is the middle of a triad of predictions. The first occurs in 8:31; the third will occur in 10:33-34. The language is almost identical in each case, but not quite. In the first prediction, Mark shows Jesus speaking of being rejected “by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes” and then being killed. The passive voice used here does not indicate the agent of the killing. In the third prediction, Mark shows Jesus telling his disciples that he will be “handed over to the chief priests and the scribes” who will, in turn, “hand him over to the Gentiles” who will put him to death. In this middle and key version, Mark quotes Jesus as saying that he will be “handed over to human beings and they will kill him.” In this key version, Mark suggests that all humanity rather than a particular agent is responsible for Jesus’ death. Mark makes a point of saying that the disciples do not understand (9:32).

### **9:33-37 “Who is the greatest?”**

Mark underlines the disciples’ lack of understanding in the next episode. We have seen how twice before, Mark has shown Jesus telling these disciples that he must be rejected, suffer, and die (8:31; 9:31). He has shown Jesus making an explicit connection between his cross and their discipleship (8:34-35). And yet here they are, “discussing among themselves . . . who was the greatest” (9:34).

Mark indicates that they had some sense of the inappropriateness of their discussion by noting that they did not answer Jesus’ question but “remained silent” (9:34). Mark then uses their question to set up further teaching by Jesus: “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all” (9:35).

It is worth noting that Jesus “called the Twelve” before giving this teaching. This is the third time that Jesus summons and instructs the Twelve; in effect, it is another Markan triad. The first time, Jesus sends them out as apostles “to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (3:14-15); the second time, he instructs them “to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick” (6:8); here he instructs them to be servants. Mark shows Jesus progressively teaching his disciples how to give up the pursuit of worldly power. He dramatizes Jesus’ point by showing him elevate the child (9:36-37).

### **9:38-40 “Whoever is not against us is for us”**

Mark continues in the next episode to stress Jesus’ instruction on the yielding of power. He uses the reactions of the disciples as a foil for this



teaching. In this scene, the disciples ironically exhibit a worldly sense of competition about the spiritual ministry of exorcism: “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us” (9:38). Mark gives Jesus’ response (9:39-40) as further instruction in being one who serves others, not one who seeks to be superior.

### **9:41-42 The reward of a cup of water**

At this point, the text indicates that Jesus said, “Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ . . . will surely not lose his reward.” This saying does not seem to fit in here. Instead, it would seem to fit logically after Jesus’ statement “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me” (9:37). This placement is supported by the fact that the phrase that is translated here as “you belong to Christ” literally reads “because in name you are Christ’s.”

Mark has been showing how Jesus tried to teach his disciples that being like him means being like a child in powerlessness. And so it follows that whoever receives a child in his name—that is, welcomes the powerless in his name—welcomes him. It would make sense for Jesus to then turn it about and speak of his disciples as the “children” being welcomed by others. Assuming that his disciples will become the powerless he has asked them to be, Jesus goes on to say that anyone who welcomes them in his name (even with as little as a cup of water) will be rewarded.

This rearrangement of verses would also make more sense out of Jesus saying, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe [in me] to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea” (9:42).

The disciples’ complaint about someone outside their group driving out demons in Jesus’ name (9:38) would then take on even greater irony. Mark would be showing that instead of getting Jesus’ point about powerlessness, the disciples (one more time!) had missed the point and latched on to the phrase “in my name” as the key one. Thus the protest against someone driving out demons in Jesus’ name who isn’t one of “them.”

### **9:43-48 Being ready to give up everything**

The list that follows then makes sense as a continuing part of Jesus’ instruction to give up things that most people cling to—even, if necessary, one’s very limbs. The terse style in which these teachings are phrased is typical of the

Wisdom writings, as is the rhythmical pairings of contrasts: “It is better [to do such and such] than to [do this or that].”

### **9:49-50 Being salted**

Being salted “with” fire is a bit puzzling, but there is precedent in the Hebrew Bible for linking both elements with purification. We have already noted the passage in Malachi where he speaks of the final messenger of the covenant being like “the refiner’s fire” (Mal 3:2). In both Leviticus and Ezekiel, salt is connected with sacrificial offerings that are burned on the altar. Leviticus speaks of the “salt of the covenant”: “Every offering of grain that you present to the LORD shall be seasoned with salt. Do not let the salt of the covenant of your God be lacking from your grain offering” (Lev 2:13). Similarly in Ezekiel, God asks for purifying sacrifices that involve both salt and fire: “When you have finished the purification, bring an unblemished young bull and an unblemished ram from the flock. And present them before the LORD. The priests shall strew salt on them and offer them to the LORD as holocausts” (Ezek 43:23-24).

Mark has just shown Jesus teaching his disciples to be ready to sacrifice their own bodies, if necessary, in order to be his disciples. It would seem to be in keeping with those demands that he speaks of their purifying themselves with salt and fire. When Mark shows Jesus saying in conclusion, “Keep salt in yourselves” (9:50), he would seem to be referring to both “the salt of the covenant” and the fire of self-sacrifice that he himself will model.

### **Summary of chapter 9**

The chapter shifts the readers’ focus and makes plain things hidden before. The scene of Jesus’ transfiguration begins this shift by revealing the inner and future glory of both Jesus and his disciples. Mark designs this revelation to come before the narrative of Jesus’ shameful death so that it will overshadow it. It points to Jesus’ resurrection.

At the same time, the chapter is unified by a new perspective on power. The Transfiguration reveals a splendor that will transform the ignominy of rejection and death. The casting out of demons is revealed to be not a matter of super power but of simple faith and prayer. The servant and the child are held up as the greatest. God’s power is declared to be inclusive and not restricted to an inner circle. Jesus teaches that it is better to be crippled for God than to remain strong and not be for him. In conclusion, Jesus teaches that the “fire” of sacrificing oneself may be the “salt” needed to season the kingdom.

## RETURN TO THE BEGINNING

### *Mark 10:1-52*

#### **10:1-12 “From the beginning of creation”**

This discussion of divorce is usually treated apart from Mark’s whole Gospel. Abstracted in that way from its context, Jesus’ words on marriage appear to be stricter and less flexible than the present teachings of the church. But if the passage is read in its whole setting, a different sense emerges. In the preceding chapter, Mark has shown Jesus elevating a child (9:36-37), and in the passage that immediately follows this one, Mark shows Jesus saying, “Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (10:15). In fact, the whole of chapter 10 (as we are about to show) is focused on how to live with childlike simplicity. In this passage on marriage, Mark sets up this focus by giving Jesus’ reference to “the beginning of creation” (10:6). “The beginning of creation” is the frame for the whole chapter.

In Jewish thought about the end time (that is, the projected moment when, it was believed, the will of God would entirely prevail), there were two distinct strains of thought. One view held that God would prevail as judge, destroying the wicked and preserving the good. The other view held that God would act as a healer and redeemer, restoring his people and leading them back, as it were, to their original state in the Garden of Eden. In the Prophets, one hears a lot about God’s judgment on Israel; it is associated with the destruction of Jerusalem and especially the Temple, as well as the defeat and captivity of Israel. In the prophetic imagination, however, God’s final judgments are rendered only on the nations that besiege and corrupt Israel. God’s judgments on Israel itself are temporary. The prophet always envisions that in the end time God will restore his people to virtue, his Temple to its original state as a house of prayer, and the land to its original condition of abundance and fertility.

In the Wisdom writings, the prevailing imagery is of the Garden. The Psalms sing of how God created human beings for glory (“You have made him a little less than the angels,” Ps 8:6); how God preserves his people from destruction (They shall be “like a tree / planted by running water, / That brings forth its fruit in due season,” Ps 1:3); how God restores them after a time of wandering or distress (“Beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul,” Ps 23:2-3). The Song of Songs imagines the Garden as the setting for the love affair between God and humanity. The book of Sirach associates the Garden imagery of the Song with the feminine figure of God’s Wisdom. The book of

Job, for all its tragic disaster, concludes with a reminder of the majesty of creation, the restoration of Job, and a new beginning. The cynical preacher in Ecclesiastes changes from finding that “all is vanity” to a new trust in God’s power to create. The author of the Wisdom of Solomon takes the idea of restoration a step further by perceiving that Wisdom in the human soul is a reflection of God’s immortality. In all of these writings, while God’s judgment on evil is certainly assumed and articulated, there is also a sense that the true human destiny is to return to the original Garden. To say that Mark shows “the beginning of creation” to be the framework for Jesus’ teachings is to imply his reference to this whole tradition.

It is this tradition that Mark shows at work here when he tells us that Jesus quoted Genesis 2:24 (10:7-8) and contrasted its ideal of married oneness with the bill of divorce that Moses allowed as a concession to the “hardness of your hearts” (10:5).

Mark has used the phrase “hardness of heart” twice before—once to describe the Pharisees when they begrudge Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath (3:5) and again to describe the disciples when they fail to understand the miracle of the loaves (6:52). In all three instances, the phrase does not indicate the commitment of a sin but the failure to measure up to an ideal standard. So here, we may infer, Mark shows Jesus using this phrase to indicate a falling away from the ideal human state.

### **10:13-16 Children as the ideal members of God’s kingdom**

In describing Jesus’ blessing of the children here, Mark echoes and develops the scene in the previous chapter (9:36-37) where Jesus embraces a child and says, “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me.” As we noted before, in that context Jesus seems to be teaching his disciples the value of powerlessness. This idea seems to be confirmed and clarified by what Mark shows Jesus saying here: “Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (10:15).

### **10:17-31 The poor as ideal members of the kingdom**

The story of the rich man who cannot follow Jesus is of a piece with this emphasis. The man affirms that he has kept the Ten Commandments from his youth (10:20), a declaration that indicates his essential goodness. And Mark goes on to say that Jesus “loved him” (10:21). Nonetheless, Mark shows Jesus asking more of him: “You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to

the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (10:21).

Just as in the teachings about being faithful in marriage and about becoming childlike, Mark shows Jesus holding up an ideal. It is an ideal that is in keeping with Jesus’ other teachings on detachment. Just as Mark shows Jesus teaching his disciples to detach themselves from power by becoming like children, so here he shows Jesus teaching them to detach themselves from possessions. By showing that despite his goodness, this rich man cannot follow Jesus’ instruction (10:22), Mark indicates that Jesus is setting up a norm for holiness that demands far more than the conventional one. In the discussion with the disciples that follows (10:23-33), Mark further dramatizes the unconventionality of Jesus’ request.

Mark does this by setting up a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, in which Jesus repeatedly stresses “how hard” it is for the wealthy to enter God’s kingdom, while the disciples repeatedly express their astonishment at what he is saying (10:23-26). (Jesus’ statement that “It is easier for a camel . . .” has a rabbinic parallel—“It is easier for an elephant . . .”—and so should not be seen as a special riddle of Jesus, but simply as an exaggeration typical of first-century Jewish teachers.)

The climax of this dialogue occurs when the disciples ask, “Then who can be saved?” and Jesus responds, “For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God” (10:26-27). In this pithy exchange, Mark shows that Jesus was asking his followers to commit themselves to a way of living that could not be accomplished without God’s grace. He was shifting the burden from their need for self-sufficiency to their need for total dependence on God. This acknowledgment of total dependence is, of course, the ultimate poverty, the ultimate detachment.

### **10:28-31, 35-45 The disciples’ failure to understand**

In the exchange that follows between Peter and Jesus (10:28-31), Mark shows how little Peter has understood. Peter’s response to Jesus’ request for this total detachment is to protest that he has already accomplished it: “We have given up everything and followed you” (10:28). Jesus’ reply is indirect, not directly disagreeing, and indeed promising rewards in this life and “eternal life in the age to come” (10:30). Yet among his promises, Mark shows Jesus slipping in “persecutions,” a reminder that following Jesus will involve following him in the way of suffering. Jesus’ final assertion, “Many that are first will be last and [the] last will be first” (10:31), is also a reminder of the paradox of the cross.

Mark particularly dramatizes the disciples' failure to grasp that final lesson when he shows James and John asking to be first in glory (10:37). Mark introduces this ironic question by showing James and John talking to Jesus as if he were their servant: "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (10:35). And he shows Jesus accepting this role: "What do you wish [me] to do for you?" (10:36). In the exchange that follows between Jesus and his disciples, Mark shows the extent of the gap in the disciples' understanding.

The reply that Mark shows Jesus giving here is central to Mark's interpretation of Jesus' theology. First, he shows Jesus speaking cryptically of his "cup" and his "baptism" (10:38-39). In the Psalms, "cup" is figuratively linked to one's inheritance or destiny ("LORD, my allotted portion and my cup," Ps 16:5) and to salvation ("I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD," Ps 116:13). "Baptism" is not a word used in the Hebrew Bible, although the ritual immersion that it connotes was part of Judaism and signified (as it does in Mark) a change of heart. These words take on additional meaning here. Jesus' use of the word "cup" suggests the cup of wine that he will later designate as the cup of his blood (14:24), and his use of the word "baptism" also suggests a link with his death.

Paul emphasizes this link when he asks, "Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom 6:3). When Mark shows James and John being quick to accept this "cup" and "baptism" (10:39), he indicates that they are not making these same connections with death. Mark confirms this lack of awareness when he shows Jesus saying, "You do not know what you are asking" (10:38).

By giving the ironic request of James and John, Mark sets the stage for a fuller illumination of Jesus' teaching on worldly power (10:42-45). He shows Jesus here giving his disciples the plainest explanation of what he is about. Mark first shows Jesus distancing himself from the worldly, Gentile conventions of power, in which "those who are recognized as rulers . . . lord it over" others and "make their authority . . . felt" (10:42). Then Mark shows Jesus directly rejecting this approach: "It shall not be so among you" (10:43). Next, he shows Jesus telling them how they should act: "Whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all" (10:43-44). Last, and most important, Mark shows Jesus explaining that by so doing, they will truly be his disciples, because he came expressly "not to be served but to serve" (10:45). Beyond that, Mark suggests by his final phrase that Jesus has come to offer the ultimate service of giving up his life for the sake of others.

The phrase “to give his life as a ransom for many” is a quote from Isaiah 53:11, where God is speaking about his chosen servant, who will offer his life as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of others. This is the last of those passages in Isaiah known as the “Songs of the Suffering Servant.” In Isaiah, the Servant is identified as Israel—God’s righteous servant among the nations, who is put to death by the kings of the world because they do not understand Israel’s God-blessed nature or mission. By quoting this phrase as part of Jesus’ self-understanding, Mark suggests that Jesus can be understood through the same lens: he is God’s righteous servant; he will be put to death by Gentile powers that fail to understand him; he will offer his life as an atonement for the sins of others; he will ultimately be exalted by God.

### **10:32-34 Jesus’ third prediction of his death**

Mark interweaves Jesus’ third prediction of his own suffering in between the episodes that show the failure of Peter, James, and John to understand that as Jesus’ disciples they have been called to dispossession, service, and death. It is a structure we have seen Mark use before. Just as he placed the story of John the Baptist’s death in the middle of the first sending forth of the disciples (6:14-29), so here he places the prediction of Jesus’ death between the episode showing Peter’s confidence that he has already given up everything and the episode of the request of James and John for glory.

Mark, moreover, shows Jesus being explicit here in a way that he never has been before. In the first prediction, Mark quotes Jesus speaking vaguely about how he must “suffer greatly . . . be rejected . . . be killed . . . and rise after three days” (8:31). In the second prediction, Mark shows Jesus adding the element of betrayal, but generalizing everything else: “The son of man is to be handed over to human beings and they will kill him, and three days after his death he will rise” (9:31). Here Mark shows Jesus speaking specifically about “going up to Jerusalem” and about how he will be handed over “to the chief priests and the scribes,” who will, in turn, “hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death” (10:33-34). If we look at these three predictions as one of Mark’s triads, the middle prediction is key, indicating that “human beings” in general are responsible for Jesus’ death. But within Mark’s narrative, the concreteness of the third prediction is Mark’s way of sharpening the irony of the disciples’ lack of understanding.

### **10:46-52 The symbolic cure of the blind man**

This is another miracle of healing that has a symbolic and summarizing function. In 8:22-26, Mark shows Jesus healing a blind man in two stages. We noted that the miracle echoes the earlier healing of the deaf-mute (7:33) and completes Jesus' relationship to the passage in Isaiah where "the ears of the deaf" are "cleared" and "the eyes of the blind" are "opened" (Isa 35:5-6). At the same time, the two-stage process alerts the reader to the meaning behind Mark's doublet structure. In the next miraculous healing (9:14-29), a deaf-mute is cured again. In describing this cure, Mark incorporates a number of elements that have been part of several earlier miracles, so that this miracle incorporates what has gone before. In the same way, this cure of the blind man Bartimaeus appears to be a doublet, and more than a doublet, of the cure of the blind man in chapter 8.

Within the immediate narrative, the story of the blind beggar reverses that of the rich man. The rich man could not become a disciple of Jesus because of his many possessions. The beggar has no possessions except his cloak, and he immediately casts that away to come to Jesus (10:50). In the end, the blind man not only receives his sight from Jesus but "followed him on the way" (10:52).

Beyond that, the name Bartimaeus literally means "son of the unclean" in Hebrew, so the name alone has a summarizing function. In the first part of his Gospel, Mark has shown Jesus to be in constant association with "the unclean" of his society—demoniacs, lepers, tax collectors, sinners, a woman with a flow of blood, and a dead body. When Mark shows Jesus healing someone who is named "son of the unclean," he is reminding his readers of them all.

Mark also shows this blind man to have other distinctive characteristics. Unlike the first blind man, who was brought to Jesus by others, this one calls out to him (10:47). Mark shows him addressing Jesus, moreover, as "son of David," a title that indicates he recognizes Jesus as God's chosen agent. There is a certain irony, therefore, in his request to see (10:51), because he seems to already be seeing more than many sighted folk around him. Mark shows Jesus confirming this when he says, "Go your way; your faith has saved you" (10:52). In showing Jesus' cure of Bartimaeus, Mark sums up how Jesus can heal and restore all "the unclean" who have faith in God's outreach to them.

In this summarizing incident, Mark echoes certain words from the first part of his Gospel. When he says that the blind man "began to cry out" (10:47), we hear an echo of the unclean spirit in chapter 5, who also cried out to Jesus (5:5). The intent, however, is the reverse: the unclean spirit wanted Jesus to go away; the blind man wants him to come near. When Mark describes the disciples' telling the blind man to "take courage" (10:49), he uses the same word that he



shows Jesus saying to his frightened disciples in chapter 6 (6:50). But again there is a difference: the disciples remain fearful; the blind man seems to need no encouragement, for he springs up and goes to Jesus (10:50). The phrase that is translated here as “get up” (10:49) is in fact “*rise up*”<sup>\*</sup> and thus an echo of Jesus’ words to the dead child in chapter 5 (5:41). Jesus’ final words to the blind man, “Your faith has saved you” (10:52), repeats his final words to the woman healed of her flow of blood (5:34). In ending this narrative, Mark says that “*Straightway*”<sup>\*</sup> [translated here as ‘immediately’] he received his sight” (10:52). In short, there are enough key words in this short episode to suggest that Mark is loading it with particular significance. It is as though Mark wanted to suggest the possibility of all people—whether blinded by demons or by fear or by “uncleanness” or even by death—to be restored, to have their lives “made straight” again.

### **Summary of chapter 10**

In this chapter, Mark shows Jesus pointing to “the beginning of creation” as revealing God’s intended destiny for human beings, and trying to teach his disciples how to return to that state of original simplicity. Mark shows Jesus doing this in several ways. First, he shows Jesus referring to the beginning unity between man and woman as the norm for human relationships. Then he shows him holding up children as models of the detachment from power necessary to enter the kingdom. Next, through setting up a dialogue between Jesus and a rich man, he shows Jesus teaching his disciples that they need to divest themselves of all possessions and learn to depend totally upon God’s providence. Mark then indicates the disciples’ failure to understand these teachings by showing parallel episodes that involve the three key disciples—Peter first, then James and John. Mark sharpens the irony of the disciples’ obtuseness by placing in between these episodes Jesus’ third and most explicit prediction of his own suffering and death.

In conclusion, Mark shows the healing of a blind beggar who, out of his powerlessness and poverty, is ready to become a disciple of Jesus. He is a beggar whose name means “son of the unclean” and whose cure, as Mark constructs the story, echoes and summarizes many of Jesus’ earlier miracles. When Mark ends this narrative by saying, “*Straightway*”<sup>\*</sup> he received his sight and followed him on the way” (10:52), he affirms the potential for every human being to follow Jesus’ way of return to the beginning.

## **JESUS AND THE TEMPLE AUTHORITIES—NEW**

## UNDERSTANDINGS OF POWER

### *Mark 11:1-37*

#### **11:1-11 Jesus' entry into Jerusalem**

In this opening scene, Mark picks up on the cure of the blind beggar by showing the people spreading their cloaks on the ground (11:8) and crying out, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come!" (11:10). Their cry also echoes the first proclamation of John the Baptist, "One mightier than I is coming after me" (1:7). Yet Mark modifies the impression of triumphant entry by describing Jesus riding on a colt.

In the whole next section of his Gospel, Mark shows Jesus acting out the new understandings of power he has been trying to teach his disciples. Mark also shifts his style, showing Jesus, like many of the prophets, engaged in symbolic or parabolic action. To begin with, by showing the lengths to which Jesus goes to ride into Jerusalem on a colt (11:1-7), Mark calls attention to the relationship between Jesus and the words of Zechariah:

See, your king shall come to you;  
a just savior is he,  
Meek, and riding on an ass,  
on a colt, the foal of an ass (9:9).

In Zechariah, the predicted king is unknown and mysterious. One of the most striking details in Zechariah's description is this picture of him entering Jerusalem on "the foal of an ass." The choice of the donkey not only suggests humility but peacemaking; in ancient times war was associated with the horse. Zechariah goes on to say that this king will "banish the horse from Jerusalem" along with "the warrior's bow," and "he shall proclaim peace to the nations" (9:10). The passages that follow in Zechariah are complex, but essentially the coming of this peace-loving king begins the restoration of Jerusalem.

At the same time, Mark echoes, through the images of the people spreading "leafy branches" and crying out "Hosanna" (11:8), the description in the first book of Maccabees of Simon Maccabeus entering Jerusalem "with praise and palm branches" to take back the Temple from the Greek tyrant Antiochus IV (1 Macc 13:47-52).

We have spoken before about how different foreign conquerors of Jerusalem tried to take over the Temple and weaken Jewish religion. One of the most despised was Antiochus IV, a Greek ruler of Palestine two centuries before

the time of Jesus. He tried to virtually eradicate Jewish faith in a number of ways. He ordered the substitution of the Greek constitution for the Hebrew Bible. He forbade circumcision, and if mothers violated his edict, he killed their babies and hung the dead infants around their necks. He erected a statue of himself in the Temple. This statue of Antiochus is referred to in Daniel 12:11 as “the abomination of desolation” or “the desolating sacrilege” (a phrase that is used by Mark, as we will see, in chapter 13).

It was the last straw for the Jewish people. They rose up in revolt, led by the seven Maccabee brothers. Their success in restoring the Temple is still celebrated in the annual feast of Hanukkah. The first book of Maccabees records that Simon Maccabeus “cleansed the Temple” of Antiochus’s statue and all his other profanities (1 Macc 13:50b).

By using language that would remind his readers of both Zechariah’s peace-loving king and of Simon Maccabeus, Mark offers a complex picture of Jesus. Both scriptural passages converge in showing someone who took action to restore the Temple to its original state as a place of worship. Yet there is a tension between the two. As Mark develops his portrait of Jesus’ relationship to the Temple, he also continues to show this tension.

### **11:15-19 Jesus’ “cleansing of the Temple”**

It is interesting to note that the phrase “cleansing of the Temple” is not used by Mark. The caption is an editor’s choice; one can only speculate that the editor was thinking of the book of Maccabees. In any event, the episode that follows, like the opening one of the chapter, is constructed out of interweaving echoes of the Hebrew Scripture. The key echoes occur in what Mark shows Jesus teaching:

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.  
But you have made it a den of thieves (11:17).

The first line here is a direct quote from Isaiah 56:7, while the second comes from Jeremiah 7:11. The passage in Isaiah is expressing his vision of a time when God will welcome foreigners to the Temple:

All who keep the Sabbath free from profanation  
and hold to my covenant,  
Them I will bring to my holy mountain  
and make joyful in my house of prayer (56:6-7).

The passage from Jeremiah comes from what is known as his “Temple sermon.”

It is a long passage in which the prophet expresses God's anger at the people's breaking of the covenant and his demand for their moral reform:

Put not your trust in the deceitful words: "This is the Temple of the LORD! The Temple of the LORD! The Temple of the LORD!" Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds; if each of you deals justly with his neighbor; if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow; if you no longer shed innocent blood in this place, or follow strange gods to your own harm, will I remain with you in this place . . . . Are you to steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal, go after strange gods that you know not, and yet come to stand before me in this house which bears my name, and say, "We are safe; we can commit all these abominations again"? Has this house which bears my name become in your eyes a den of thieves? (Jer 7:4-7, 9-11).

In interweaving these two passages, Mark is juxtaposing two very different strands in biblical tradition. The passage from Jeremiah expresses a warning about being corrupted by foreigners who will not only encourage burning incense to a foreign god but will also foster the weakening of covenant commitments. The passage from Isaiah expresses the vision of a time when foreigners will want to join Israel in worshiping the one God, and all people will be joyfully one in prayer. By showing Jesus quoting both these passages at once—indeed, even making one sentence out of them—Mark again suggests a tension and a complexity in Jesus' attitude toward the Temple. On the one hand, the quotation from Jeremiah places him in the tradition of the reforming prophets seeking to purify Temple worship of foreign influences. On the other hand, the quotation from Isaiah places him in the tradition of the visionary prophets seeking to bring all people together by welcoming foreigners into God's house.

When Mark shows Jesus driving out "those selling and buying" and overturning "the tables of the money changers" and not permitting "anyone to carry anything through the Temple area" (11:15-16), these actions must be understood in the context of these prophetic traditions. In the light of these traditions, it does not make sense to assume (as many have) that Mark was indicating that Jesus' actions were hostile to the Temple per se. Nor does it make sense to assume that Jesus was expressing anger at a Temple system that allowed money on the premises.

Some historical background sheds light on the latter. It was customary for Jews to purchase an animal to sacrifice in the Temple, and while they ordinarily used Roman coins in their business transactions, they did not think that appropriate for sacred matters. The Temple authorities accordingly allowed them

to exchange their Roman coin for a special Temple coin, which could then be used for their sacrifice. Such a system was no more scandalous than the money collections taken up today in Christian churches.

The prophetic tradition, exemplified in Jeremiah, of criticizing the gap between Temple worship and moral behavior, explains Mark's intent in showing Jesus' anger at the "buyers and sellers" in the Temple. Mark is not suggesting that Jesus was reacting to the custom of money exchange or that he wanted to overturn the whole Temple. Rather, Mark is suggesting that, like reforming prophets before him, Jesus wanted to purify the Temple of the foreign influences that had commercialized it. Under Rome, this commercialization had taken the specific form of turning the priest-hood into a political job. The high priests were appointed by Rome and collaborated with the Romans. Some who might have been committed to the Temple became committed instead to collecting taxes for the empire. It is this overall picture of Jewish faith corrupted by venal interests that Mark conveys here. It is opposition to this corruption of faith that Mark shows Jesus symbolizing by overturning the tables of the money changers.

Mark's perspective is signaled by the scriptural contexts he provides for Jesus' action: Maccabees, Jeremiah, Isaiah. By alluding to Maccabees, Mark indicates that Jesus is "cleansing the Temple," as Simon Maccabeus did, from the idolatrous perversion of Jewish worship caused by foreign occupiers. By quoting Jeremiah, Mark indicates that Jesus is angry, as Jeremiah was, at the weakening of the covenant. But by also quoting Isaiah, Mark indicates that Jesus has a countering prophetic vision of a time when foreigners would be included in the covenant.

### **11:12-14, 20-28 The fig tree**

Two episodes involving the fig tree enclose the symbolic action in the Temple. It is a typical Markan structure and indicates a relationship between the scenes. To understand them, it helps to know the symbolism of the fig tree in first-century Jewish thought. First of all, the fig tree was considered to be the tree that was forbidden in the Garden of Eden. (It is an interpretation that makes sense when you consider that fig trees are indigenous to that part of the world, and that Genesis 3:7 says that Adam and Eve sewed together fig leaves for their first form of clothing.) Second, a fig tree in bloom was considered to be a sign of the end time, of God's final kingdom.

It is also important to consider that Jesus' curse of the fig tree is related to God's curse of the ground when Adam and Eve leave the Garden (Gen 3:17). In

Genesis, God tells Adam and Eve that the ground will only bring forth “thorns and thistles” for them (Gen 3:18). In Isaiah, however, this curse is explicitly reversed, and God says he will make the cypress grow instead of the thorn-bush, and the myrtle instead of nettles (Isa 55:13). Jesus’ curse is often translated (as it is here) in such a way that it seems irreversible. But some scholars have suggested that the phrasing is more accurately rendered, “May no one ever eat fruit from you *to the end of this age.*” Such a translation leaves open the possibility of a future reversal, and Mark, in a later chapter, refers to the fig tree in bloom (13:28). The possibility of such a reversal also fits better with one of the first things Mark says about the tree: “It was not the season for figs” (11:13). As we have noted before, the Wisdom writings are especially attuned to the idea that human matters are not permanent but seasonable.

The conversation that Mark gives between Jesus and Peter regarding the tree (11:20-25) gives hope for a different season. Peter says, “The fig tree that you cursed has withered” (11:21). Jesus’ response, “Have faith in God” (11:22), is usually taken to mean that Jesus is telling Peter he could have the same power as Jesus. If one has been following Mark’s view of Jesus, one sees that he always shows Jesus’ power directed toward healing. So here it seems right to understand Jesus’ reply as encouragement to have faith in the fig tree’s restoration.

Such an understanding is bolstered by two things. First, the term “withered” should remind Mark’s readers of the episode where Jesus healed the man with a withered arm (3:1-5). Second, Mark shows Jesus going on here to recommend not only prayer but forgiveness (11:24-25). By providing the context of forgiveness, Mark suggests the possibility of a renewed tree. And as we have just noted above, Mark shows us a renewed fig tree later on.

### **11:27-32 “By what power . . . ?” (11:28)**

The chapter concludes with Mark giving a direct question from the Temple authorities about the source of Jesus’ power. Mark then shows Jesus replying with a question that is also something of a riddle: “Was John’s baptism of heavenly or of human origin?” (11:30). By showing the authorities’ confusion in trying to answer it, Mark indicates their mistake in trying to divide the “human” from the “heavenly.” Implied is Mark’s view that the figure and actions of Jesus show that they belong together.

## **Summary of chapter 11**

In chapter 10, Mark has shown Jesus teaching his disciples that they should not seek worldly power but rather should follow him in seeking “not be served but to serve.” In this chapter, Mark shows the kind of power Jesus does possess. He shows him to be at once forceful and humble.

In the opening verses, Mark shows Jesus entering Jerusalem to the acclaim of crowds, yet riding on a donkey. Through the language he uses to describe Jesus, Mark relates him both to Zechariah’s peacemaking king and to Simon Maccabeus in his act of taking back the Temple. Through his description of Jesus’ actions in the Temple, Mark further indicates Jesus’ relationship to Simon’s “cleansing” of the Temple. Through his quotations from Jesus’ teaching, Mark places Jesus simultaneously in the tradition of prophetic reform of the Temple (like Jeremiah) and in the tradition of the prophetic vision of restoration of the Temple and universal prayer (like Isaiah).

By enclosing the symbolic action in the Temple with two episodes involving the fig tree, Mark further symbolizes the relationship between Jesus and power. In the first episode, Mark shows Jesus cursing the tree in much the same way that God cursed the ground in Genesis. It is another episode in which Mark shows Jesus reflecting God’s action in the Hebrew Bible. Yet in the second episode, Mark shows Jesus encouraging Peter to “have faith” in its restoration. Mark’s view is parallel to Isaiah’s view of God reversing the original curse and restoring the earth.

Through this conversation with Peter, Mark indicates that Jesus is pointing to the power to move or transform things through faith and prayer and, above all, forgiveness. Through the further exchange between Jesus and the Temple authorities, Mark suggests how it is God’s power, especially the power to forgive, that unites the human and the heavenly.

## **JESUS AS WISDOM IN THE TEMPLE**

### ***Mark 12:1-44***

#### **12:1-13 Parable of the vineyard**

It is striking that Mark shows Jesus once again speaking in parables, a style he has not shown him using since chapter 4. This parable is clearly an allegory, but it is also shaped by pieces of interweaving Scripture. The vineyard as a metaphor for Israel occurs in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and the Song of Songs. In this long tradition, God creates a vineyard that he loves. He is sometimes angry at it, but in the end God always restores it. The opening verses

here echo, in a condensed way, the “Vineyard Song” in Isaiah:

My friend had a vineyard  
    on a fertile hillside;  
He spaded it, cleared it of stones,  
    and planted the choicest vines;  
Within it he built a watchtower,  
    and hewed out a wine press.  
Then he looked for the crop of grapes,  
    but what it yielded was wild grapes (Isa 5:1-2).

In Isaiah’s song, the “friend” is God, and “the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel” (Isa 5:7). God is angry at his vineyard for only yielding “wild grapes,” and he threatens to destroy it (Isa 5:5-6). Much later in Isaiah, when God proclaims a “new heavens and a new earth,” he also promises a new vineyard (Isa 65:17-21).

It is important to realize that although Mark is clearly alluding to the first passage in Isaiah, he is not repeating it. There are key differences: the vineyard here is not yielding “wild grapes” but a good harvest. The anger of the vineyard owner is therefore not directed at the vineyard, but at the tenants who are keeping him from gathering it (12:8b). What we have in Mark is thus not the same plot line as in Isaiah but a rather different story. We cannot hastily conclude (as many have) that it is about God’s anger at Israel, because if we are reading carefully, we see that the vineyard (Israel) is not the cause of God’s distress.

At the conclusion of the parable, Mark tells us that Jesus said that the owner of the vineyard would “put the tenants to death and give the vineyard to others” (12:9). Mark then shows Jesus quoting Psalm 118:22:

The stone that the builders rejected  
    has become the cornerstone.

Christians of a later time came to identify “the cornerstone” with Christ, and so they interpreted this parable to mean that God would take his vineyard from Jews and give it to Christians. But in the tradition flourishing in Mark’s time, the psalm was sung at Passover as a way of rejoicing that Israel, the enslaved people, had become the cornerstone of a nation covenanted to God. Knowing this fact, we need to carefully reexamine all the terms of the parable.

First of all, who are the tenants? The word “tenants” suggests those who have a commercial interest in the property, not a personal one. They are distinguished in the story from the landlord’s “servants,” whom they beat up and send away, and from his “beloved son,” whom they kill. In biblical tradition, a



prophet is usually described as God's servant. Israel itself is known as God's servant and also as God's beloved son. The "tenants" are hostile to the servants and the son, and obstructionist in regard to the vineyard. In short, they are hostile to Israel.

The parable, then, is not directed against Israel but against those who would destroy it. Israel, as God's vineyard, is fruitful, but hostile hirelings are preventing God's harvest. God promises to take back the vineyard from them and give it to others who will allow it to come to harvest.

Mark then says, "They were seeking to arrest him, but they feared the crowd, for they realized that he had addressed the parable to them" (12:12). Mark does not explicitly identify whom he means by "them," and there is no direct antecedent. In the following verse, Mark says that "They sent some Pharisees and Herodians to him . . ." (12:13), so we know that he could not mean either of those two groups. The only plausible group left are the Temple authorities who were questioning Jesus in chapter 11—"the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders" (11:27). In terms of what we know of the historical situation of the Temple in the time of Jesus, the parable is a transparent allegory of the corruption of the Temple by Rome and its Jewish collaborators—that is, the chief priests and some of their associates who had sold out to Rome.

In addition, the reference to the landowner's "beloved son," of course, also suggests Jesus himself, who has been referred to by this phrase twice before at key moments in Mark's Gospel—at his baptism and his transfiguration (1:11; 9:7). In the baptism scene, we have suggested, Jesus is God's "beloved son" in the sense of being a "second Adam," giving hope for a renewed humanity. In the transfiguration scene, Mark shows Jesus addressed by God as "my beloved son" in terms of his inner radiance, which images God's own. At the same time, it is a scene in which Mark shows Jesus in conversation with Elijah and Moses, that is, he shows him in conversation with the greatest prophets of Jewish tradition.

We have noted before that in a Markan triad, the middle episode is the most illuminating one. The transfiguration scene seems to imply that Jesus represents the teachings of Israel in the same way as Moses and Elijah did. So here in this vineyard parable, Jesus stands allied with religious Israel. In predicting the death of "the beloved son" at the hands of outsiders hostile to Israel, the parable is predicting simultaneously the death of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple. By means of this parable, Mark shows how both were destroyed by perverted power. The parable is a fitting conclusion to the discussion of power that runs through both chapters 10 and 11.

### **12:13-37 The four questions**

In this section, Mark shows Jesus answering four questions about the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, or the teachings of Moses. In biblical thought, the Torah was equated with Wisdom. We have spoken earlier about how, in many different ways, Mark presents Jesus as God's Wisdom. So here, as he shows Jesus in the Temple answering questions about the Torah, Mark suggests that he is responding as Wisdom itself.

It is worth noting, moreover, that the questions involve different schools of thought within Early Judaism—Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. David Daube, a Jewish scholar, has suggested that they also represent the four questions asked by four sons in an ancient family liturgy for Passover. The first question is asked by a righteous son on a point of law. The second question is a mocking one, asked by a wicked son. The third question comes from a pious son. Finally, the father of the family gives instruction to a fourth son, who does not know how to ask.

### **12:13-17 The first response: “Whose image?”**

Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question about the lawfulness of the Temple tax is often treated as a statement on the separation of church and state. One of the main causes of Jewish anger at the Caesars was their attempt (like Antiochus IV before them) to put their own image in the Temple. Jesus' response implies that Caesar's image has no place there.

More important, however, is how Mark uses this question (as he has earlier in his Gospel) to illumine Jesus' teaching on some key passage in the Bible. In this case, when Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question with his own question, “Whose image and inscription is this?” (12:16), there is more at stake than money. Mark shows Jesus using language that would have reminded his audience of the most important verse in Genesis: “God created human beings in God's image” (1:27).

What the response implies is this: Caesar's image may be on the coin, but God's image is inscribed on every human being. Jesus' response is first of all a theological one. The theological answer, moreover, touches the core of Mark's Gospel, because Mark has shown Jesus himself to be the image of God.

### **12:18-27 The second response: “He is not God of the dead but of the living”**

The Sadducees were a group particularly in league with the Temple priests. Unlike the Pharisees, they questioned belief in immortality, and their narrative

here is designed to make that belief seem ridiculous. Mark shows Jesus responding in a way that emphasizes God as the Creator. First, he shows Jesus pointing to “the scriptures” and “the power of God” (12:24). Then he shows Jesus spelling out what he has in mind by quoting God’s words to Moses at the burning bush: “I am the God of Abraham, [the] God of Isaac, and [the] God of Jacob” (12:26). The meaning of the reply is not obvious, and one has to read between the lines. But Jesus’ response implies that by speaking of the patriarchs in the present tense, God indicates that they are still alive, because “He is not God of the dead but of the living” (12:27). Mark shows Jesus suggesting that belief in the Scriptures would lead one to belief in resurrection. Mark also quotes Jesus as saying twice to the Sadducees, “You are misled” (12:24, 27). He implies that not to believe in resurrection is to limit God’s power.

To further unpack this passage, Jesus’ response seems to be saying that if one believes that God had the power to create life, one should believe that God has the power to re-create it. This point of view is in keeping with the way Mark has depicted Jesus, throughout his Gospel, as healing and restoring life. It is in keeping with the transfiguration scene, in which Mark shows Elijah and Moses fully alive. It is in keeping with the way Mark continually points to Jesus’ own resurrection.

### **12:28-34 The third response: “You shall love the Lord your God . . . .”**

The third question is asked by “one of the scribes” (12:28), a group particularly versed in Scripture. The scribe asks the most basic question: “Which is the first of all the commandments?” (12:28).

In his reply, Mark shows Jesus weaving together three essential parts of Judaism. The first part, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is LORD alone” (12:29), is the central “creed” of Judaism, that is, it is an assertion of Jews’ central belief in one God. It has always been at the heart of Jewish worship. The second part, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (12:30), is a direct quotation from Deuteronomy (6:4). The third part, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (12:31), is a direct quotation from Leviticus (19:2).

By interweaving these three parts, Mark shows Jesus speaking as a scribe himself, that is, as a teacher of Scripture. Mark shows Jesus using a method typical of Jewish Scripture scholars and Wisdom teachers of the first century. The effect of this interweaving is to suggest that love of God implies love of neighbor and that both together are what constitute true worship.

It is striking that Mark shows Jesus and the scribe to be in perfect agreement. He shows the scribe repeating what Jesus has said, only adding another quotation from Scripture to further support it: “ ‘To love your neighbor as yourself’ is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices” (12:33).

The last part of the scribe’s comment is an allusion to Psalm 40:7-9:

Sacrifice and offering you do not want . . . .  
Holocausts and sin-offerings you do not require;  
So I said, “Here I am . . . .  
To do your will is my delight.”

Mark shows that the scribe uses the same method as Jesus, bringing together different parts of the Hebrew Bible to illuminate their meaning.

Mark further indicates the harmony between Jesus and the scribe when he quotes Jesus saying to him approvingly, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (12:34). The incident stands out because through it Mark shows that Jesus was not at odds with *all* the scribes and Temple authorities. On the contrary, Mark shows Jesus to be in perfect agreement with one who taught the central tenets of Judaism.

### **12:35-37 The fourth response: “How is he [the messiah] his [David’s] son?”**

In this passage, Mark shows Jesus posing a riddle about the meaning of “the messiah.” He does so by continuing to juxtapose one Scripture passage with another. In this instance, he juxtaposes the tradition based on God’s promise to David in the second book of Samuel with a popular interpretation of Psalm 110. In the passage from 2 Samuel, God says to David:

I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm. It is he who shall build a house for my name. And I will make his royal throne firm forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever (2 Sam 7:12b-14, 16).

In the first century, all the psalms were popularly attributed to David, so he was considered the speaker in Psalm 110. In its opening verse, the words “my lord” were interpreted as a reference to a coming messiah who would be victorious for Israel. Mark shows Jesus putting these two things together and suggesting that they don’t add up—that is, he is asking: If the coming messiah is a son of David, how come David calls him “my lord”?

There is no answer to this riddle. By having Jesus pose this riddle, Mark is not intent on giving answers but on raising questions. The riddle raises a question about popular understandings of “the messiah.” Earlier in his Gospel, Mark shows that Peter has an understanding that Jesus does not share. Peter thinks that if Jesus is “the messiah,” he cannot suffer and die. And as we have seen, Jesus reproaches him (8:29-33). Here Mark shows Jesus using Scripture to reveal the fault line in the tradition. By this means, Mark shows how Jesus raised questions in the minds of his audience. Mark shakes up the popular definition of “the messiah” so that he can dramatize that Jesus is a “messiah” in an unconventional sense.

### **12:38-44 The rich and the poor in the Temple**

Mark concludes the chapter with a contrast between those who use the Temple for their own profit and those who give to it their last coin. The episode sums up and illumines the theme of wealth versus poverty that has run throughout the last three chapters.

We have just noted that Mark shows Jesus in perfect agreement with one of the scribes. But here he shows Jesus denouncing those scribes who use their religion for self-aggrandizement. It is important to see that the scribes who seek “seats of honor” are not unlike James and John, who asked to sit at Jesus’ right and left in his glory (10:37). By means of the echo, Mark reminds us of Jesus’ teaching that “whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all” (10:44). In addition to seeking glory, we learn, these Temple authorities make venal profit off the needs of poor widows (12:40). The language that Mark shows Jesus using to describe their action—“they *devour* the house of widows” (emphasis added)—suggests that their greed is the reverse of the nurturing habits of Jesus himself.

The episode of the poor widow has several functions. First of all, it clarifies Jesus’ anger at the money changers (11:15-17). By showing Jesus’ approval of the widow’s contribution to the Temple treasury, Mark indicates that it was not money in the Temple per se that caused Jesus’ anger. Rather, as the condemnation of the greedy scribes shows, Jesus was angered by those who used the Temple money for themselves.

At the same time, when Mark shows Jesus praising the poor widow because “she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had” (12:44), he also shows him echoing his instruction to the rich man to sell all he has (10:21). The widow’s total self-giving embodies the commandment to “love the Lord your God with

all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (12:30).

### **Summary of chapter 12**

The chapter is unified around the theme of wholehearted love of God versus religion perverted by greed and hypocrisy. The parable of the vineyard contrasts the venal tenants of the vineyard with the vineyard owner’s servants and “beloved son.” It is a transparent allegory, contrasting the present authorities in the Temple—the Romans and their hire-lings—with the prophets and with Jesus.

The parable makes use of the vineyard tradition in the Hebrew Bible, especially Isaiah, to indicate the similarities and differences between Israel’s situation now and in the past. As in the past, God is not able to reap from his vineyard (Israel) the harvest he wants from it. Unlike the past, the cause of this is not the vineyard itself but the obstructions placed in the way by the greedy and hostile occupier of the vineyard (Rome).

These “tenants” want whatever “inheritance” there is for themselves. The narrative of the killing of the beloved son, together with the image of the ungathered harvest, suggests that those who now occupy the vineyard are responsible both for the killing of Jesus and for the destruction of the Temple. The quotation from Psalm 110 in the conclusion of the parable suggests that God will vindicate his people (Israel) as he has before.

When Jesus tells this parable, Mark depicts him again as a Wisdom teacher. In the rest of the chapter, Mark shows Jesus engaged in interpreting the meaning of Scripture to various groups of Jewish scholars in the Temple. By doing this, Mark suggests (as he has earlier) that Jesus is Wisdom itself.

As Wisdom in the Temple, Jesus responds to four types of questions about Jewish teaching. The first question puts forward the relationship between the Temple and worldly power. Jesus’ response suggests that worldly power does not belong in the Temple. It also suggests that human beings, as bearers of God’s image, belong wholly to God. The second question puts forward the relationship between God and death. Jesus’ response indicates that God is concerned with life, not death. God the Creator has the power to go on creating. The third question puts forward the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus and the scribe agree that they are inextricably woven together. Love of neighbor (as the Psalms and Prophets have said) is the truest way of loving God. The last question takes the form of a riddle that Jesus himself asks about the meaning of God’s “messiah.” The riddle raises questions about the

conventional understandings of the term and so prepares for an unconventional one.

All of Jesus' responses bear on his identity in Mark's Gospel. Mark presents Jesus as image of God, as one who lives beyond death, as one who has come "not to be served but to serve" (10:45), and as unconventional messiah.

These responses also indicate the kind of Temple reform Jesus stands for. In conclusion, Mark sums up that reform by the contrast Jesus makes between the venal and hypocritical Temple authorities, who use the Temple for their own purposes, and the poor widow, who gives all that she has to sustain it.

## **JESUS AS PROPHET IN THE TEMPLE**

### ***Mark 13:1-37***

#### **13:1-2 The prophecy of the destruction of the Temple**

In chapters 11 and 12, Mark has shown Jesus pointing to the spiritual devastation of the Temple. Here he speaks of its coming physical destruction. Both kinds of speech belong to the role of the prophet. We have a tendency today to restrict the word "prophet" to one who makes predictions about the future. But the biblical prophets were not soothsayers. They were messengers of God, reminding the people of God's past word in Scripture and, in the light of it, conveying God's present word on human behavior. They were, in fact, preachers.

The prevailing theme of the prophets is the need for Temple reform. By this they did not so much mean reform of liturgical practices but of people's way of living. They were constantly calling the people back to their commitment to the covenant. They identified the breaking of any of the commandments with idolatry. For example, Jeremiah's "Temple sermon" (see p. 162) equates adultery and perjury with the worship of Baal. They always preached, moreover, in times when Israel was in crisis—either under attack by foreign powers or actually occupied by them. Every foreign power that conquered Jerusalem also took over the Temple. So in such times (which constituted most of Israel's biblical history), the danger of idolatry from within was compounded by foreign influences from without. As a consequence, the prophets warned the people again and again about succumbing to false gods as well as about neglecting their obligations to love their neighbors as themselves.

The Temple building functioned as a key image in these warnings. The prophets expressed God's displeasure with the people by saying either that God

would destroy the Temple or that God would leave the Temple. Many scholars think that these imaginative warnings were not so much predicting disaster to the Temple as reflecting on it after the fact. Take Jeremiah, for example. The Temple was destroyed by Babylon in 586 B.C.E., the time of Jeremiah, and the people lived in exile from Jerusalem until 539. When Jeremiah, therefore, tells the people that it is God's will for them to submit to Babylon, is he looking ahead, or is he trying to reassure the exiles that God had a plan in allowing their disaster? Many scholars think it was the latter.

All this background is relevant to the prophecy that Mark shows Jesus making here. For the second time in Jewish history, the Temple was destroyed—this time by the Romans in the year 70 C.E., forty years after the death of Jesus but in the lifetime of Mark. It had a traumatic effect on everyone associated with the Jewish community, including those Jews who were followers of Jesus. Most scholars date the Gospel of Mark around that time, either just before or just after. Mark portrays Jesus, as we have seen, in the role of a prophet, preaching about the corruption of Temple worship. The prophetic tradition raises this question: When Mark shows Jesus saying that the Temple would be destroyed, is he suggesting that Jesus in fact predicted its destruction, or is he imaginatively projecting how Jesus as prophet reflected on its meaning?

In any case, the chapter is carefully designed. Mark opens the chapter by citing the disciples' admiration for the Temple. Their wonder at the great buildings expresses a long tradition of reverence for the Temple as the dwelling place of God. Mark cites Jesus' reply without indicating his tone of voice. Many have assumed that Mark shows Jesus to be angry at the Temple, but we have seen that his anger is tempered by the prophetic vision of reform.

### **13:4 and 13:32 “When will this happen?”**

At the time that Mark was composing, there was a large body of Jewish writings known as “apocalyptic.” They were characterized by a number of things. They warned of a final disaster that in some way took the form of a battle between good and evil, that is, directly between God and Satan, or between good and evil nations, or between good and evil forces. (For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls speak of a final clash between “the sons of darkness” and the “sons of light.”) They made precise predictions about the time that the world would end. They also projected that there would be particular signs that the end was about to happen. The question raised by the disciples here—“Tell us, when will this happen, and what sign will there be when all these things are about to come to an



end?” (13:4)—is typical of these writings. Mark does not give Jesus’ reply for many verses, and when he does, he shows him giving an answer that does not fit the apocalyptic perspective: “But of that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (13:32). This exchange functions as the frame for the chapter.

### **13:5-13 Instructions to the disciples**

Mark shows that instead of replying right away to the disciples’ question, Jesus instructs them on how to behave in the face of coming disaster. These instructions are a mixture of many things, and they need to be looked at carefully.

Some of what Mark shows Jesus saying are generalized clichés taken from contemporary writing about the end of time. These include the warnings about “wars and reports of wars” (13:7), about nation rising against nation (13:8a), about “earthquakes” (13:8b), about how “brother will hand over brother to death” (13:12).

But most of the warnings Mark places in Jesus’ mouth are ones that would only have had meaning for Mark’s own community in the year 70 or later. For example, Jesus’ warning that “Many will come in my name saying, I am he” (13:5) makes most sense after Jesus’ death. Indeed, earlier Mark has shown Jesus refusing to stop someone healing in his name, saying, “Whoever is not against us is for us” (9:40). Similarly, Jesus’ warning that “They will hand you over to courts. You will be beaten in synagogues. You will be arraigned before governors and kings because of me” (13:9) does not apply to the disciples of Jesus’ time but to his later followers.

It becomes clear that Mark is speaking to his own time when he shows Jesus saying, “But the gospel must first be preached to all the nations” (13:10). So, too, the advice that immediately follows this statement makes sense if it is seen as directed to Mark’s community: “When they lead you away and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say. But say whatever will be given to you at that hour. For it will not be you who are speaking but the holy spirit” (13:11). Finally, the warning “You will be hated by all because of my name” (13:13a) suggests what was happening in Mark’s time, not in that of Jesus.

It is important to realize that Mark is addressing two different periods of time. Otherwise, we might think that the hatred and persecution of Jesus’ followers happened while Jesus was still alive. But we know historically that this

was not the case. And in other parts of his Gospel, Mark has shown that while some of those in power were hostile to Jesus, the crowds followed him. It is Mark's community, living after the double trauma of the death of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple, that needs encouragement to "persevere to the end" (13:13b).

### **13:14-27 An apocalyptic end?**

This description of the end again makes use of phrases used in apocalyptic writings of the time. These include the warning to flee to the mountains (13:14), and not to go back to one's house (13:16), the lament for those who are pregnant "in those days" (13:17), and the admonition to "Pray that this does not happen in winter" (13:18).

The reference to "tribulation such as has not been" (13:19) is taken verbatim from Daniel 12:1, where it is indeed predicting a final disaster that will bring about an eternal separation of the good from the wicked:

Some shall live forever,  
others shall be in everlasting horror and  
disgrace (Dan 12:2).

As in other apocalyptic literature, this moment of doom is precisely timed. In this case, the doom is related to "the abomination of desolation": "From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days" (Dan 12:11).

The "abomination of desolation" is Daniel's veiled way of speaking about Antiochus's sacrilegious act of placing an image of himself in the Temple. Mark clearly shows Jesus referring to the same act when he uses the very same phrase (13:14a) and then emphasizes that the reference is to a written work ("let the reader understand," 13:14b). By showing that Jesus quotes the book of Daniel, Mark suggests that Jesus, too, perceives sacrilege in the Temple as the cause of the tribulations to come. Only in Mark's time, the veiled reference to sacrilege would have been to that of the Romans.

But Mark also shows that Jesus' perspective is different from that of Daniel and the other apocalyptic writings. He does this in many different ways. First, while Jesus warns, in typical apocalyptic language, of "wars" and "earthquakes" and "famines" (13:7-8), he also comments, "These are the beginnings of the labor pains" (13:8b). The image of "labor pains" or "birth pangs" was often associated with a time when God's kingdom would prevail.

Second, Mark shows Jesus reassuring his followers that God will shorten the days of tribulation (13:20). The description that follows of a darkened sun and stars “falling from the sky” (13:25) also has apocalyptic parallels, but the edge is softened here by the suggestion that this shaking of the heavens is part of God’s act of mercy.

Third, Mark shows Jesus telling his disciples that he, the second Adam (“son of Adam” or “son of man”), will return in glory to gather his elect “from the end of the earth to the end of the sky” (13:26-27). Mark has shown Jesus speaking before about his own rising from the dead, but it is the first time that he has shown him promising his disciples some future glory.

In all these ways, Mark shows that while Jesus uses some apocalyptic terms, he does not share that perspective. In chapter 4, we looked at the way Mark shows Jesus telling an apocalyptic parable (the sower), and then two more parables that reverse its meaning (the seed growing secretly and the mustard seed). In the same way here, Mark shows Jesus using the apocalyptic language of some contemporary writers in order to show how he differs from their point of view.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus does not predict a final battle between good and evil, and he does not believe that anyone can calculate when the end will come. Instead, he says that the suffering to come should be understood as “labor pains” (13:8). He says that God will shorten the suffering (13:20). He says that beyond the suffering there will be glory (13:26). And he says that no one but God the Father can know the time of the end (13:32). Jesus also expresses a non-apocalyptic point of view in his reference to the fig tree and in his parable of the returning lord of the house.

### **13:28-31 The fig tree blooms again**

In chapter 11, Mark shows Jesus first cursing a fig tree that was not in season (11:12-14), and later exhorting Peter to “have faith” in God’s power to restore it (11:20-23). These episodes, we suggested, are best understood in terms of God’s actions in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 3, God curses the ground, but in Isaiah, God reverses that curse (Isa 55:12-13; 65:17-25). Following a similar pattern, Mark shows Jesus speaking here of the fig tree once more in bloom. This image is particularly significant in the light of contemporary Jewish thought, where the fig tree coming back into bloom was considered a sign of God’s kingdom.

### **13:32-37 The lord of the house returns**

Mark shows Jesus telling a parable that has significance both for the time of Jesus and for the end time. It has immediate significance for Jesus' disciples because it warns of the lord of the house returning to his servants at "cockcrow" (13:35), a clear foreshadowing of the cockcrow that wakens Peter to remorse for having denied any knowledge of Jesus (14:30, 72).

This parable also bears a significant relationship to the parable of the vineyard (12:1-9). In that parable, the owner of the vineyard goes away and allows hired hands to tend his vineyard. In this parable, the owner also goes off, but he leaves his house in the charge of trusted servants. In both parables, the owner stands for God, and the vineyard or house represents the sacred space where God dwells. In the first parable, the sacred space is violated by hirelings; in the second parable, "the lord of the house" is on his way back home. The parable ends, as it were, with a question: What will the lord of the house find when he returns? And it explicitly ends with the advice to "watch" (13:33, 35, 37), an exhortation that belongs to the Wisdom traditions.

The exhortation to watchfulness appears three times in this chapter. It appears first when Jesus tells the disciples to "Watch out for yourselves" in regard to those who might deceive them (13:9). It occurs a second time in the context of Jesus' warning about "false messiahs and false prophets" (13:22-23). And it is repeated three times in connection with this parable—once at the beginning and twice at the end (13:33, 35, 37).

The word "watch" is the key word of the chapter. It belongs to the Wisdom traditions, because it is in those traditions that the acknowledgment of uncertainty is prized. It is wise to know what one does not know. So here Mark shows Jesus acknowledging that only God the Father can know when the end will come. Not knowing, one must be always on the watch.

### **Summary of chapter 13**

The chapter is unified by the question about "signs." It is framed by the disciples' question that seeks definite signs as to when the end will come and by Jesus' reply that "No one knows," so they must always "watch." An apocalyptic question receives a non-apocalyptic reply.

In between, Mark shows Jesus countering what were conventionally considered the signs of God's coming judgment (war, earthquake, famine, family betrayal, death, and cosmic turmoil) with images that bring hope: giving birth, a merciful shortening of suffering, a glorious ingathering of the elect, a

new season in which the fig tree blooms again. In this way, Mark shows Jesus countering the conventional fears of a coming apocalypse with suggestions of a new beginning.

The specific reference to “the beginning of God’s creation” (13:19), even though it is made in the context of predicted suffering, is a reminder of God’s purpose in creation to “look at everything [that God] had made” and find it “very good” (Gen 1:31). The very word “beginning” reminds Mark’s readers of his persistent images of a new creation. The parable of the fig tree in bloom is one more of these images. It is a sign of return to the original Garden.

The glorious ingathering of Jesus as the “son of man” reinforces this sign. We have suggested before that the phrase “son of man” is best understood as “son of Adam.” Jesus as “son of Adam” is also a second Adam. Mark presents him as a representative of humanity who has not fallen. As such, he is a representative who perfectly reflects human beings as God intended them to be at the beginning—as image of God.

The central “sign” of the chapter, of course, is the Temple itself. In chapters 11 and 12, Mark has shown Jesus using the language of the prophets to point to its corruption and to hope for its restoration. In this chapter, he shows Jesus borrowing the veiled words of the book of Daniel (“the abomination of desolation”) to point to the sacrilegious use of the Temple by the Romans. In the parable of “the lord of the house” returning home, he gives hope that God will come back to his dwelling place.

That hope, without certainty, brings the chapter to its concluding key word, the key word of Wisdom—“Watch!”

## **THE PASSION NARRATIVE, PART I: PREPARATIONS FOR DEATH AND LIFE**

### ***Mark 14:1-52***

#### **14:1-2 Preparation for betrayal**

In these opening verses, Mark introduces the theme of betrayal that he interweaves throughout the chapter. The Feast of Passover, designed to celebrate the freedom of the people of God, is the setting for the plot to kill Jesus. By means of the plotters’ remark that they had better not kill Jesus at the feast (14:2), Mark suggests the tension both between the feast and the plot and between the Temple authorities and the people.

### **14:3-9 Anointing: preparation for death and life**

The next few verses present a counter theme. The setting is “the house of Simon the leper” (14:3). Mark introduces this figure without explanation. The reader only knows the name “Simon” in association with Peter (1:16, 29-30; 3:16). The only leper to appear before is the one cured in 1:40-45. Does Mark intend the reader to make some connection between this Simon and Simon Peter or between this leper and the one who was healed?

The mystery of the scene is compounded by the entry of an anonymous woman carrying an alabaster jar (14:3). Again, Mark makes no attempt to identify this woman. The reader, however, may have a subliminal memory of having encountered before this particular pairing of anonymous woman and leper. In Mark’s account of Jesus’ first miracles, he tells of Jesus healing “Simon’s mother-in-law” (1:29-31), and then a leper (1:40-45). The name “Simon,” transposed here to the leper, adds to the impression of *déjà vu*.

We noted earlier that Mark’s language suggests that Jesus did not merely heal the woman physically but “raised her up”\* (1:31) to a new status of ministry. It is one in which she “served”\* others (1:31). And serving others is how Jesus describes his own way of life (10:45). The leper, too, receives more than a physical cure. Mark tells us that Jesus sent him back to the priest and so to his community. Once there, Mark says, he spread the word of Jesus to such an extent that Jesus could not “enter a town openly” (1:45).

Could it be, then, that Mark intends his readers to regard the woman and leper here as these two persons in their changed state? That supposition is supported by the fact that they act here in unconventional and extraordinary ways. Unlike most lepers, “Simon the leper” is able to open his home to a social gathering. Even more remarkable, Mark shows Jesus saying that what the anonymous woman has done will always be part of the gospel proclamation (14:9).

The leper disappears from the narrative while the woman preoccupies it. It is important to look carefully at how Mark describes her actions. A jar made of “alabaster” suggests something rare and valuable. The perfumed oil that it contains is described by two words, one of which is hard to translate. The first word means “pure”\* (translated above as “genuine”). The other word does not appear in any other piece of writing; it is closest to the Greek word for “faith.”\* Mark is presenting his readers with a highly symbolic narrative in which the woman is bearing the costly oil of faith.

The woman proceeds to break the jar and pour out the oil (14:3b). The word

Mark chooses for “break” here is no ordinary word, but one that means to “shatter” or “to destroy completely.” By using it, Mark calls attention to the action. He suggests that this is not a casual or conventional sort of breaking. The word for “poured” has the sense of “poured out.” In its root form, it is related to the word associated with a cultic pouring out of blood. Mark uses a variant of it later in the chapter when he describes Jesus saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (14:24). In fact, with hindsight one can see that the woman’s gestures here of “breaking” and “pouring out” anticipate the gestures Mark shows Jesus making at the Last Supper. Mark makes the woman’s extravagant gestures of breaking and pouring a symbolic foreshadowing of Jesus’ extravagant gestures of giving his body to be broken and his blood to be poured out.

By showing the narrow-minded response of some present who view this extravagance as a “waste” (14:4-5), Mark sets the stage for Jesus’ praise of this woman’s act (14:8-9). Given the symbolic nature of the narrative, every word here is important. When Mark shows Jesus rebuking the protestors by saying, “Let her alone” (14:6), we hear an echo of the scene where Jesus rebukes those who were keeping back the children (10:13-14). When Mark shows Jesus saying, “She has done what she could” (14:8a), we hear an echo of Jesus’ praise of the poor widow: “[She] contributed all she had” (12:44).

When Mark shows Jesus saying, “She has anticipated anointing my body for burial” (14:8b), we are forced to consider the different meanings of “anointing.” Jesus speaks of anointing here in the context of consecrating the body for death. At the same time, Mark’s readers would have been aware that Jesus was referred to as “messiah,” a Hebrew word that means “the anointed one.” In the Bible and other writings of the time, that term generally referred to someone who was sent to do God’s work, and so it was a title associated with glory. But we have already seen that Mark shows Jesus rebuking Peter for making that association (8:29-33). Mark shows Jesus consistently teaching that God’s anointed one should be associated instead with suffering and even death. In this episode in chapter 14, Mark dramatizes that meaning. Jesus becomes “the anointed one” in the context of death.

When Mark shows Jesus saying, “Wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance\* of her” (14:9), what does Mark have in mind? We have suggested that Mark intends a connection between the woman’s extravagant gestures of breaking and pouring and Jesus’ gestures (later in this chapter) that symbolize his death. In other

words, Mark makes her gestures anticipate the eucharistic gestures of Jesus. And those gestures of breaking and pouring are the very ones that, according to Paul, Jesus asked his followers to do “*in remembrance*” of him (1 Cor 11:24-25, emphasis added).

The phrase expresses a concept important to Passover celebrations and also to celebrations of the Eucharist. In both instances, it conveys the sense of doing more than recalling a past event. Rather, it suggests a reliving of a past event in such a way that God’s grace is not just recalled but made present. At the end of every Passover meal, the leader prays that God may grant the grace of freedom to every Jew here and now. In the same way, the presider at the Eucharist prays that the freeing grace of Jesus may be made present here and now. The eucharistic act of “remembrance” is not an act of recalling what Jesus did but of making it present once again.

When Mark gives his own account of the first Eucharist (14:22-26), his wording is close to that of Paul’s account in First Corinthians. It is therefore striking that Mark does not put the phrase “in remembrance” there. The fact that it is here confirms Mark’s intention to link this woman’s gestures to the Eucharist. In preparing Jesus’ body for burial, she has prepared his body for a death that will be life-giving. It is for her eucharistic gestures that she will be kept “*in remembrance.*”

#### **14:10-11 Preparation for betrayal continued**

These two verses connect Judas with the plot to kill Jesus. They reintroduce the theme of betrayal. Mark consistently uses the phrase “hand over” to express betrayal. That use carries ironic overtones, because “hand over” can also mean *hand on*, as of a tradition. By his persistent repetition of the phrase, Mark suggests that Jesus is *handing on* the tradition of being *handed over*. It is the same word that Paul uses with the same double meaning when he says that he is “*handing on*” to the Christian community at Corinth what he knows about Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist “on the night that he was *handed over*” (1 Cor 11:23).

#### **14:12-16 Preparations for the Passover Supper**

The details of this episode again seem both mysterious and symbolic, like the details of the anointing scene. Mark does not identify which disciples were sent or the man “carrying a jar of water” (14:13). Nor does he tell us how the man knows to lead the disciples to the right place. Mark also doesn’t identify



“the master of the house” nor tell us why he has already prepared a room for Jesus’ Passover (14:14-15). The narrative’s lack of realistic concreteness suggests that it is also intended to be symbolic.

In fact, many details suggest that Mark intends this narrative to symbolize the Eucharist. By referring to the Passover supper as “the Feast of Unleavened Bread” (v. 12), Mark stresses a detail that would be significant to a eucharistic community. When Mark notes that the disciples set off to prepare the supper on the day “when they sacrificed the Passover lamb” (14:12), he is calling attention to the sacrificial implications of the meal to come.

When Mark speaks of an anonymous man carrying a pottery water jar, the image seems to echo and complement the anonymous woman carrying an alabaster jar of costly ointment. We have noted that the alabaster jar indicates that it contains something precious and that the pouring out of its ointment anticipates Jesus’ pouring out of the wine that he calls his blood. The pottery (or earthenware) jar is humble in comparison, and the water is ordinary compared with the precious ointment. One may think of Paul saying, “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7). In any case, by presenting his readers with these different but echoing images, Mark suggests the pairing of water and wine that is part of the eucharistic celebration and proclaims, for the believer, the meeting of humanity with divinity.

In that context, the “large upper room furnished and ready” (14:15) is perhaps suggestive of the house churches that were developing in Mark’s time to accommodate the eucharistic gatherings of the early Christian communities. Once again, Mark seems to be projecting his own time frame into the narrative. He is trying to give the reader his own awareness that this last Passover meal of Jesus was also the first Eucharist.

### **14:22-26 The Passover/Eucharist**

In between predictions of betrayal, Mark places his account of the meal that he describes as both Passover and Eucharist. The blessing and breaking of bread, together with the blessing and giving of the cup (14:22-23), suggest the opening prayers of every Passover meal. (These read: “Blessed are you, O God, king of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.”) It is also usual to conclude the Passover Seder, as they do here, with the singing of a hymn (14:26). What is strikingly different is Jesus’ identification of the bread as his body and the wine as his blood (14:22-24). Mark also shows Jesus speaking of his blood as that “of

the covenant” (14:24a). That reference suggests both the blood of the Passover lamb that saved the Israelites from destruction (Exod 12:13) and the sacrificial blood that ratified the covenant (Exod 24:8).

In addition, Mark shows Jesus quoting from Isaiah when he speaks of his blood being “shed for many” (14:24b). That phrase is also an echo of what Mark has shown Jesus saying earlier to his disciples about the purpose of his life: “The son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). In both instances, the phrase is an echo of Isaiah’s description of God’s justification of his “Suffering Servant”:

Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many,  
and their guilt he shall bear (Isa 53:11).

By showing Jesus repeating this phrase, Mark interprets Jesus’ death in that tradition of atoning sacrifice. It is also a tradition in which God raises up his servant and exalts him. Like the episode of Jesus’ anointing, it is a suggestion of hope in this chapter so seemingly concentrated on betrayal and death.

Another suggestion of hope is given in Jesus’ further words that he will not drink “the fruit of the vine” again until the day when he drinks it new “in the kingdom of God” (14:25). Although in one sense it suggests that he is moving toward death, in another sense it offers hope that there will be another time, a new time, in which God’s kingdom will at last prevail. And by showing that Jesus speaks of this time as one in which there will be “fruit of the vine” to drink, Mark also suggests that there will be a time when the fruit of God’s vineyard will be accessible again to God.

### **14:17-21, 27-31 Predictions of betrayal**

Mark frames the narrative of this Passover/Eucharist with predictions of Jesus’ betrayal. The scene he describes before the supper (14:18) echoes a verse in Psalm 41 where the speaker recalls a time when friends as well as foes turned against him:

Even the friend who had my trust,  
who shared my table, has scorned me (v. 10).

When Mark then shows Jesus saying that his betrayer will be “the one who dips with me into the dish” (14:20), he brings to mind both the dipping gesture characteristic of the Passover Seder and the dipping posture of baptism. By suggesting both simultaneously, Mark suggests that the experience of being

betrayed is the tradition of God's servants. (Being *handed over* is being *handed on*).

When Mark shows Jesus saying, "For the son of man indeed goes, as it is written of him" (14:21), he indicates how much his narrative uses Scripture to shape and interpret the story of Jesus' passion. The foretelling of the disciples' betrayal (14:27) is preceded by a passage from Zechariah:

[I will] strike the shepherd  
that the sheep may be dispersed (Zech 13:7).

In the context of Zechariah, God is saying that he will strike the shepherd so *that* the sheep may be dispersed. God says that he will purge Israel of false prophets and false shepherds so that he can preserve the remnant and make Jerusalem holy again. In Mark, the prophecy is used to indicate how all the Twelve, including Peter, will scatter and leave Jesus without their support.

When Mark shows Jesus making this prediction to Peter, it is even more precise: "Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times" (14:30). Mark thus links Jesus' warning to Peter to his general admonition to "watchfulness" in chapter 13: "You do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow . . ." (13:35). The vehemence of Peter's refusal to accept himself as a possible betrayer (14:29, 31) intensifies the enormity of his eventual act of betrayal (14:66-72).

Yet even in this context of betrayal, Mark shows Jesus predicting once again that he will be raised from the dead (14:28). In this instance, Mark shows him speaking not only about his being raised but about his life beyond death: "I shall go before you to Galilee." It is striking because his words do not suggest ascension to heaven (like Elijah), but a return to ongoing ministry. And this phrase is the one the women at the tomb are sent to repeat to the disciples after Jesus' death (16:7).

### **14:32-52 Betrayal in the garden**

This betrayal has two parts: (1) betrayal by the three key disciples (14:32-42), and (2) betrayal by Judas (14:43-52).

**14:32-42 Betrayal by the disciples.** The first part is conventionally labeled "Agony in the Garden," although in fact there is no explicit mention of a garden; the garden setting is inferred from knowledge of Gethsemane. The image of betrayal in a garden fits in with the fact that Creation provides Mark's overall

frame of reference. In that context, there is particular irony in Mark showing Jesus, second Adam, betrayed in a garden.

There is also irony within the scene itself. We have noted before that Mark shows Jesus taking these same three disciples with him at three key moments in the Gospel: at the raising up of Jairus's daughter (5:37); at the transfiguration of Jesus (9:2); and here. The first two episodes point toward Jesus' resurrection. In fact, in terms of the overall structure of Mark's narrative, the transfiguration scene takes the place of a resurrection scene. In this scene in the garden, all the elements of the transfiguration scene are reversed. Mark tells us that instead of being radiant and dazzling (9:3), Jesus is "troubled and distressed" (14:33). Instead of ascending up a mountain (9:2), Jesus falls to the ground (14:35). Instead of being blessed by the Father (9:9), Jesus cries out to the Father to take away his coming suffering and death (14:36). Peter, who is so roused by the moment of transfiguration that he wants to celebrate it (9:5), falls asleep (14:37). It is also significant that Mark shows Jesus not addressing him here as "Peter" but reverting to "Simon," the name he had before he became a disciple.

Mark connects this scene to others in his Gospel as well. By showing that Jesus refers to his suffering as "this cup," Mark links this scene to Jesus' question to James and John: "Can you drink the cup that I drink . . . ?" (10:38). The word is, of course, also linked to the Passover/Eucharist Mark has just described and to the cup of Jesus' blood (14:23-24).

By showing that Jesus cries out "Abba," the Aramaic word for "father" (14:36), Mark indicates the importance of this moment. He shows Jesus using Aramaic only in three other key places: when Jesus raises up the little girl from death (5:41); when Jesus symbolically heals the deaf-mute (7:34); and when Jesus cries out to God from the cross (15:34).

Most important, Mark shows Jesus using the word "watch" three times in this brief episode (14:34, 37, 38). Like the "cockcrow" (14:30), this refrain links this moment to the warnings at the end of chapter 13 (13:33, 35, 37). There, at the conclusion of the parable of the returning lord of the house, Jesus says to his disciples, "May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!' " (13:36-37). Here Jesus comes back to his disciples three times and finds them asleep.

Jesus' announcement that "the son of man is to be handed over to sinners" (14:41b) picks up the theme of being "handed over." It is full of irony in view of the fact that throughout the Gospel Mark has shown Jesus reaching out to sinners.

The phrase translated above as “Get up!” (14:42) is literally “You are raised up!”\* It is again ironic. By means of it, Mark indicates the distance between what the disciples ought to be and what in fact they are.

**14:43-52 Betrayal by Judas.** The betrayal by Judas follows upon the more subtle betrayals by the three key disciples. It is signaled by Mark’s word for moral urgency, “straightway”\* (omitted in the translation given here for 14:43). Judas comes as the agent of the Temple authorities—“the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders” (14:43). The crowd that accompanies him is the reverse of “the crowd” we have seen earlier that follows after Jesus. The “sign” that Judas has arranged with them (14:44) is doubly ironic. It is ironic because of the earlier episode where the Pharisees sought “a sign from heaven” (8:11). It is ironic because the sign of betrayal is a kiss (14:44).

Mark’s irony continues as he says that Judas approached Jesus “straightway” (again translated as “immediately” above) and addressed him by the honorific “Rabbi” before he kissed him (14:45).

When Mark goes on to say, “they laid hands on him and arrested him” (14:46), the reader hears an ironic echo of Jesus’ “laying his hands” on the sick to cure them (6:5).

When Mark shows Jesus asking, “Have you come out as against a robber?” (14:48), the reader hears an ironic echo of Jeremiah’s sermon that reproaches the Temple authorities for turning the Temple into “a den of thieves” (11:17).

The reference to the fulfillment of the Scriptures (14:49) should be understood in terms of the passage from Zechariah quoted earlier in this chapter (14:27):

[I will] strike the shepherd,  
that the sheep may be dispersed.

Mark shows its fulfillment here by the terse statement “And they all left him and fled” (14:50).

The episode concludes with Mark’s description of a young man who started to follow Jesus until the crowd seized hold of him; then he left behind the linen cloth on his body “and ran off naked” (14:51-52). The incident dramatizes the kind of situation warned about earlier in 13:14-16: “When you see the desolating abomination . . . a person in a field must not return to get his cloak.” By this dramatic image, Mark suggests that the “tribulation” warned about in chapter 13 has begun.

## **Summary of the passion narrative, Part I (14:1-52)**

Part I of the passion narrative interweaves two contrasting themes, one of which leads to death and the other to life. The episodes of the chapter show preparations being made for both.

The negative theme, that of betrayal, appears to dominate. The chapter opens with chief priests and scribes plotting to kill Jesus, and it concludes with his arrest in the garden. In the middle verses, Mark shows Judas joining the conspiracy to kill Jesus. Mark's account of the Last Supper is framed by Jesus' predictions of the betrayals by Judas and Peter. The scene in the garden reverses all the elements of the Transfiguration: Jesus "falls to the ground," while the three key disciples—Peter, James, and John—fail to "watch" with him. After Jesus' arrest, all his disciples desert him. From the point of view of plot, the preparation for Jesus' death appears to be advancing inevitably.

Yet, interwoven into this death-leading plot are events that suggest Jesus' continued life in the Eucharist. First, Mark tells us of an anonymous woman who anoints Jesus for his death. Mark describes her gestures in such a way that they anticipate the Eucharist. The Eucharist is further symbolized by the pairing of this anonymous woman with her alabaster vase of ointment and the anonymous man with his earthenware jar of water. The woman "shatters" the vase and "pours out" the precious ointment. Her extravagant gestures prepare for Jesus' extravagant gestures of breaking and pouring out. The anonymous man with his earthen vessel leads Jesus' disciples to a large room already prepared to receive them. Together, they suggest the early eucharistic communities meeting in house churches and reliving Jesus' gestures "in remembrance" of him.

These episodes introduce the description of the Passover meal in which Jesus speaks of the bread as his body and the wine as his blood. In its introductory blessings and its final hymn, it is a traditional Passover meal, celebrating God's act of freeing his people from slavery. In the midst of this traditional framework, Jesus speaks of his body as the bread to be broken and of the wine as his blood to be "shed for many." In this way he links his blood to the saving blood of the covenant and to the atoning blood of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. He reverses the effect of the vineyard parable by predicting a future day when the vineyard's fruit will again be accessible and God's kingdom will prevail. His words imply the paradox of a death that will be life-giving. After the supper, even while he is predicting the scattering of his disciples, he speaks of his life beyond death.

In Mark's telling of it, Part I of the passion narrative presents episodes and

scriptural echoes that prepare simultaneously for Jesus' death and for his new life. The plot seems to be moving inevitably toward his death, but the framework of Passover freedom, together with hints of the kingdom to come, life beyond death in Galilee, and a eucharistic community holding him "in remembrance," points to a dramatic irony in which what looks like the end may in fact be a new beginning.

## **THE PASSION NARRATIVE, PART II: THE IDENTITY OF JESUS ON TRIAL**

### ***Mark 14:53–15:15***

#### **14:53-65 Jesus before the high priest**

As we read this account, it is important to remember the place of the high priest in Judaism at the time of Jesus. As we explained earlier, the high priest at this time was appointed by the Romans and did not represent the religious leadership of the Jews. The "chief priests and the elders and the scribes" who accompany the high priest here (14:53) should also be understood as part of a group that were collaborating with Rome. Their plot to kill Jesus, therefore, together with their questions and their response to him, must be seen in this context. (Mark has earlier shown Jesus' total agreement with a different sort of scribe in 12:28-34.)

Mark establishes the injustice of the trial by noting that from the outset "the chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they found none" (14:55). Mark notes that not having found any valid evidence against Jesus, they offered "false witness" (14:56a). This testimony is further invalidated by the fact that the witnesses did not agree (14:56b, 59). (Having at least two witnesses who agree is a requirement of Deuteronomy 19:15.) The false witness that they offer has to do with the Temple: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this Temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands' " (14:58). Mark has earlier given the reader an account of what Jesus said about the Temple (ch. 13), so the reader can judge how false this statement is.

Of course, the reader familiar with the interpretation given in John—"But he was speaking about the Temple of his body" (John 2:21)—may read this false accusation as containing an ironic truth, but within the framework of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has spoken only of the Temple being destroyed (13:2). Yet the reader who knows the end of the story may be haunted anyway by the ironic

mixture here of uncanny truth with deliberate falsehood.

The questions of the high priest also have ironic elements. When the high priest asks, “Are you the Anointed One [the Messiah], the son of the Blessed One?” (14:61), he is asking the key questions of Mark’s narrative about Jesus’ identity. Mark has earlier shown Jesus reproving Peter for identifying him as a triumphant, non-suffering messiah (8:32). Mark has just shown Jesus becoming “the Anointed One” in the context of death (14:8). He has also just shown that for Jesus, the implication of being “the son of the Blessed One” is acceptance of the Father’s will, even to the point of death (14:36).

Jesus’ response here, however, does not stress his death but his glory. Mark shows him quoting Daniel 7:13 when he describes himself as “son of man . . . coming with the clouds of heaven.” In Daniel’s context, the phrase describes an angelic figure who comes in human form (“One *like* a son of man”) and who represents the people of God in contrast to worldly kingdoms, described as beasts. We have noted before that Mark shows Jesus applying this phrase to himself as a way of indicating that he represents all humanity. Mark uses the phrase to suggest that Jesus is a second Adam, giving all of us a second chance.

Mark shows Jesus adding to that reference the image of himself “seated at the right hand of the Power” (14:62). The image of someone seated “at the right hand” of God comes from the first verse of Psalm 110, where God is reassuring his anointed king that he will protect him from his enemies:

The LORD says to my lord:  
“Take your throne at my right hand,  
while I make your enemies your footstool.”

In chapter 12, Mark has shown Jesus quoting this psalm in order to raise questions about the nature of the Messiah or Anointed One (12:35-39). Here Mark shows Jesus implicitly identifying himself with this figure. Yet Mark has also shown, through Jesus’ rebuke of Peter (8:33), that Jesus defines “messiah” differently from those who associate the term with triumphant power in this world.

Mark shows the high priest responding in a way that reveals he does not share Jesus’ understanding of the terms “messiah” or “son of the Blessed One.” The high priest responds by tearing his garments and calling Jesus’ reply a “blasphemy” (14:64). The high priest implies that it is blasphemous to refer to oneself by either of these terms. But in Jewish law, that was not the case. “Blasphemy” is defined in Leviticus as “cursing” God (Lev 24:15-16), not



anything else. Being called “messiah” means being called the one anointed to do God’s work; it is hardly a term hostile to God. And being “son of God” was a claim that any pious Jew might make. By this reply, Mark shows the high priest to be either ignorant of Jewish law and custom or indifferent to it. Mark is thus dramatizing the fact that the high priest of that time was not a religious leader but a worldly one. In league with Rome, he did not know or care about Jewish piety.

In addition, Mark constructs the scene of Jesus’ trial by interweaving echoes of Scripture that reveal how much it is the pattern for God’s just one to be misunderstood and condemned by the powers of the world. First of all, Mark seems to be reenacting the scene in the Wisdom of Solomon where “the wicked” set out to “beset the just one” (Wis 2:12) because “he professes to have knowledge of God and styles himself a child of the LORD” (Wis 2:13) and “boasts that God is his Father” (Wis 2:16b). The “wicked” in the Wisdom of Solomon also go on to condemn the just man “to a shameful death” (Wis 2:20).

Second, by saying that “Some began to spit on him” and “struck him” (14:65), Mark seems also to be summoning up the third song of Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” figure:

I gave my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who plucked my beard;  
My face I did not shield  
from buffets and spitting (Isa 50:6).

Like “the just one” of the Wisdom of Solomon, the Suffering Servant is mocked and condemned by the obtuse powers of the world, who do not understand his identity as God’s servant. By echoing both those works, Mark is providing an interpretive framework for understanding the condemnation and death of Jesus.

### **14:66-72 Peter denies knowing Jesus**

Mark shows the two trials to be about Jesus’ identity. He bridges these two trials with the episode in which Jesus’ key disciple denies knowing who Jesus is. Peter’s presence “in the courtyard” (14:66) picks up an earlier point in Mark’s narrative (14:54). The structure is the typical Markan “sandwich” we have noted before, for example in Mark’s placement of the story of John the Baptist’s death (6:17-29) and in his narrative of the healing of the woman with a menstrual disorder (5:25-34). In each instance, the middle section sheds light on the parts it

separates. So here the episode of Peter's denial of Jesus illuminates the trials that center on Jesus' identity.

Both the high priest and Pilate condemn Jesus by misrepresenting his identity as one that claims power. They both function as false witnesses to Jesus. At the other extreme, Mark shows Peter refusing to witness at all.

Ironically, one of the high priest's maids bears witness to Peter's identity ("You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus," 14:67b). This identification of Peter is repeated two more times (14:69-70). Mark creates a triad of true identifications of Peter that balance the triad, under Pilate, of false identifications of Jesus. Peter's denials are incrementally more vehement. The narrative reaches its climax when the cock crows a second time (14:72) and Peter remembers the prediction of Jesus, "Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times" (14:30). The second cockcrow is prefaced by the key word "straightway"\* (translated above as "immediately"). Mark notes that upon hearing it, Peter "broke down and wept" (14:72b). Mark is dramatizing the fact that in denying Jesus, Peter has been denying himself. In Mark's account, Peter's identity is bound to the identity of Jesus. Ironically, too, Peter's denial of himself is not the kind of self-denial that Jesus asked of his followers (8:34). Rather, Mark shows it is the opposite: Peter denies knowing Jesus because he is trying to save himself from a similar fate. Mark's narrative dramatizes the truth of Jesus' wisdom: "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it" (8:35). The other side of that truth remains for now only in the reader's mind.

### **15:1-15 Jesus before Pilate**

As we have seen, Mark shows the high priest falsely accusing Jesus of blasphemy. His accusation serves to reveal both his ignorance of Jewish religious law and his underlying fear of Jesus' power. Mark shows that he does not understand the terms "messiah" and "son of the Blessed" in a spiritual sense but sees them as a threat to his worldly power. Mark emphasizes the concern of the high priest for worldly power by structuring Jesus' trial before Pilate as a parallel to it. In both instances, Mark shows that the one interrogating Jesus is not interested in what Jesus has done but in who he is and how his identity may threaten their own.

Mark shows Pilate's main concern to be whether Jesus considers himself "the king of the Jews." In Mark's account, Pilate repeats this phrase three times, like a refrain. The first time, Pilate asks the question directly of Jesus (15:2). The second time, he uses the term in a question to the crowd: "Do you want me to

release to you the king of the Jews?” (15:9). The third time, Pilate uses it to address the crowd about Jesus’ fate: “Then what [do you want] me to do with [the man you call] the king of the Jews?” (15:12).

To grasp the full effect of this refrain, it is helpful for the modern reader to know that the term was in fact a title that the Romans applied to their designated tetrarchs. At the time of Jesus, Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee, while Judea was directly under the administration of Roman procurators like Pilate. Needless to say, ordinary Jews of the time did not like the idea of a Roman appointee being called their “king.” Pilate’s reference to Jesus by this term was therefore politically charged. By showing Pilate’s repeated use of it, Mark indicates that Pilate fired up the crowd to think that Jesus either was a tool of Rome or had claimed such an alliance for himself. While on the surface Mark’s narrative seems to suggest that Pilate turned over Jesus’ fate to the Jewish crowd, at a more subtle level Mark is showing how Pilate incited the crowd to anger.

Just as Mark shows the high priest trying to turn the religious community against Jesus on the false claim that he had committed some kind of blasphemy, so he shows Pilate trying to turn the crowds against Jesus on the false claim that he had taken to himself a title of Roman power.

The scene has other ironic details worth noting. In the opening verse, Mark says that “the chief priests with the elders and the scribes” held a council about Jesus “*straightway*”\* (a word omitted in the translation above). Mark repeats the key word of the theme of betrayal by saying they “*handed him over* to Pilate” (15:1b, emphasis added). The word for “release,” which Mark has associated before with Jesus’ acts of freeing people from physical ailments or from sin, appears here in the question of Pilate: ““Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” (15:9). This question is the middle one of the triad of references to Jesus as “the king of the Jews,” thus stressing its irony.

### **Summary of the passion narrative, Part II (14:53–15:15)**

Part II of Mark’s passion narrative focuses on the identity of Jesus. There are two balancing scenes in which the identity of Jesus is put on trial. Each trial is characterized by a falsification of who Jesus is; in each case, Jesus is condemned on false grounds. In the trial before the high priest, Jesus is condemned as a blasphemer, although he has said nothing that would constitute blasphemy according to Jewish law. In the trial before Pilate, Jesus is condemned as a would-be “king of the Jews,” although he had never claimed

that Roman title or sought that Roman power.

In between these matching trials and false witnesses, Mark gives an account of Peter's refusal to witness to Jesus at all. As Mark tells the story, Peter's denial of Jesus is also a denial of himself.

In Mark's narrative, the high priest, Pilate, and Peter are alike in trying to save themselves. As a consequence, each one betrays himself: the high priest betrays that he is not truly a religious leader of the Jews; Pilate betrays that he is not truly an administrator of justice; Peter betrays that he is not truly a disciple of Jesus. Their false witness to Jesus is pivotal to their own identities.

## **THE PASSION NARRATIVE, PART III: THE DEATH OF JESUS**

### ***Mark 15:6-47***

#### **15:6 The death sentence**

We have already suggested that Mark shows Pilate inciting the crowd by referring to Jesus repeatedly as "the king of the Jews" (15:2, 9, 12). But in fact, Mark is more precise than that. He indicates that Pilate used that title to arouse the chief priests, because "he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over" (15:10). After that, Mark says, "the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead" (15:11).

The release of Barabbas is further Markan irony. It is ironic from the point of view of the Roman trial because Barabbas, Mark tells us, is a known insurgent against Rome and a murderer as well (15:7). And it is ironic from the point of view of the Jewish trial because the name Barabbas means in Hebrew "son of the Father." Jesus, who has no plans to strike against Rome, is put to death, while a convicted rebel against Rome is released. Jesus is condemned for calling himself "son of the Blessed," while one whose very name means the same thing is released.

The word "released" is also used by Mark as an ironic refrain, being repeated three times in this short episode (15:9, 11, 15). The theme that Mark has repeatedly associated with Jesus' acts of forgiveness and healing is repeatedly used here in connection with Jesus' sentence of death.

Mark tells the story of the death sentence in such a way that everyone is implicated: the crowd that shouts "Crucify him" (15:13-14); the chief priests, who have stirred them up to this (15:11); and Pilate, who, "wishing to satisfy the crowd" (15:15), handed Jesus over to be crucified. Although Mark reports the involvement of the crowd, he shapes the narrative to place the greatest blame on

the chief priests and Pilate—that is, the agents of Rome. In particular, he indicates the moral weakness of Pilate by showing that he knows Jesus is innocent (15:14) and nonetheless condemns him, just “to satisfy the crowd” (15:15).

### **15:16-20 The mockery of Jesus**

In this description of the Roman soldiers’ mockery of Jesus, Mark dramatizes the irony of calling Jesus “king of the Jews” (15:18). He expands upon the image of Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant,” to which he had alluded earlier (14:64):

I gave my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who plucked my beard;  
My face I did not shield  
from buffets and spitting (Isa 50:6).

Here the “buffets and spitting” accompany the elaborate mockery of the purple cloak and crown of thorns (15:17), the mocking salutation (15:18), and posture of kneeling (15:19).

The whole scene also expands upon the brief suggestion in the Wisdom of Solomon of “the wicked” torturing “the just one”:

With revilement and torture let us put him to the test  
that we may have proof of his gentleness  
and try his patience.  
Let us condemn him to a shameful death;  
for according to his own words, God will take care of him (Wis 2:19-20).

The mock homage also ironically recalls three earlier instances in Mark’s Gospel where some knelt in all seriousness before Jesus: the leper seeking to be healed (1:40); the demons who recognized him as “son of God” (3:11); and the woman who touched him and was overwhelmed by her cure (5:33).

### **15:21 Simon forced to take up the cross**

The reappearance of the name “Simon” here has symbolic significance. Mark has just shown us Simon Peter denying Jesus while refusing to “deny himself and take up his cross.” (The language of denial here explicitly repeats the language of 8:34.) Like Simon the leper, this Simon also functions as his alter ego, forced into doing what Simon Peter the disciple has not been able to do.

The other names in this brief incident are significant as well. “Simon” was a Jewish name, and Cyrene was apparently a Greek colony where many Jews had settled. The names “Alexander” and “Rufus” are, respectively, Greek and Roman. Through these names, Mark suggests how Jesus’ followers were eventually to include the Greek and the Roman world.

### **15:22-32 Crucifixion**

Mark translates the name “Golgotha” as “Place of the Skull.” His Jewish audience would have known the legend that it was the burial place of Adam’s skull. Thus even as he shows Jesus being led to his death, Mark calls attention to the fact that Jesus is a second Adam. Mark thus suggests the cosmic irony of his death.

The “wine drugged with myrrh” (15:23) echoes the distress expressed by the psalmist, who says “I have become an outcast to my kin” because “zeal for your house consumes me” (Ps 69:9-10). In his anguish, he cries out:

Insult has broken my heart, and I am weak.  
I looked for compassion, but there was none,  
for comforters, but found none.  
Instead, they put gall in my food;  
for my thirst they gave me vinegar (Ps 69:21-22).

Similarly, the detail about the soldiers’ dividing Jesus’ clothes (15:24) recalls the agony of the innocent one in Psalm 22:

They stare at me and gloat;  
they divide my garments among them;  
for my clothing they cast lots (Ps 22:18b-19).

The passers-by who shake their heads at Jesus (15:29), along with their mocking taunts to “save yourself” (15:30), also recall Psalm 22:

All who see me mock me;  
they curl their lips and jeer;  
they shake their heads at me (Ps 22:8).

The gesture of head-wagging also echoes the mockery of Jerusalem in the Book of Lamentations:

All who pass by  
clap their hands at you;  
They hiss and wag their heads (Lam 2:15).

Mark is clearly summoning up a long biblical tradition in which the servants of God are mocked. He interweaves scriptural references into his narrative as a way of communicating the meaning of Jesus' death.

In this context, it is significant that Mark speaks of the title "the king of the Jews" as an "inscription" on Jesus' cross (15:26). It was common Jewish idiom to speak of Scripture as "what is written" or "what is inscribed." Mark thus suggests that the mockery of Jesus is, in its own right, a "Scripture." He sees Jesus' way of the cross as part of the long tradition of righteous prophets and psalmists who suffered for their zeal for God.

When Mark notes that "With him they crucified two revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left" (15:27), his phrasing reminds the reader that James and John had once asked to be in those positions (10:37). They thought that being on Jesus' right and left would be places of glory. Mark uses the same phrasing here to reveal to his audience the irony of their request. He shows that unwittingly they had asked to be placed in the tradition of suffering servants.

Mark shows Jesus being taunted by everyone present: the passers-by (15:30), the chief priests (15:31), and even those crucified with him (15:32). Mark shapes their taunts to underscore the irony of Jesus' plight. The passers-by repeat the earlier false testimony (14:57-58) that Jesus said he "would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days" (15:29). Both they and the chief priests ironically suggest that he should "save" himself by "coming down from the cross" (15:30, 32). Mark chooses language that reminds his audience that Jesus has said the opposite: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it" (8:34-35). The ultimate irony of Mark's narrative lies in the way he shows that in spite of the appearances of death and defeat, Jesus is accomplishing what he set out to do.

### **15:33-40 Death**

Mark's account of Jesus' death gives details that suggest Creation in the process of being reversed. Light is created at the beginning of Genesis 1; Jesus' death brings darkness (15:33). The loss of light also echoes Jesus' description of the great tribulation, when "the sun will be darkened" (13:24).

Mark next says that Jesus cried out to God (15:34). Significantly, Mark uses Aramaic for the fourth time in the Gospel. The other three times are the raising up of the little girl from death (5:41), the healing of the deaf-mute (7:34), and

Jesus' anguished cry to his Father in Gethsemane (14:36)—all key turning points in Mark's Gospel. The words here constitute the opening of Psalm 22, and their significance increases if one knows the whole psalm. It is a psalm in which the speaker begins in despair and moves to an encounter with death, but then is rescued by God, and concludes with thanksgiving and praise. If one knows the whole structure, then the opening verse recalls not only the speaker's initial agony but also his eventual rescue and restoration.

Mark goes on to say that the bystanders are confused by the Aramaic word for "my God" (*Eloi*) and think that Jesus is calling Elijah (15:35). It is worth noting that this is the third time the bystanders have had a place in Mark's account. Each reference indicates a different attitude toward Jesus. The first reference is to Simon of Cyrene, who is forced to help carry the cross (15:21). The second is to the bystanders who revile and taunt Jesus (15:29). In this third reference, the bystanders are simply confused. Their confusion of the word for God with that for Elijah recalls earlier places in Mark's narrative where people confused Jesus' identity with that of Elijah (6:15; 8:28). By repeating the confusion here, Mark suggests that confusion about Jesus' identity remained right up to the end. The episode also serves to clarify the kinship and distinction between Jesus and Elijah. Mark stresses that while Jesus may be like Elijah in many ways, they are not the same.

The next verse repeats the detail, already given in verse 23, of the sour wine offered to Jesus to drink. It is a detail that echoes, as we have noted before, the plight of God's servant in Psalm 69:22. Here this detail is combined with a taunt: "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down" (15:36). Again the mockery echoes that of the just one in the Wisdom of Solomon:

Let us see whether his words be true;  
let us find out what will happen to him.  
For if the just one be the son of God, he will defend him  
and deliver him from the hand of his foes (Wis 2:17-18).

The precise words that Mark uses to describe the moment of Jesus' death are significant: "Then Jesus, releasing a loud voice, breathed out"\* (15:37). This literal translation is not as idiomatic as the conventional one, but it serves to highlight Mark's ultimate use of the theme of *release*. When Jesus cures Simon's mother-in-law, Mark says that "the fever *released*\* her" (1:31b). When Jesus forgives the paralytic, he says, "Your sins are *released*" (2:5). When Jesus heals the deaf-mute, he says in Aramaic, "Be *released!*" (7:34). And we have



just seen how Mark shows Pilate ironically releasing a murderous rebel, but not Jesus, from death (15:6, 9, 15). So it is dramatically effective that Mark uses the verb again here, suggesting that Jesus' final breath is freeing.

The splitting of the sanctuary veil (15:38) must be seen in this context. (The translation "torn" is misleading.) The word that Mark uses for "split"\* here is an unusual one. He has used it once before in his Gospel, when he described the heavens opening up at the moment of Jesus' baptism (1:10). By repeating it here, Mark suggests that a similar event is taking place. In his death, Jesus is opening up the heavens.

This interpretation is strengthened by two details. First, the phrase idiomatically translated here as "top to bottom" is literally "from above to below"\*—a wording suggestive of God's creation of the dome of the sky to separate the waters "above" and "below" in Genesis 1:6-8. Second, the unusual word for "split"\* is also used in a significant place in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that the evangelists followed). It appears in a prayer of Isaiah that asks God to split the heavens and come down and take back his sanctuary from Israel's enemies who have trampled it (Isa 63:18–64:1). If we put these details together, we see that Mark's choice of wording suggests that through his death, Jesus is opening up the sacred place of God's dwelling. He is making it accessible.

By immediately following the split veil with the centurion's proclamation of faith in Jesus as "the son of God" (15:39), Mark confirms this understanding. He is suggesting that even the Roman soldier—someone disposed to pollute the Temple with false gods—has come to see the divine image in Jesus' humanity. In his death, Jesus has opened up the heavens even to the Romans.

### **15:40-41 The watchful women**

Before he presents the passion narrative, Mark gives the last word of Jesus to his disciples as "Watch!" (13:37). Mark then shows how Jesus' disciples, particularly his three key disciples, fail to do this (14:32-42). Here Mark introduces a balancing trio of women who do what Jesus has asked. At the same time that Mark shows that all the men have fled (14:50), he also shows that there were women who did not flee but were "seeing\* from a distance" (15:40). The verb that Mark uses for "seeing" here is one that implies spiritual insight. The watchful "seeing" of these women stands in contrast to the betrayal by Judas, the denial of Jesus by Peter, and the flight of the other disciples. The women are not labeled "disciples," but Mark describes them acting in the way Jesus has asked

his disciples to do. Mark also tells us that they had “followed” Jesus in Galilee and “ministered to him” (15:41a). Mark names three but says there were also many others (15:41b).

The three names that Mark gives are vaguely identified. The first is Mary Magdalene, known in all the Gospels as the first witness to Jesus’ resurrection, but not yet called that here. (The idea that she was a “sinful woman” is not in Mark.) The last is Salome, about whom we know nothing. We do know that “Salome” was the name of the daughter of Herodias, who danced for the head of John the Baptist, but in Mark’s account of that event, her name is not given (6:17-29). Did Mark assume that his audience knew her name and intended them to infer that she reappears here transformed? The middle woman, described only as “the mother of the younger James and of Joses,” is presumably (on the basis of 6:3) the mother of Jesus. It is striking that Mark does not single her out; he treats these women as a generic group. Yet Mark suggests that this generic group of women, in their “following” and “ministering” and, above all, in their watchful “seeing,” act in the ways to which Jesus has called all his disciples.

### **15:42-47 Burial**

Mark loads every detail of the burial scene with significance. First, he tells us that “it was the day of preparation, the day before the Sabbath” (15:42). This is usually understood as just a simple reporting of fact. But given Mark’s tendency to emphasize symbolic detail, one might surmise that he wants his readers to consider that the burial of Jesus was “a day of preparation” for his resurrection. The “preparation” theme of chapter 14 is being brought to a climax.

Joseph of Arimathea (15:43) is another disciple hitherto unknown in the Gospel, like the anonymous woman and man at the beginning of chapter 14 (14:3-16). He, like they, appears in the narrative suddenly, just as he is needed. Strikingly, he is described as a member of the council that has just condemned Jesus. His action in asking for the body of Jesus (15:43) suggests a transformation in his understanding of Jesus, just as much as the centurion’s proclamation (15:39). Together, the Roman centurion and the Jewish member of the Sanhedrin reverse the judgments of the trials against Jesus.

Mark also characterizes Joseph by saying that he was “awaiting the kingdom of God” (15:43). It is the seventh time that the phrase “kingdom of God” has appeared in Mark’s Gospel. The first time is in the preaching of Jesus (1:15). The second, third, and fourth times occur in the chapter containing the seed parables (4:11, 26, 30). The fifth time is when Jesus says approvingly to the

scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (12:34). The sixth time is at the Last Supper, when Jesus says he will “not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (14:25). “The kingdom of God,” in other words, is an important theme throughout the Gospel. When Mark says that Joseph was “awaiting” it, he also picks up on the themes of “watching” and “preparation.” Through showing his action of seeking to honor Jesus in death, Mark implies that Joseph now links Jesus with the kingdom.

Pilate’s response—wanting to make sure that Jesus was really dead (15:44-45)—confirms the characterization of Pilate that Mark has already given. By means of this detail, Mark again suggests the non-spiritual level on which Pilate exists. In view of Mark’s hints of resurrection to come, it is also ironic.

The linen cloth in which Joseph buries Jesus (15:46) is significant because of the way it recalls the young disciple who left his linen cloth behind when he fled the scene of Jesus’ arrest (14:51). The reappearance of a “linen cloth” is suggestive of a restoration. The wrapping of Jesus here in a linen cloth reverses that moment of fear and flight. There is also an echo here of the transformed demoniac, who, after his cure by Jesus, is seen “sitting there clothed and in his right mind” (5:15). That man had “lived among the tombs” (5:5) until his encounter with Jesus changed him. The echo of his story, just as Jesus is being laid in a tomb (15:46), is thus something that gives hope.

Further hope appears in the final detail of the two Marys “watching” where Jesus was laid (15:47). Just as Mark speaks of women “watching” or “seeing”\* Jesus’ crucifixion, so here he describes women again “watching” where Jesus was buried. Watchful women enclose Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ burial. Mark says that Joseph “rolled a stone” against the “entrance” or “gate”\* to the tomb (15:47). The details together recall Jesus’ parable of the man who leaves home and “orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch” (13:34). The two Marys here function as gatekeepers, keeping watch for the lord’s return.

### **Summary of the passion narrative, Part III (15:6-47)**

Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ death is carefully crafted. First of all, Mark weaves his narrative out of echoes and patterns of the Hebrew Bible, telling Jesus’ story in the light of them. Second, he picks up earlier themes within his own Gospel, repeating them and making their significance more clear. Third and most important, he constructs a structure of dramatic irony, so that what seems to be leading to Jesus’ total doom is in fact moving toward his resurrection.

**Mark’s use of the Hebrew Bible.** The details of Mark’s narrative are

woven out of numerous images in the Hebrew Bible of “the just one” who is persecuted by powerful and obtuse figures of the world because they do not grasp his identity as God’s servant. The primary sources here are Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant,” sent “like a lamb to the slaughter” by the obtuse kings of the world; the “just one” in the Wisdom of Solomon put to death by “the wicked” because he “boasts that God is his Father”; and the persecuted just one in Psalm 22 who is brought to the point of death and despair before he cries out to God and is rescued. The first two sources provide some of the details for Mark’s account of the trial by Pilate and the mockery of the Roman soldiers. Along with Psalm 22, they also provide background for the taunts of Jesus on the cross. Psalm 69 adds the detail of the sour wine given to Jesus in his thirst. All of them offer a pattern or structure that Mark wants his readers to find relevant and illuminating. It is the pattern of God’s servant, who appears by the world to be doomed but who in the end is exalted by God. It is this structure of dramatic irony that Mark adopts for his narrative.

**Mark’s repeating themes.** Again and again Mark repeats words or images that recall an earlier place in his Gospel. In each case he uses the echo to give an extra dimension to the present scene, sometimes making it fuller and sometimes pointing up its irony.

When he describes Jesus being mocked by the Roman soldiers, for example, he shows them kneeling before Jesus (15:19). It is a detail that ironically summons up earlier moments in the Gospel when people knelt before Jesus in awe (1:40; 3:11; 5:33).

When Mark tells of someone who is forced to carry Jesus’ cross, he notes that he was called “Simon,” thus reminding his readers of Simon the leper, who welcomed Jesus into his home (14:3), and Simon Peter, who has just denied him (14:66-72). The echoes intensify the irony of Simon Peter’s betrayal.

When Mark describes the crucifixion of Jesus, he notes that the Romans crucified two revolutionaries with him, “one on his right hand and one on his left” (15:27). By his phrasing he ironically recalls the request of James and John for just those positions (10:37).

When Mark quotes Jesus’ final death cry, he notes that some thought he was calling Elijah (15:34-35), thus repeating earlier stories of how people were confused about Jesus’ identity (6:15; 8:28). The repetition underscores Mark’s theme of Jesus’ mistaken identity.

When Mark describes Joseph of Arimathea “awaiting the kingdom of God” (15:43), he recalls six other mentions of the kingdom (1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; 12:34;

14:25). He thus hints that the kingdom may now be imminent.

When Mark speaks of Joseph wrapping Jesus in a “linen cloth” (15:46), he summons up the stories of the young man who fled (14:51) and the man who had lived “among the tombs” (5:5), whom Jesus transformed (5:15). The echoes provide hope for Jesus’ own restoration and transformation.

When Mark uses the verb “release”\* to describe Jesus’ death (15:37), he chooses a word that he has associated again and again with Jesus’ acts of freeing people from sin and from disease (1:31; 2:5; 7:34). He has also placed it as an ironic refrain in Pilate’s mouth, in the context of whether or not he should set Jesus free (15:6, 9, 15). By using it as a description of Jesus’ last breath, Mark signals that Jesus’ death is a freeing act.

Similarly, by using the same words for “splitting open”\* the sanctuary veil (15:38) that he has used to describe the “splitting open” of the heavens at Jesus’ baptism (1:10), Mark suggests that Jesus’ death is not an end but a beginning.

**Mark’s dramatic irony.** Mark tells the story of Jesus’ death and burial in such a way that he alerts the reader to the fact that the plot is really moving in the opposite direction than it appears. He does this both by his echoes of the patterns in the Hebrew Bible and by his use of repeating themes.

Mark also hints at a new beginning by the way he frames the narrative of Jesus’ burial with descriptions of women who follow Jesus’ instruction to “watch.” They remind his readers of Jesus’ story of the lord who returns to his house.

### **Summary of the passion narrative, Parts I, II, and III (14:1–15:47)**

Part I of Mark’s passion narrative focuses on preparations of various kinds. They are ambiguously for both death and life. Part II focuses on Jesus’ identity and how he is sentenced because he is mistakenly identified in both his trials. Part III focuses on the dramatic irony of a plot that may seem to be leading to death but is in fact leading to new life.

## **A NEW BEGINNING: THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS AND THE REVELATION OF WISDOM**

### ***Mark 16:1-8***

#### **16:1 The women**

The same three women who watched Jesus’ death (15:40) reappear. Like the anonymous woman at the beginning of chapter 14, they come to anoint the

body of Jesus. Mark has shaped his narrative to show that at either end of the passion narrative, there are women coming to anoint Jesus. In Mark's account, their actions claim Jesus as "messiah"—that is, as God's anointed.

### **16:1-2 The time**

Mark says the women came "when the Sabbath was over." In Jewish liturgy, a distinction is made between Sabbath time and "ordinary time." The Sabbath is a time set aside to celebrate God and to reflect his kingdom. The other days are time to journey towards this perfect state of being. The Sabbath liturgy concludes with spices to "hallow" and "sweeten" the ordinary days of the week. Mark may have had this concluding prayer in mind when he describes the women bringing spices at the end of the Sabbath. On the literal level, the spices are for burial; on the symbolic level, they may also signify the transition to "ordinary time."

Mark also says they came "very early, when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week." Each phrase emphasizes, in a different way, a new beginning.

### **16:3-4 The stone**

The "stone" at "the entrance to the tomb" suggests the sealing off of death from life. When the women say to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us?" Mark shows their willingness to accept their vulnerability along with their trust that God will provide.

### **16:5 The young man**

The young man "clothed in a white robe" is an angelic figure. The whiteness of his clothing summons to mind the transfiguration of Jesus (9:3), an event that Mark clearly constructed as a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection. He also resembles the young man who fled the garden when Jesus was arrested, leaving his linen cloth behind him. The fact that this young man is seen "sitting" also recalls the transformed demoniac, whom the townsfolk found "sitting there clothed and in his right mind" (5:35). Mark's detail about his being "on the right side" further recalls Jesus' proclamation to the high priest that he would "see the son of man seated at the right hand of the Power" (14:62). By means of all these echoes, Mark suggests that this young man represents a transformed life.

### **16:6 The young man's news**

The words that Mark quotes the young man as saying form the heart of his

Gospel: “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” The key words are “crucified” and “raised.” Throughout his Gospel, Mark has stressed the necessary connection between Jesus and the cross, and between Jesus and resurrection. In Mark’s narrative, it is the paradoxical union of those two seemingly contradictory elements that form his identity. Mark shows that both the high priest and Pilate mistake his being called “messiah” as a sign that he sought power. Mark also shows that both mistook his death as the ending of his power. The phrasing here suggests a paradoxical balance: Jesus is both the suffering, crucified one and the one whom God’s power has raised up.

### **16:7a The commissioning of the women**

Mark says that the young man told the women to “go forth.”\* (The verb is stronger than merely “go.”) Mark has shown the women acting all along as disciples. By this act of commissioning, Mark suggests that the women are also sent forth as apostles. They are, moreover, sent forth to the male disciples, even to the head disciple, Peter. The women are sent forth to witness to the men.

What are the implications of the role of men and women in Mark’s Gospel? Many readers have observed that Mark shows Jesus’ male disciples to be obtuse and foolish. Few seem to have noticed that Mark simultaneously shows that Jesus has female disciples who are insightful and wise. If the Gospel is read on a literal, historical level, it is difficult to know what to make of this. But if the Gospel is read on a symbolic level and in the light of the Wisdom traditions, Mark’s purpose becomes clear. We have suggested before the extent to which Mark presents Jesus as God’s Wisdom made flesh. In the light of the Wisdom writings, Mark characterizes Jesus as a nurturing, healing, compassionate, and maternal figure, always intent on giving and restoring life. Following the same traditions, Mark sets up a typical contrast in his Gospel between the wise and the foolish. There is a creative logic in his choosing women to be like Woman Wisdom, while their male counterparts act out the part of the foolish. Mark also makes the women’s raised status and new ministry a symbol of the new creation that Jesus brings into being.

### **16:7b The message**

Mark indicates that the message the women are sent forth to repeat is not about Jesus’ glory but about his ministry. It repeats exactly what Mark has shown Jesus saying on the eve of his crucifixion: “But after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee” (14:28). It confirms his ongoing life: “there

you will see him, as he told you.” It sends the disciples back to where the Gospel first began. It suggests a new beginning.

### **16:8 The revelation to the women**

The translation given above is conventional, but unfortunately it is badly misleading. The word translated “bewilderment” is *ekstasis* in Greek. Even someone who has never read Greek can see that its English counterpart is “ecstasy.”\*

The word “ecstasy” literally means “out of [a normal] state [of being].” In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that the evangelists followed), the word appears at two key moments in the book of Genesis. When God casts Adam into a “deep sleep” or “trance” while he is creating both man and woman (2:21), the word for “trance” is *ekstasis*. Similarly, when God casts Abraham into a “deep sleep” or “trance” while he is making the covenant with him (Gen 15:12), the word for “trance” is *ekstasis*. In both instances, the word conveys the action of God creating something new. It also implies a human being undergoing some shock of transition, a human being experiencing a transformation of consciousness.

Mark uses the word “ecstasy” more than once in his Gospel. When he wants to describe the state of the crowd that witnessed the rising up of the paralytic, he says, “They were all ecstatic and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this’ ” (2:12b). When he wants to describe the changed condition of those who have witnessed Jesus’ raising up of Jairus’s daughter, he says that “They were out of their minds with ecstasy\*” (5:42).

Mark also uses a related word to describe Jesus himself. When he wants to describe how “those close to” Jesus thought he was crazy for mingling so closely with the crowds, he says that they thought he was “out of [his] mind” (3:21).

All these earlier uses of the word support its meaning here. The women are, like Jesus, out of their minds at what they have learned from the angel. And like those who witnessed a paralytic rise up from his mat and a child brought back to life, they are in a state of ecstasy at the realization of Jesus’ resurrection. The word conveys that they are undergoing some shock of transition. They are experiencing a transformation of consciousness.

It is a sign of this transformed consciousness that “they went out and fled from the tomb.” The foolish (male) disciples fled from Jesus. The wise women follow the example of Jesus and flee from the tomb.

“They said nothing to anyone” because they were in a “trance”—like



Adam, like Abraham. By his choice of words, Mark suggests that they were in a state of shock, undergoing a transforming experience. Their silence is more, not less, than words.

They are not silent because “they were afraid.” This translation is again conventional but unfortunate. Again, Mark has used the word given here twice before in his Gospel—first, to describe the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ stilling the storm (4:41), and second, to describe their response to the transfiguration of Jesus (9:6). The New American Bible (which is the translation given above) translates the first instance as “filled with great awe” and the second as “terrified.” There is no justification for “terrified” because the context is Peter’s exclamation that “It is good that we are here!” (9:5). Both contexts suggest the meaning of awe. The context here of “ecstasy” also supports a translation of “awe.”

If we put all these pieces together, we would translate Mark’s ending as follows:

And going out, they fled the tomb, for trembling and ecstasy\* possessed them, and they said nothing to anyone because they were filled with awe.\*

Such a translation would be a fitting conclusion to a Gospel that presents Jesus as Wisdom and the women as faithful disciples of Wisdom/Jesus. Throughout his Gospel, Mark has shown that the women disciples of Jesus not only follow after him but follow his example in serving others. Mark has also shown them to be “watchful,” which is the way of Wisdom. He thus prepares his readers for an ending in which they begin to comprehend the revelation that Jesus/Wisdom cannot die but is still alive and in their midst. By showing them overcome by awe, Mark is dramatizing the theme of all the Wisdom writings that “Fear of the LORD is the beginning of Wisdom” (Prov 1:7; 9:10; Sir 1:12, 16; Ps 111:10). That fear is not fright but overwhelmed reverence before the divine mystery.

## **SUMMARY OF THE DESIGN OF MARK’S GOSPEL**

### **Doublets**

We suggested earlier that the two-stage healing of the blind man in 8:22-26 is a key to the theological design of Mark’s Gospel. That is to say, Mark seems

to have designed his Gospel in two parts, with the Transfiguration in the middle. In the first part (chs. 1–8), the reader is like the blind man who at first only sees “people looking like trees” (8:24). In the second part (chs. 9–16), Mark repeats many of the same images, events, and themes, and the reader now sees them more plainly.

The Transfiguration is pivotal because it reveals Jesus’ inner glory. We have noted before that Peter’s desire to “make three tents” or “booths”\* (9:5) suggests the feast of Booths or Succoth, a harvest feast celebrating the end time of God’s kingdom. The Markan text says that Jesus “metamorphosed”\* before his disciples (9:2), that is, he changed form entirely. Jesus’ “dazzling white” garments (9:3) suggest his relationship to other significant figures (for example, Moses and Elijah) who, in popular nonbiblical writing of the time, are imagined ascending to the heavens clothed like angels. In this literary imagination, resurrection and ascension are similar and intertwined events. Thus to a Jewish audience of the time, this scene of Jesus’ total transformation and gleaming garments in an end-time setting would have signified his ascension or resurrection from death to a heavenly state. Mark has not placed the scene of Jesus’ resurrection at the end of his Gospel but here in the middle, where it illuminates both halves of his Gospel.

The most crucial difference between the two halves lies in Mark’s presentation of the identity of Jesus. In the first part, Jesus reflects God’s power in miracles of exorcism and healing, stilling the sea and walking on water, and the multiplication of bread. In the second part, Jesus appears vulnerable to the various plottings against him, and he speaks of dispossession, poverty, and death. In the first part, Jesus calls his disciples to be “fishers” on a grand scale (1:17), to preach and cast out demons (3:14-15; 6:12-13a), and to cure the sick (6:13b). But his instructions to them begin to shift radically at the end of chapter 8 when he says, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (8:34).

The second part of Mark’s Gospel leads inexorably to Jesus’ taking up his own cross. And Mark’s Gospel is often referred to as the one in which “the cross” is key. But by placing the Transfiguration at the very center of his narrative, Mark signals that the cross is only one part of the story. The whole story involves *cross plus Transfiguration*. In fact, Mark shows that Jesus, in his key statements about the cross, indicates that the cross is *the way* to Transfiguration: “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it” (8:35). The cross is

not about suffering in itself or suffering for its own sake. The cross symbolizes how God will transform our suffering. God's creative power to transform or transfigure us from suffering humanity into persons of radiant joy is the key to Mark's theology.

In the first part of his Gospel, Mark shows Jesus reaching out to the most alienated and suffering members of his community—those known to be sinners; those possessed by unclean spirits that deprive them of God's holy spirit; those alienated by leprosy or withered limbs; those who are paralyzed; and women of all kinds and ages who, for various reasons, are kept on the fringes of worship. He reaches out in order to "raise them up," to transform their lives. In the second part of his Gospel, Mark shows Jesus himself to be the one who is alienated and suffering, and then Mark tells us Jesus is also "raised up," transfigured (as he has already shown us) by the will of God.

In the first part of his Gospel, Mark shows Jesus as a teacher of Wisdom, speaking in aphorisms and parables or riddles. Yet at the end of chapter 4, as we have seen, Mark indicates that Jesus himself is a living parable or riddle, pointing to what God is like. In the second part of his Gospel, Mark develops this idea, showing that Jesus in suffering, even more than in power, reveals what God is like. Mark indicates this through the image of the split veil of the sanctuary (15:38), suggesting that Jesus, in his dying, has opened up access to God's dwelling. He confirms it in the cry of the centurion, "Truly this was the son of God" (15:39). In that cry Mark suggests how, in the dying Jesus, even a Roman soldier came to perceive God's image. Through that perception, Mark challenges his readers to understand how God is reflected even in suffering and dying humanity. Jesus as "son of man" represents us all; Jesus as "son of God" represents us all as made in God's image.

There is a mystery here not easily articulated. The first part of Mark's Gospel is filled with the miraculous; the second part is filled with mystery. Having miraculous powers is what we more readily associate with being God's image. It is difficult to see God's image in suffering and death. But throughout the second part of his Gospel, Mark indicates how Jesus shows and teaches that God reverses our natural expectations and gives us a "second sight," as it were, by which conventional human wisdom is turned upside down.

For example, Jesus surprises those who think that entering God's kingdom requires sophisticated learning, by saying that "whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it" (10:15). He confounds the normal prizing of wealth by instructing the good, rich man to "Go sell what you have"

(10:21). He overturns the normal ambitions for power by instructing his disciples clearly that they are not to “lord it over” others (10:42), but rather, “whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all” (10:43-44).

Above all, Jesus rebukes those who think that God’s anointed (“messiah”) should be immune from suffering and death. In chapter 8, he tells Peter explicitly that this way of thinking is “human-minded” and not “God-minded” (8:33). Then in chapters 14–15, Mark shows Jesus undergoing human suffering and death and somehow revealing God in that very process.

Mark shows that Jesus reveals God even in the process of dying because, at the same time that he shows Jesus being betrayed to his death, he indicates how God will transform that death. In chapter 14, Mark hints at this transformation by the way he describes the anointing of Jesus and by the way he links it to Jesus’ last meal, which in turn foreshadows the meal of the Eucharist, itself a meal of transformation.

In chapter 16, Mark indicates the transformation of death through the whole episode of the women coming to the tomb. Through the repeated images of a new day (16:2), he projects a new beginning. Through the images of the stone rolled away (16:4) and the women fleeing from the tomb (16:8), he suggests an escape from death. Through the message of the young man in white (16:6-7), he confirms Jesus’ own prediction (14:28) that he would be raised up and return to Galilee. Through his description of the women’s silent, awed, ecstatic trance (16:8), he indicates their confrontation with the unexpected, overwhelming power of God to transform death itself into ongoing life.

## **Triad**

Another way of seeing Mark’s design is to see the whole Gospel arranged as a triad. First of all, the reader should take note that there are three beginnings. The first is the “beginning” of verse 1, suggesting the very opening of Genesis and the idea of God creating “in Wisdom.” The second is the return to “the beginning of Creation” in Mark 10:6, which follows upon the transfiguration and introduces Jesus’ radical teachings on poverty, powerlessness, and childlikeness. The third is in chapter 16 with its images of a new day and its message of Jesus’ return, at what looks like the end, to the beginning of his ministry in Galilee.

From another perspective, there are three sections that each end in a scene of resurrection. The first section, chapters 1–5, concludes with the raising up of the daughter of the synagogue leader Jairus and the image of the witnesses

“beside themselves with ecstasy” (5:42). The second section, chapters 6–9:8, concludes with the scene in which Jesus appears before his disciples transfigured in glory. Here Jesus is pictured in conversation with the great prophets Moses and Elijah, who are also portrayed in a transfigured state. In this scene, the three chief disciples are briefly transfigured too, as Peter seeks to build three harvest “tents” or booths to celebrate the end time, and all three are overcome with awe (9:6). The final section runs from 9:9, when Jesus and his disciples descend the mountain, to 16:8. In 16:6 the three women who have been watching learn that Jesus “has been raised,” and transfigured by their new understanding, they are overcome with ecstasy and awe.

In all of these configurations, doublet and triad, the re-creative, transfiguring power of God’s Wisdom is at the center.

## **OTHER ENDINGS BY OTHER AUTHORS**

Some time after Mark completed his Gospel, three anonymous authors offered other endings to it. The modern reader may well wonder how anyone had capacity, the desire, or the audacity to do such a thing. They had the capacity because texts were not guarded by copyright laws until fairly recent times. They had the desire because the conventional translation of the last verse of Mark’s Gospel made it appear to end in failure. They had the audacity because they regarded themselves as guardians of God’s word.

Over the centuries, most commentaries have accepted the idea that the women disobeyed the angel’s message because they were shaking with fright. Such a conclusion ignores, of course, the linguistic evidence that Mark uses some form of the word *ekstasis* three times in his Gospel, each time to convey the elevated feelings of those who have witnessed a miracle. It ignores as well the significant use of the word *ekstasis* in the Septuagint to indicate a trance or shift in consciousness induced by God.

It also ignores the linguistic evidence of Mark’s use of “awe” to indicate key moments of change in Jesus’ disciples—first, to describe their response to Jesus’ power to still a violent sea (4:41) and then to describe their response to his transfigured glory (9:6). Its use here forms a typical Markan triad, and its meaning here is illumined by its function in the Transfiguration.

Such a conclusion also ignores the role of women throughout the Gospel of Mark: how they are repeatedly “raised up” by Jesus in the first part of the Gospel

and how, in the second part, they fulfill the role of true disciples by following, ministering, and “watching,” as Jesus has asked. It ignores Mark’s use of the Wisdom traditions, where wise people are always contrasted with foolish ones and where Wisdom is portrayed as a woman. Above all, such a conclusion ignores the overall structure of the Gospel, in which God reverses the expected and re-creates all things. If one grasps such a structure, one is open to an ending in which those thought least likely are the ones transformed into witnesses.

It is possible (although not provable) that over the centuries, male leaders in the church have been alarmed at the idea of how a translation using the language of “ecstasy” and “awe” might elevate the role of women. It is possible that male commentators have had a mental block against seeing that while the male disciples in Mark’s Gospel are made to look foolish, the female disciples are shown to be wise and faithful witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection.

Whatever the cause, the three alternative endings to Mark’s Gospel appear in manuscripts known to be faulty. Their dates suggest a limited use by the church. The “Shorter Ending” is dated somewhere between the seventh and ninth centuries. The third ending (called “The Freer Ending” because it is preserved in the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C.) is not mentioned before Jerome in the fourth century.

The “Longer Ending” is dated from the second century because it was incorporated into a work of the time (Tatian’s *Diatessaron*), but it is not mentioned by either Clement or Origen, significant church fathers of the third and fourth centuries. Tatian’s *Diatessaron* was deemed heretical because of its attempt to harmonize all four Gospels. The “Longer Ending” was not made part of the official biblical canon until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. It is strange that it was canonized, even though it once formed part of a heretical work, particularly since the ending itself is guilty of trying to blend together different Gospel passages. Even stranger is the fact that although modern scholarship agrees it was not authored by Mark, it is still being printed in most Christian Bibles and used by the Catholic Church as the gospel on the Feast of Saint Mark!

Again the question arises as to why the Council made its decision and why the church has continued to honor it. Again the answer seems to lie in the way Mark’s original ending has been translated and understood as signifying the women’s failure to witness. Were the ending grasped as a description of the women’s stunned awe at the realization of Jesus’ resurrection, another ending would not be sought.

The Council perhaps justified its choice of this “Longer Ending” because it makes use of passages from Luke and Matthew. It does not seem to have considered, however, whether these borrowings do justice to the Gospels they are taken from or to the rest of the Gospel of Mark. It is important to look at the “Longer Ending” in detail.

## **THE LONGER ENDING**

### **16:9-11 The appearance to Mary Magdalene**

Some commentators have suggested that this verse rehabilitates Mary Magdalene as a witness because she is described here as giving the angel’s message to Jesus’ “companions.” But the description of her as one who had been possessed by “seven demons” (a reference to Luke 8:2) is denigrating. Her speech here, moreover, is ineffective because “they did not believe” her. In the original Markan ending, as we have read it, Mary Magdalene is a witness to the resurrection and an apostle to the apostles. Here she is a former sinner whose words are not given credibility.

### **16:12-13 The appearance to two disciples**

This is a vague reference to Luke’s narrative of two disciples encountering the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Omitted is Luke’s development of this narrative into a eucharistic story in which the disciples recognize Jesus “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35). As it stands, the narrative here goes nowhere.

### **16:14-16 The commissioning of the Eleven**

Jesus’ injunction to “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” comes from the ending of Matthew’s Gospel (28:19). The insistence on baptism as the guarantee of salvation, however, is not in Matthew. And such a rigid distinction between the “saved” and the “condemned” is nowhere to be found in Mark.

### **16:17-18 “Signs will accompany those who believe”**

The only two “signs” in the list that appear in the Gospels are the driving out of demons and the laying of hands on the sick. These are mentioned, however, not as “signs” but as ministries. The speaking “in new languages” is not in any of the Gospels, but in Acts and First Corinthians. The power to “tread on serpents” is mentioned in Luke (10:19), but not the power to pick them up.

The power to “drink any deadly thing” without harm is nowhere in the New Testament. (And when these words have been taken literally, they have caused death.) In no Gospel does Jesus advocate the seeking of “signs.” In fact, there are several places where Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for “seeking a sign” (Mark 8:11-12; Matt 12:38-39; Matt 16:1-4; Luke 11:16).

### **16:19-20 The ascension of Jesus**

The description of Jesus “taken up into heaven” echoes the ending of Luke (24:51). In Luke, it is part of his way of ending the Gospel on a note of expectation. In the same passage, Luke shows Jesus telling his disciples to go to Jerusalem to await “power from on high” (24:49). In the “Longer Ending” there is no such waiting or expectation of the Spirit. Instead, the author tidies things up by saying that the disciples “went forth and preached everywhere while the Lord worked with them.”

### **Summary of the “Longer Ending”**

The “Longer Ending” pieces together phrases from other Gospels without doing justice to the way they function in their original contexts. In respect to Mark, if one perceives Mark’s Gospel in the terms of this commentary, then the “Longer Ending” appears not only unnecessary but offensive because it clashes with the rest of Mark’s Gospel.

*As a final reflection*, you might want to consider all the ways in which this “Longer Ending” undermines Mark’s theological point of view:

- How does it undermine the role of women in Mark’s Gospel?
- How does the insistence that “whoever does not believe will be condemned” undermine Mark’s focus on Jesus’ outreach to sinners, his emphasis on forgiveness, his saying that “Whoever is not against us is for us” (9:40), and his emphasis on God’s will and power to transform rather than to condemn?
- How does the emphasis here on “signs” undermine Mark’s repeated suggestion that God’s kingdom is accessible in ordinary ways?
- How does ending with Jesus’ ascension into heaven conflict with Mark’s emphasis on Jesus’ return to Galilee?
- This ending seems to close off discipleship as a thing of the past instead of opening it up to the future. What effect does that have on you as a reader and potential disciple?



# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO **LUKE**

Michael F. Patella, O.S.B.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Gospel of Luke, the third Gospel in the New Testament canon, has a remarkable place in the study of Sacred Scripture, and this unique position does not stem solely from the fact that it is the only Gospel to have a second volume associated with it, namely, the Acts of the Apostles. Luke engenders a great deal of discussion on the level of New Testament formation, sensitivity to historical data, literary technique, and theological development. This commentary deals with these areas to a greater or lesser degree.

### **The Gospel message**

Each Gospel relates a particular evangelist's theological interpretation of the kerygma, that is, the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To do this, the Gospel writer takes events from Jesus' life as passed down from traditions and sources and composes a Gospel account. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, an evangelist uses his composition to present his particular theology of redemption mediated through Christ's life. Details may or may not be accurate, but the truth of the Gospel goes beyond details. The central focus of this study, therefore, is the theological picture that Luke's Gospel paints of Jesus, his earthly ministry, and the early church.

### **Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John**

Anyone reading the Gospels notices that there are stories within them that overlap, parallel, and seemingly copy each other. The reason for, and explanation of, this problem have been part of the church since the beginning. Scholars such as Origen and Augustine were among the first to develop theories on the formation of the Gospels. In the modern era, new theories have arisen that

have continued the dialogue and discussion on the development of the New Testament.

The brevity of this commentary prevents any lengthy discussion of the sources Luke used in writing his Gospel; this question has an involved and complicated history. For simplicity's sake, our commentary notes the names of commonly held sources as well as the familiar vocabulary of biblical scholarship. Knowing the following terms will be most helpful:

- *Canon*: the official collection of books comprising the Bible.
- *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*: two of the most dependable, extant New Testament manuscripts.
- *Eschaton*: the final times bringing God's eternal plan to fulfillment. The study and interpretation of the eschaton is called eschatology.
- *Evangelist*: the name given to the four Gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- *Kerygma*: the proclamation of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ that also describes how salvation comes through participation in the same passion, death, and resurrection.
- *Parallel*: a term used to describe a passage in one Gospel that has a like passage in another Gospel.
- *Q*: a hypothetical, oral source that contains material common to Matthew and Luke but not Mark.
- *Synoptics*: the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so named because they share so much of the same narrative line as well as the same material.
- *Textual witness*: early written documents containing all or part of the biblical canon.

### **Luke the evangelist**

Not much is known about the evangelist Luke. The tradition says that he was both a physician and an artist from Syria who completed his Gospel between A.D. 80 and 90. Using Acts 20–28 as a guide, along with Colossians 4:14 and Philemon 1:24, many feel that he may have known Paul. Although it is impossible to prove these claims, the texts that Luke wrote indicate that he was a highly educated person, influential in the early church, aware of geography

(outside Palestine anyway) and history, and very much attuned to the dynamic, direction, and development of Christianity.

### **Sensitivity to historical data**

In addition to being considered a doctor and an artist, many have thought of Luke as a historian, because he gives greater attention to historical details than any other evangelist. For example, passages describing the birth of Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist contain information on emperors, governors, and kings, and a good deal of it is close to accurate. Much of our information about Pontius Pilate comes from Luke. In large part, his information about the Herodian dynasty matches well with the writings of the ancient Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.

### **Literary technique**

Luke is an economical writer. This evangelist avoids repetitions and superfluous information. He tells a story well, with attention given to rising action, climax, and denouement. His use of Greek is among the finest in the New Testament, and he is well-versed in Greco-Roman literary style. His prose has a nobility that has made this Gospel a favorite of many.

### **Theological development**

Luke views the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ as the great salvific act that has affected the whole cosmos. The evangelist expresses this theology by presenting Jesus' earthly ministry as a battle between Christ and Satan. Christ's victory over evil comes with his death and resurrection. In Lukan theology, the death on the cross is actually a transfiguration into glory. Furthermore, by virtue of that death, the same transformative glory is promised to humanity, a concept that came to be known as *theosis*.

In this presentation, Luke relies on literary motifs to relay these key concepts. First, there is the motif of the diabolical force. Every good story needs an antagonist, and Luke elevates Satan to this position. Consequently, Christ's miracles and cures are more than kind deeds; they are attacks against the Evil One and his diabolical force. In other words, Christ is in a relentless pursuit of redeeming the world from Satan's clutches.

Second is the idea of the great reversal, a term used to describe the turn in fortune that will befall all between now and the *eschaton*, that is, the end times: the hungry now will have a banquet, while the rich go hungry; the humble will

be exalted, and the exalted will be humbled.

Next, there is the schism motif. Christ will come to all, but some will heed his call to discipleship while others will not.

Finally, there is joy. The word appears more times in the Third Gospel than in any other New Testament work. In Lukan theology, for a world redeemed and transfigured by the blood of Christ, there can be no other Christian response than joy.

## **COMMENTARY**

### **THE PROLOGUE**

#### ***Luke 1:1-4***

##### **1:1-4 Address to Theophilus**

The Gospel opens with a short prologue of a single periodic sentence, a style typical of ancient literature that often sets the tone and purpose of biographies and histories. Josephus and Polybius, for example, show similar introductions. Luke's use of this style often raises the question of whether he sees himself as writing a biography or a history. Opinions favoring one or the other abound. Perhaps the most we can say is that Luke is simply following the literary convention of the day as he writes his two-volume work. The Gospel, neither a biography nor a history, is an evangelical proclamation. A Gentile audience would expect such a prologue, and Luke is simply supplying it.

The identity of Theophilus is unknown. Possibilities range from his being a benefactor of the community, a church leader, or even a civil authority. Perhaps Theophilus is all three. On the other hand, using the name Theophilus (literally, "Beloved of God") universalizes the identity and allows every reader to be the addressee.

The prologue provides hints at the formation of the New Testament as well as the development of the early Christian community. What are the "events that have been fulfilled"? Who are the "eyewitnesses" and "ministers of the word"? Luke describes some of these events and personages within his two-volume work, particularly in the Acts of the Apostles, but how much of it is recoverable is difficult to answer. Of fascinating interest for source critics is Luke's explanation that he has investigated "everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence." How many and varied were the initial documents

before they saw their final editing at Luke's hand? Extant papyri, lectionaries, and targums certainly bespeak a Christian movement very much in ferment and development. Luke's project replaced the diverse gospel fragments floating around the Greco-Roman world. That this Gospel eventually became part of the New Testament canon attests to its nearly universal use over the course of the first two centuries.

## **THE INFANCY NARRATIVE**

### ***Luke 1:5–2:52***

Only Matthew and Luke feature stories of the birth of Christ, although from two different perspectives. Luke centers his account on Mary, while Matthew focuses on Joseph. It is obvious that Matthew and Luke were not copying each other in forming their respective infancy narratives. Nonetheless, they do share some details. Both have an angel relaying the divine plan to the human participants—Joseph in Matthew, Mary in Luke. Both state that this child will be born of the house of David in Bethlehem, that his name will be Jesus, and that these events will occur while Herod the Great is king of Judea (37 B.C.–4 B.C.). Most importantly, despite the many variations in the two different accounts, the two agree on the essential point that Mary is pregnant, and there is no human father.

Luke's purpose for including the infancy narratives is to situate the whole Gospel within the story of God's divine plan. Luke also uses references and allusions to the Old Testament, especially prophetic figures. Furthermore, he has passages dealing with John the Baptist precede those of Jesus. This structure prepares the reader for an account that aims to show Jesus as the one long-promised to deliver humankind from sin and death. Luke's infancy narratives grab the attention of his Gentile audience, catechize them, and graft them to the community of Israel by setting the many references to political events and leaders of the day within the context of the Old Testament. As Simeon proclaims in his canticle (2:29-32), Jesus is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, / and glory for [the] people Israel" (2:32). Furthermore, this glory will not come easily, for even Jesus' mother, Mary, will be pierced by a sword. Thus, the infancy narratives serve as an abbreviated version of the Gospel and Acts. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke recounts how Peter, Paul, and the Gentiles receive the light of revelation, but only after hardship and pain. On the final page of Acts, Paul is living, preaching, and teaching in that most Gentile of cities, Rome.

### **1:5-25 Announcement of the birth of John the Baptist**

Luke provides a broad context for Jesus' birth, employing both Old Testament prophecies and typologies. Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as being "advanced in years," and thus past the age of childbearing. The announcement of the Baptist's birth, therefore, is similar to the miraculous birth genre found with Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:1-15), Manoah and his wife (Judg 13:2-25), and Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam 1:1-23). In addition, both Zechariah and Elizabeth are of priestly stock, which means that their son John would one day be serving in the temple at Jerusalem. None of the evangelists, however, imply that John the Baptist ever took on this role.

As a priest, Zechariah would take his turn serving in the temple twice a year for a week at a time. This detail no doubt led to the tradition, dating from at least the sixth century, that Ein Karem, with its close proximity to Jerusalem, is the village of John's birth.

Angels are God's messengers and agents, and Luke mentions them twenty-five times in the Gospel. More than half of these occurrences fall within the first two chapters. The presence of an angel at the altar of incense (v. 11) underscores God's role in the events to follow. While in Matthew's Gospel the angel who appears to Joseph (1:20) remains unnamed, Luke specifies the identity of the heavenly messenger who comes to both Zechariah and Mary. The name Gabriel itself is a combination of two Hebrew terms, *Gabur* ("strong man," "warrior"), and *El* ("God"), therefore "Warrior of God." Gabriel has a role in the Old Testament. In the book of Daniel, this angel explains a vision to Daniel (8:17-26) while simultaneously giving Daniel understanding (9:22).

### **1:26-45 Announcement of the birth of Jesus and Mary's pregnancy**

In Luke's chronology, Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah (1:8-20) precedes the one to Mary (1:26-38). Luke is setting the proper sequence of salvation history. If John is the precursor of Jesus in the ministry, he must also come first in the order of birth. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel comes to Nazareth to deliver the news to Mary. Of course, Mary is extremely puzzled by this information, and when she expresses her doubt (v. 29), Gabriel encourages her. When Zechariah doubts, however, he is made mute (vv. 18, 20).

Whatever point Luke is trying to make by this comparison of the two personages, it is not too clear. Perhaps it is another way to indicate the Baptist's subservience to Christ, a point reiterated by the baby's leaping in Elizabeth's

womb upon hearing Mary's greeting. Or since the recovery of Zechariah's voice excites wonder in the people (vv. 60-64), Zechariah's muteness reflects Luke's attention to the details of storytelling; it advances the theme and the plot.

### **1:46-55 The Cantic of Mary**

Traditionally called the *Magnificat* in the Western church where it is sung at Evening Prayer, the cantic has all the markings of an early hymn. There are four hymns in these opening narratives, of which this is the first. Grounded in a reference to Abraham and referencing other forebears, this song has a decidedly Jewish-Christian cast. The piece contains the reversal theme found in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, but it is modified. Those who oppress now will be overthrown, and the lowly will be exalted; those who are hungry now will have their fill, but those who are satiated now will be sent away.

### **1:57-80 The birth of John and the Cantic of Zechariah**

Zechariah regains his speech upon acknowledging the divinely given name of his son. The hymn Zechariah sings, also known by its Latin name, the *Benedictus*, the Morning Prayer cantic in the Roman Office, clarifies John the Baptist's role in the sweep of salvation history. He is to "go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (v. 76). The beautiful, poetic images "daybreak from on high will visit us" (v. 78) and "to shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow" (v. 79) have their foundation in Isaiah 8:23-9:2. Luke concludes this section on John the Baptist with a brief note placing John in the desert, where the reader will encounter him again at the beginning of chapter 3. The evangelist now moves on to the birth of Christ.

### **2:1-7 The birth of Jesus**

Scholars have often considered Luke's attention to historical detail as one indication of the evangelist's high level of education—not only for the fact that he includes such information but more for the way in which he uses it. Greco-Roman historians wrote their accounts to favor their patrons or the party in power, much the same way as a local chamber of commerce writes about its particular locale today. Thucydides, Tacitus, and Josephus all had a certain editorial slant to their works that supported those who supported them. Luke stands within this tradition, but with an important difference: his bias is toward showing the hand of the holy Spirit at work in both Jewish and Gentile events of the day. Jesus Christ is to be considered the fulfillment of both cultural worlds.

We have observed an example of Jewish fulfillment in the stories of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary. In these opening verses of chapter 2, we see the events in the pagan world also cooperating and foretelling the birth of the Messiah in Jesus Christ.

A difficulty enters into this section with the names and dates of the people mentioned. Although the Roman historian Suetonius states that there were registrations of Roman citizens in 28 B.C., 8 B.C., and A.D. 14 (*Divus Augustus* 27.5), there is no record, outside the New Testament, which states that Caesar Augustus (27 B.C.–A.D. 14) decreed the enrollment of the whole empire, that is, non-citizens, for taxation or any other purposes. There were local registrations within various provinces from time to time, and once such census occurred under the Roman legate Quirinius, but he was not made governor of Syria until A.D. 6, when he also took control of Judea at the banishment of Herod's son Archelaus. Since Luke attests that both John the Baptist and Jesus were born under Herod the Great (37 B.C.– 4 B.C.), most scholars concur that it would be impossible for these events to have occurred at a time when Caesar Augustus, Herod the Great, and Quirinius were all simultaneously in power.

For Luke's theological intention, however, the important point is that during the *Pax Romana*, when the Gentile world looked to Augustus Caesar as the prince of peace, Jesus comes into the world as the true Prince of Peace. In fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, which establish the messianic line through the house of David, Jesus, a descendant of David, is born in Bethlehem, the city of David. In order to make this point, Luke takes historical facts, such as the census, and reworks them to fit his theological purpose, just as ancient historians altered details to suit the purposes of their patrons. For contemporary readers, such remolding of details may seem spurious or dishonest, but in the religious tradition, the truth that Jesus is the Savior of the world lies beyond the accuracy of some facts dealing with the reigns of various rulers.

The Greek term *phatnē* is translated as “manger” (v. 7) but can also mean “stable.” The Greek *kataluma*, represented here as “inn,” specifically means “lodging” or “guestroom,” with space for a dining area (*kataluma* is the word employed in Luke 22:11). Reading together both *phatnē* and *kataluma*, we can see that Luke is probably describing the typical house of the day. These homes, built for extended families, had a living space on the upper floors with a stable at ground level. Both Matthew and Luke emphasize Jesus' Davidic lineage through his foster father, Joseph, as well as the fact that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the city of David. It is reasonable to conclude that Joseph had family in Bethlehem



and that he and Mary stayed with them. With all the relatives of the extended family eating and sleeping in the upper *kataluma*, the one private place for Mary to give birth would be in the *phatnē* or stable.

According to Roman, Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and other ancient traditions, the phrase “firstborn son” (v. 7) represents a title of honor. It does not imply that Mary had other children after Jesus.

### **2:8-20 Angels and shepherds**

Once again Luke uses an angel to announce a birth, this time to the shepherds. Shepherds, although not social outcasts, were among the poorest people in the society. A group composed mostly of women and young children, they did not own land or sheep, and they worked for hire. Luke underscores Jesus’ salvific role especially for the poor with this annunciation story; the shepherds are the first to hear the good news. With the angelic choir (v. 14) we have the third song in the infancy narratives, the *Gloria*. In Western liturgies this text serves as the foundation for the “Glory to God.”

### **2:21-38 Circumcision, naming, and presentation in the temple**

The parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus continues in verse 21. John is circumcised and named eight days after his birth (1:59-60), and now so too with Jesus.

In portraying this section, Luke relies on some elements of the Mosaic Law as well as stories about the prophet Samuel (1 Sam 1:24-28). God commands Abraham to circumcise male descendants and slaves as a sign of the covenant (Gen 17:12), a point the book of Leviticus stipulates (12:3). Although Luke states that both parents must undergo the rites of purification (v. 22), the Levitical prescriptions apply only to the mother (Lev 12:2-5). A Gentile Christian himself, Luke is not always accurate in his explanation of Jewish cultic and legal codes. Luke rightly notes that the firstborn must be consecrated to the Lord (Exod 13:2), but this redemption is accomplished by paying five shekels to a priest (Num 3:47-48). The sacrifice of turtledoves Luke describes is part of a woman’s purification rite. These verses serve to emphasize Mary and Joseph as faithful, law-abiding Jews, and with them, Luke underscores the Jewish context of Jesus’ birth and mission.

Nothing else is known about the identities of Simeon and Anna other than what this section tells us. Both represent the faithful Israelite who waits and does not lose hope in the coming redemption. Simeon’s canticle, or *Nunc dimittis*

(2:29-32), is the fourth and final hymn from the Lukan infancy narratives and has traditionally been part of Compline or night office in the Liturgy of the Hours.

Simeon's words to Mary, ominous though they are, are also highly theological. With verse 34 we see the first instance of the schism motif, which runs throughout Luke's Gospel. Often in Luke's portrayal of Jesus' mission, one party or person will follow him, while another will turn away. One group will be saved, another will fall into perdition. In each case individuals choose their own fate by deciding for or against following Jesus. Simeon states that a sword will pierce Mary's heart as well. The discipleship that Jesus demands extends even to his mother. Not only does Luke indicate through Simeon that discipleship will not be easy, but he also elevates Mary to the role of the model disciple. To love Jesus is to suffer with him.

The widowed state of the prophetess Anna, daughter of Phanuel (vv. 36-38), has made her utterly dependent on God's goodness. Luke tells us that she "spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38), and thus she is the first evangelist. By starting out with the "redemption of Jerusalem," Luke sets his literary project in order. After the resurrection, the message goes from "Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

## **2:39-40 Nazareth and Bethlehem**

According to the accounts of both Luke and Matthew, Jesus is born in Bethlehem but spends his youth and young adulthood in Nazareth. Mention of these two locales in this manner forms an enigmatic knot that is difficult to unravel. If there are serious questions surrounding the census (see 2:1-7 above), why do Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem, when we know that Mary is from Nazareth (1:26)? The four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles refer to "Jesus of Nazareth" but never "Jesus of Bethlehem." Is the whole narrative of the birth at Bethlehem a literary construction serving to demonstrate that Jesus, through his foster father Joseph, is the Son of David who is born in the city of David?

Scripture, history, and archaeology all show that there was a strong Jewish presence in various parts of Galilee, so it would not be a strange place for Jesus to have his upbringing. The most we can say about this puzzlement is that the two sources that mention Jesus' birth, Luke and Matthew, both specifically state that it occurs in Bethlehem. There are no texts that cite Nazareth as Jesus' birthplace. Basing their respective accounts on the oral tradition, the evangelists

composed stories that get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and then back up to Nazareth. The importance of this Lukan narrative is that Jesus stands in line of the Davidic Messiah, and about that, Luke wants the reader to know, there can be no doubt.

### **2:41-52 The boy Jesus in the temple**

Only Luke contains this story of how Jesus is lost while on the return trip from Jerusalem. Passover was one of the pilgrimage feasts, when devout Jews would go to Jerusalem to celebrate the occasion.

The story itself reflects a theological point that Luke makes explicit in recounting Jesus' earthly ministry: true discipleship goes beyond familial relationships (8:19-21 and 11:27-29). In addition, that this conversation takes place in the temple reflects Luke's ambivalent attitude toward the temple's existence, if not his positive disposition toward it. Luke frequently shows Jesus teaching in the temple up to the final days before his crucifixion. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and Paul also preach and teach in the temple.

Jesus returns with his parents to Nazareth, and nothing more is heard about him until he is an adult and begins his ministry. The next time we read of Jesus in Jerusalem will be at his triumphal entry (19:28-39), which leads to his death.

## **THE PREPARATION FOR THE PUBLIC MINISTRY**

### ***Luke 3:1–4:13***

John the Baptist is the precursor of Jesus, and Luke shifts the focus from one ministry to the other. This transition entails Jesus' baptism and desert temptation.

### **3:1-20 The ministry of John the Baptist**

Chapter 3, like chapter 1, opens with a periodic sentence, a strong indication that this section is a major literary unit.

As with the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-3), Luke situates John the Baptist within a geopolitical framework involving the Roman emperor and his Palestinian-Jewish client states. Tiberius Caesar succeeds Augustus. According to Luke's dating, the word of God comes to the desert-dwelling John the Baptist in A.D. 29.

The nominally Jewish king, Herod the Great, died in 4 B.C. and divided his kingdom among his three sons: Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, or ruler, of Galilee and Perea; Herod Archelaus, ethnarch over Judea, Idumea, and Samaria; and

Herod Philip, the tetrarch in charge of Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, and Batanaea. Archelaus's misrule led the emperor Augustus to banish him in A.D. 6, at which time a Roman procurator was appointed to govern his territory. One such procurator was Pontius Pilate, who ruled the area from A.D. 26 to 36, the period Luke is writing about here.

Lysanias is difficult to identify. There is scant information about a person of that name ruling the area of Abilene at this time. Many have speculated on the reason why Luke includes this information. Was he addressing a Christian community based in Abilene (northwest of Damascus), or was he from Abilene himself? We may never know, but we have here a typical example of the manner in which Luke uses historical data—truth is more important than mere fact.

With the mention of high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, Luke grounds the Baptist's ministry within the history of Jewish Palestine. From John's Gospel (11:49; 18:13), we read that Caiaphas is the priest at the time of Jesus' death. Although only one high priest ruled at a time, Luke may include the reference to Annas simply because Annas was still alive while his son Caiaphas was in charge.

John the Baptist begins the public ministry in the parallel accounts of the other three Gospels as well, but just where John preaches is a question. Mark simply says "in the desert" (1:4). Matthew states "in the desert of Judea" (3:1), which would place him under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate. Further on, both Matthew and Mark add that crowds come from Judea and Jerusalem, a region accessible to Perea and Herod Antipas's territory. Luke writes "in the desert . . . [the] whole region of the Jordan" (vv. 2-3), a reading that suggests along the Jordan River, including the Judean side of the river (Roman territory), but in any case, in that area east of Jerusalem as far as the mountains on the east bank. Since Galilee is also under Herod Antipas, Luke seems to introduce the idea that both Jesus and John, each in his proper time, face the same political ruler (see 3:19ff. and 23:6-12).

Luke firmly establishes John as the precursor. Not only does John preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but the evangelist (vv. 4-6) also interprets the Baptist's role as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (40:3-5).

Judaism, with its whole tradition of the *mikvah*, or ritual bath, was well acquainted with the water ablutions that John mentions (v. 16). The reference to a baptism "with the holy Spirit and fire" further on in the verse emphasizes that Jesus' action goes beyond religious ritual; it will have an efficacy that will transform the whole created order, just as fire alters the material state of matter.

Early Christian mosaics depict this point by presenting Jesus standing in the Jordan River with smiling fish surrounding his feet as the Baptist pours water over Jesus' head.

### **3:21-22 The baptism of Jesus**

John clarifies his subservient role to Christ with his preaching in 3:15-18. From the beginning of Luke's Gospel, information about John the Baptist has come before the accounts dealing with Jesus. In keeping with this thematic development of the Baptist as precursor, Luke skillfully provides the account of John's arrest (3:19-20) before the narrative surrounding Jesus' baptism (3:21-22).

Luke shows Jesus praying at critical points in his life. To underscore the point that John is lesser than Jesus, Luke recounts the baptism itself in the passive voice. There is no conversation between the two individuals. Jesus is baptized as one among the crowd, the voice from heaven is directed only to him, and it is understood that the others do not hear it. Later, when the Baptist sends messengers to Jesus (7:18-23), there is no indication of his being aware of having baptized Jesus.

To interpret the baptism, Luke relies on a conflation of two Old Testament passages. The first half of the voice from heaven (v. 22) is a paraphrase of Psalm 2:7, while the second half is part of Isaiah 42:1. It should be noted, however, that the textual witnesses for this section display a wide variety of readings. One manuscript, for example, quotes Psalm 2:7 in its entirety: "You are my Son, this day I have begotten you." The version that we have here reflects the evidence from Codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, two of the most dependable of the extant Gospel manuscripts. A similar, although not an exact, quotation is found at the transfiguration of Jesus (9:35).

According to the science of the ancients, doves were considered not to have any bile and thus were symbolic of virtue. Not only were they worthy for sacrifice to God, but, as seen here, they also symbolized the divine presence.

### **3:23-38 The genealogy of Jesus**

By setting Jesus' genealogy after the baptism, Luke fashions a twofold theological statement. First, after having seen Jesus' divine sonship pronounced in the voice from heaven (3:22), he now reiterates that point by stating it in verse 38. Second, Luke writes Jesus' ancestral line going all the way back to Adam, and by so doing connects Jesus to all humanity, unlike Matthew, who shows

Jesus as descended from Abraham to stress his Jewish background and role (Matt 1:1-17). Luke also underscores Jesus' virginal conception by the use of the parenthetical expression "as was thought" (v. 23).

One theory of the formation of Luke's Gospel holds that the infancy narratives (Luke 1-2) were later additions to a primitive version of the current text (see above). If so, an earlier stage of the Third Gospel began with Jesus' baptism and genealogy. Supporting this possibility is a lack of similar introductory material in the other Gospels (Matthew notwithstanding), as well as use of Luke's Gospel by early Christians and heretics, particularly Marcion, who denied Christ's relationship with anyone in the Old Testament. In any case, in this final redaction Luke does a fine job linking the first two chapters to the third both literarily and theologically.

#### **4:1-13 The temptation in the desert**

The Spirit who descended upon Jesus at his baptism now leads him into the desert for forty days.

The desert brings life right to the edge. In the Jewish tradition, it can be a place of divine encounter, such as with Moses and the burning bush (Exod 3:1-14), or it can be the place of death (see Gen 21:14-16). Of course, the forty-year wandering of the Israelites, a communal experience that formed them into the people of God, takes place in the desert. Just so, Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness brings into clearer focus for him what his mission on earth will be.

The Synoptic Gospels all include the desert temptation, but there are differences among them in the telling. Mark's account is the shortest (1:12-13), and Luke's is most similar to Matthew's (4:1-11), but the similarities break down in the respective nuances of each account. In Matthew, the setting of the three temptations goes from the desert, to Jerusalem, to the kingdoms of the world, while in Luke we read desert, kingdoms of the world, Jerusalem. Luke's account has greater internal consistency, for Jesus' ministry will culminate in Jerusalem, and it will be in that city that he meets his greatest temptation as well as his greatest triumph (see below, Luke 22:39-46; 23:44-49; 24). As it stands in this passage, the three temptations are to riches, glory, and power, represented by bread, rule, and defiance of nature respectively. Jesus' reply to each of the temptations, all from the book of Deuteronomy (8:3; 6:13, 16), connects his experience in the desert with that of the wandering Israelites.

For Luke, the devil is a force in the yet unredeemed world of Jesus' ministry. In the Lukan narrative, this encounter in the desert is Jesus' first

meeting with the devil, but certainly not the last (v. 13). Jesus will be in hard combat with the devil or Satan from here until his death.

## **THE MINISTRY IN GALILEE**

### ***Luke 4:14–9:50***

The Spirit now leads Jesus to Galilee, the area north of Jerusalem and Samaria. This was the district of his upbringing, and he begins his earthly ministry there.

#### **4:14-30 Jesus arrives in Nazareth**

From the preceding section we know that Jesus was away from the region and his hometown. What is unclear, however, is how long he was away and why he departed. That he was baptized with all the people somewhere along the Jordan (3:3, 21) has led many to conclude that Jesus was associated with John the Baptist for some time before setting out on his own way.

Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2, a messianic text. Although by the fourth century A.D. the rabbis had adopted a particular order of scriptural pericopes to be read throughout the year, it is uncertain whether such a system was in place in first-century Judaism. If it was, then Jesus demonstrates his authority in bypassing the accepted practice and choosing a passage of his own. His concluding comment (v. 21) allows the listeners to draw their own conclusions.

The reaction of the people in Nazareth reflects the schism motif, which Luke develops from the beginning (see 2:34). Some speak highly of Jesus, while others are filled with resentment at having one of their own preach to them, and Jesus calls them on this point by providing examples from their history when the people acted in like manner. The references to Elijah and Elisha serve to describe the kind of prophet people see in Jesus and, indeed, how he perhaps sees himself. Unlike the prophets of the south, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, Elijah and Elisha lived in the north, and they, too, made the rounds raising the dead, feeding the poor, and healing the sick (1 Kgs 17:1–2 Kgs 13). Since Galilee is in the north, where much of Jesus' ministry is situated, both the actions and words of Jesus would have special resonance with the people. Jesus' comments draw the obvious conclusion. By their resistance to him, the townspeople are no better than their forebears who did not heed earlier prophets; therefore, they come under the same judgment. Jesus' insinuation enrages the people to the point where they try to kill him.

Nazareth is located on a hill overlooking the Esdraelon Plain. A rocky

precipice encircles the southeast section of the town.

#### **4:31-44 Exorcisms, cures, and healings at Capernaum**

The central focus of Jesus' ministry is the reclamation of this world for the reign of God, and now the battle begins.

Capernaum lies along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, where archaeological evidence points to its being a busy fishing village. Much of Jesus' ministry takes place in this locale.

Unlike the temptation scene in Luke 4:1-13, here Jesus encounters not the devil but an unclean demon. For Luke, both the demon and the devil may represent the same evil force, but they are not one and the same entities. The devil, Satan, and Beelzebul (see 10:18; 11:14-23) are synonymous terms for the Evil One holding creation captive. Demons, on the other hand, play a lesser role and are subject to the devil. That this exorcism as well as the following cure takes place on the sabbath is significant: the reign of God is made manifest on the literal day of the Lord, which, metaphorically speaking, is the *Day of the Lord*, the moment when the end times arrive culminating in the Lord's decisive battle with evil. When the Gospels were written, apocalyptic thought filled the thoughts of Jew and Gentile alike, and this Lukan scene reflects such a mindset. The Gospels are in a large way responsible for the fact that judgment of good and evil is an important part of the Christian theological tradition.

The cure of Simon's mother-in-law follows. The world between sickness, disease, and demonic possession was not so well defined in ancient times. None of it was good, and all of it was evil. Curing a person, therefore, would evoke the same reaction as an exorcism, a point made by the fact that Jesus "rebukes" the fever. Again, the event takes place on the sabbath, leading to the same conclusions as above. From earliest Christianity, a house located in the center of Capernaum has been held as the place of veneration commemorating this miracle, and churches havestood on the spot ever since to accommodate the thousands of pilgrims who continue to visit it.

The sabbath ends at sunset, yet people still come to Jesus for cures and exorcisms. The day of the Lord cannot be confined to the temporal cycle. The passage shows the melding of time with the *eschaton*. The demons always know Jesus' identity, even though the people do not, and these unclean spirits nearly always declare him the Messiah or state his divinity. Jesus prohibits them from speaking in order to demonstrate his power over them and their ruler, the devil.

Jesus leaves Capernaum at daybreak and goes to a deserted place. Tradition



has often located this spot along the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee, a place of volcanic rock and little vegetation. Luke, not known for his accuracy in Palestinian geography, ends the section by saying that Jesus goes to preach in the synagogues of Judea. This point of information is problematic. Judea is in the south. Luke's whole schema has Jesus making only one trip there, and it ends with his passion, death, and resurrection. The earliest manuscripts, Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus read "Judea," but another important codex has "Galilee," the district in the north, probably written thus to resolve the narrative contradiction. Most likely Jesus made more than one journey to Judea in his lifetime. Indeed, John's Gospel indicates that Jesus went to Jerusalem at least seven times. This verse (v. 44) reflects such a tradition.

### **5:1-11 The miraculous draft of fish and the call of Peter**

Luke is the only Synoptic writer to include the story of the miraculous catch of fish within the call of Simon, although John's Gospel shows a similar miracle in a resurrection narrative (John 21:1-11).

Lake of Gennesaret is another name for Sea of Galilee (v. 1). Fishing in the Sea of Galilee is done only at night. If the men caught nothing at that time, there was nothing to be had. That they listened to Jesus at all is indicative that they respected Jesus' opinion even when it came to their own profession. There is a tinge of doubt in Simon's reply (v. 5), and his reaction only confirms his initial skepticism (v. 8).

Jesus speaks only to Simon, and Simon is the only one to reply. Luke is preparing the reader for the leadership role that Simon (Peter) will play throughout the Lukan corpus. We get the impression that the crowd must have been so large that the only way Jesus could be seen and heard without being overwhelmed by the throng was to sit in Simon's boat just off the beach, the same boat that sails out for the catch at the Lord's command. The emphasis on Simon's boat is Luke's way of underscoring the disciple's importance on the symbolic level. Early Christian iconography often used a boat filled with people to depict the church, just as the church has long been called the "bark of Peter."

The miracle excites awe and wonder. Moreover, it represents the multitudinous followers this disciple will "catch" once he becomes a fisher of people in Christ's name. In verse 8 Luke uses the name "Simon Peter" for the only time and shows the disciple moved to repentance. Jesus then speaks directly to Simon in listening distance of the others. Jesus' call results in these fishermen responding immediately. They leave everything and follow, thereby becoming

models of the perfect disciples.

### **5:12-16 The cleansing of a leper**

In the Old and New Testaments, the term “leprosy” is used to describe a variety of skin diseases, including leprosy itself. Any skin abnormalities, particularly those ulcerating or scabbing, made ritual purity impossible. Whether or not the disease was contagious, the affliction was considered a sign of sinfulness, and so people so afflicted were separated from the community to prevent physical as well as cultic contamination. After viewing the symptoms of the disease, the priests made the determination on purity or impurity (see Lev 13–14).

The man prostrates himself and acknowledges Jesus’ authority both by the title “Lord” and by the supplication “if you wish” (v. 12). His action shows his faith, which Jesus recognizes. Jesus’ commanding the cleansing is an affirmation of his lordship. The injunction not to tell anyone echoes the messianic secret found in much of the Gospel of Mark. Of course, it would be impossible to keep. It shows, however, that Jesus prefers that his actions rather than his words speak of his reign. Indeed, Jesus relies on such actions as proof of his being the Messiah (Luke 7:22). As a means of evangelization, the cure has the desired affect of bringing others to Jesus. Rather than portraying Jesus as being another miracle worker among many, Luke notes that the crowds assembled first “to listen to him.” Only then were they “cured of their ailments” (v. 15).

Luke, more than any other evangelist, frequently shows Jesus alone at prayer, an activity hinted at in Luke 4:42. Often Jesus retreats to a deserted place or wilderness after an intense period of preaching, healing, and exorcising, as he does here.

### **5:17-26 The healing of a paralytic**

Although all three Synoptic Gospels have the healing of a paralytic, only Mark and Luke feature the bearers of the stretcher letting the person down through the roof. This story provides a number of details that describe the effect Jesus was having in his ministry.

The crowds he was able to draw must have been exceedingly large. The fact that Jesus teaches from a boat in Luke 5:3 gives us a hint of their size. In this passage the stretcher-bearers cannot possibly make their way through the people gathered in front of the door and must resort to unconventional methods.

Luke shows his Syrian origins here. The Markan parallel to this story says,

“After they had broken through” (Mark 2:4), a statement describing better the roofs of Jewish homes in Palestine, which were flat and made of a mud-and-sod mixture resting on wooden beams or stone arches. These roofs often served as terraces on warm summer evenings. To maintain their impermeability during the rainy season, they would be rolled with a large rounded stone to compact the grasses. Burrowing a hole to let down a pallet would have been relatively easy. On the other hand, Luke states “through the tiles” (v. 19), a detail reflecting the domestic architecture stretching from the Golan Heights up into most of Syria, where a series of stone arches commonly support a roof made of shingles.

Although many see this passage as the first of several “conflict stories,” there is no reason to conclude that the Pharisees and teachers of the Law are present with bad intentions, for there are no harsh words between them and Jesus until he forgives the paralytic’s sins. The Pharisees are correct in their criticism—only God can forgive sins—but they do not know the full meaning of what they say. Jesus, referring to himself as the “Son of Man” for the first time in Luke (v. 24), proves his divinity with the cure, and everyone, including the Pharisees and teachers, is awe-struck. Their attitude may change as Jesus progresses in his ministry, but at this point the tension is not evident. In line with the schism motif that Luke has developed (see Luke 2:34), this scene gives reason to believe that this group of Pharisees and scribes are convinced that Jesus does have such authority.

As an Aramaic phrase, the title “Son of Man” can be loosely translated by the pronoun “someone.” It is used frequently in the Old Testament, especially in Ezekiel and Daniel. It gains specific import, however, in the latter book, which reads, “As the visions during the night continued, I saw One like a son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven; When he reached the Ancient One and was presented before him, He received dominion, glory, and kinship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed” (7:13-14). This quotation from Daniel is seminal for formation of the Christian understanding of Jesus’ identity, and it is this reference, combined with the cure, which causes the crowd and the Pharisees to be awe-struck. They are able to make the connection between the miracle and the person performing it.

The event itself is a good example of the incarnational character of Jesus’ mission. Forgiveness of sins and spiritual well-being are not separated from physical wholeness and restoration. The Son of Man does not ignore the material world or the suffering of those living in it. By the double action of forgiving sins

and curing the paralysis, Jesus shows that God's beloved creatures are redeemed in this life as well as the next.

### **5:27-32 The call of Levi, the tax collector**

The Jewish people detested tax collectors for good reason. On the religious level, tax collectors made themselves idolaters by cooperating with the Romans; thus they at least tacitly acclaimed Caesar's lordship. Dealing with Roman coinage, which featured an engraving of the emperor, would support such an accusation. On the nationalistic plane, by working for the Romans, Jewish tax collectors betrayed their people. They received their positions by bidding themselves out as agents to the Roman State. The Romans assessed the sum a district should provide to the emperor; the Roman officials demanded a surcharge for themselves, and the collectors were bound to bring in both while taking any extra as their remuneration. They could and would sell whole families into slavery in order to meet their demands. This position made them extortionists, both symbolically and literally.

All three Synoptic Gospels contain this story. Levi sits at the "customs post" (*telōnion* in Greek). This detail tells us that Levi taxed goods going from one political jurisdiction to another. Since nearly eighty percent of Jesus' ministry occurs along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, this customs post was most likely located at the mouth of the Jordan River, which formed the border between Galilee, under Herod Antipas, and Gaulanitis, under his brother Philip. The alacrity with which Levi leaves his post at the customs house indicates that his heart was predisposed to conversion before his encounter with Christ; Jesus' call is the catalyst causing the move toward repentance.

Levi's great banquet (*dochē* in Greek) with a large number of invitees underscores his wealth (v. 29). Luke's version differs from the Matthean (9:9-13) and Markan (2:13-17) accounts in several ways. Whereas the other two Synoptics specify that the Pharisees and scribes see Jesus in attendance and then speak to his disciples, Luke simply states that the Pharisees "complained" to his disciples, which leads one to believe that they were at the celebration. Were the Pharisees invited and only saw the rest of the company when they arrived? Would they have gone to a tax collector's banquet in the first place? Whatever the answer, Luke wants the reader to know that the Pharisees were in close proximity to Jesus. Unlike the preceding passage of the paralytic, where friction is not necessarily evident between Jesus and the Pharisees, here Luke describes the encounter between the two with the use of the Greek verb *gongyzō*, "to

grumble against someone” or “complain,” indicating that some visible tension has arisen between them (v. 30).

The parallel accounts in the other two Synoptics show “Matthew” and “Levi, son of Alphaeus” as the names of the tax collector, but Luke reads “Levi,” a name suggesting that he comes from a Levitical family and therefore would have some kind of priestly function (see Deut 31:9; Josh 13:14). Certainly Luke could have shortened Mark’s reading by dropping the identifier “son of Alphaeus.” The name “Levi” itself, however, contains overtones of the impending messianic age.

In Malachi 3:3 we read, “and he will purify the sons of Levi, / Refining them like gold or like silver / that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD.” This prophet emphasizes the impending Day of the Lord as well as the point that a messenger will come to prepare the way (Mal 3:1). Luke gives attention to John the Baptist as well as to the Day of the Lord. That Levi leaves his functions at the customs post is a sign that this remarkable day has arrived. Hence the feast, which the now repentant Levi holds, prefigures the heavenly banquet. By calling this former tax collector to a new life, the Lord Jesus has purified the sons of Levi. Note as well that with this passage Luke has blended the ministries of the Baptist and Jesus.

### **5:33-39 Feasting and fasting, new and old**

Comparing the three Synoptic versions of this story, we see that Matthew has the disciples of John the Baptist asking Jesus why his disciples do not fast (Matt 9:14). Mark has “people” inquiring, but with a reference to both John’s disciples and the Pharisees (Mark 2:18). Luke is obviously editing material that has come through Mark. The antecedent of the pronoun “they” (Luke 5:33) is difficult to identify. Since further on in the verse there is mention of the Pharisees in the third person, “the disciples of the Pharisees do the same,” it would seem that the scribes are asking the question. As a professional class of writers who knew the written law, they would not necessarily be as prone to follow the oral traditions promulgated by the Pharisees, even though they may have very well been aware of them.

In addition, the thematic content supports the scribes as the ones interrogating Jesus. This question about eating habits follows within the context of Levi’s great banquet (Luke 5:27-32). A similar controversy over feasting and fasting arises further on in Jesus’ ministry (Luke 7:31-35). It seems obvious that Jesus has developed a reputation for being one who enjoys good food and wine,

and according to the Gospel account, this accusation is not without basis. Not only does he use banquet imagery in much of his preaching, but he is frequently seen at dinner feasts with Pharisees, tax collectors, and sinners. Indeed, Jesus refers to himself as a bridegroom in this passage, thus making his ministry on earth a wedding banquet filled with the joy and the promise of new life. It is the Day of the Lord.

This passage reflects the tensions existing between the Christian movement and Pharisaic Judaism. Although Luke goes to great lengths to demonstrate Christianity's roots in Jewish tradition, particularly in the prophets (see Luke 1–2), the religious practices of the early Pharisees and Christians were incompatible. This irreconcilability stands as the background to the passage.

The parable about new and old patches, cloaks, and wineskins has a twist. The lesson about cloth and wineskins is easy to follow, and the conclusions are based on common sense. One uses old cloth to patch new, not vice versa; the fermentation of new wine needs the elasticity of new skins, not the brittleness of old ones. The summarizing statement, a verse that only Luke shows, however, is ironic: “[And] no one who has been drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good’ ” (v. 39). After a discourse on the desirability of leaving the old for the new, Jesus concludes by admitting that we often prefer the comfort of the old to the challenges of the new, particularly when we see nothing wrong or bad with the old. On the other hand, the examination of the metaphor shows that, in this case, there is something wrong and bad about the old. Threadbare clothing is of little use to anyone, and wineskins can be used only once. We must not let comfort and security blind us to the blessings of the kingdom.

Jesus' point is that the life of a disciple is not a dour regimen of religious protocol, but a life of joy. We should not let self-complacency blind us to the banquet the Bridegroom has ushered in, a banquet that begins now even as we wait to see its fullness in the yet-to-come.

### **6:1-11 Debates about the sabbath**

The Mosaic prohibition against work on the sabbath recurs in many places throughout the Pentateuch. The legislation first surfaces in Exodus 16:23-29, where Moses directs the Israelites on how to collect the manna the Lord has given them. They are to gather enough for the day at hand and leave none for the next day. This instruction is in force until the sixth day, when they are to gather twice as much for the following sabbath. Interestingly, when some disobey Moses by keeping some manna longer than they are supposed to, the cache

becomes rotten and wormy. When the leftovers are saved for the sabbath, however, the manna remains edible. This Exodus account gives rise to further legislation and consequent debates on what constitutes work on the sabbath.

The controversy revolves around sabbath regulation. If the disciples performed a similar action on any other day of the week, they would have been within their rights (Deut 23:25). Here, however, not only are the disciples in Luke 6:1-5 violating prohibitions against harvesting fields and threshing grain, but by carrying goods, they are also guilty of breaking a sabbath law (see Num 15:32). Jesus' reply to the Pharisees is nearly the same in the other two Synoptic parallels (see Matt 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28).

The incident to which Luke refers is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-7. Jesus' point is that Pharisees overlook David's infractions, who, with his men, is guilty of breaking more laws than the disciples are. Yet the Pharisees become indignant at Jesus for a less serious offense, and he is the Lord of the sabbath. This moment is one of messianic revelation, but the Pharisees' legalism blinds them to it. The passage ends with "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath" (v. 5), a verse that introduces another story on violating the sabbath.

The issue at hand is not that Jesus cures but that he cures on the sabbath, something that is considered work. As with the exorcism of the demoniac (Luke 4:31-37), the sabbath or Lord's Day here is also considered the eschatological Day of the Lord, when suffering will cease and wholeness will be restored. Jesus tries to make that point when he addresses the assembly (v. 9), and he proves his lordship in restoring the man's withered hand (v. 10). Seeing that Jesus' argument and actions are unassailable, the scribes and Pharisees become incensed.

It is important to note that Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees reflect more the tension within the early Christian community concerning Jews and Jewish practice than they do between Jesus and the Jews. Both Jews and Gentiles saw themselves as followers of Christ, and passages such as these show the points of contention both inside and outside the Christian community. Thus, when Jesus castigates the Pharisees in this passage, we see and hear the early debates within the Jewish-Christian community.

### **6:12-16 The mission of the Twelve**

There is a noticeable shift of direction in this scene. Away from the synagogues, towns, and people, Jesus goes "to the mountain to pray" (v. 12) in an all-night vigil. The exact mountain is unknown, though the use of the definite

article indicates that Lukan tradition must have had some specific mountain in mind. Galilee has many high places that could qualify as quiet retreats for prayer, but two are the most likely promontories: Mount Hermon, rising from the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee, and Mount Tabor, south of the sea, visible from Nazareth and on the Jezreel Plain. They both have been traditional places of prayer from earliest antiquity (see Ps 89:13), although Tabor is the more accessible of the two.

Jesus selects from all his disciples twelve men who will have a share in his ministry. The names of the Twelve do not match the lists of the other Gospels, nor do they correspond with what Luke writes in his second volume (see Acts 1:13). In fact, none of the lists in the Synoptics are in exact agreement with each other. How do we account for the fact that the apostles (and only Luke and Matthew call these men apostles) differ, especially when the early church placed so much emphasis on apostolic foundation in determining whether a community was orthodox or that its writings should be included in the canon? One suggestion for the variety of names is that each Gospel writer is recalling the representative figures peculiar to the community for which he is writing. These figures may have known or worked with one or more of what came to be called “the Twelve.” All four Gospels agree that Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus, however.

After the night in prayer, Jesus returns to his ministry, except now the people come to him.

### **6:17-19 Ministering to a great multitude**

The crowd’s various lands of origin give the reader insight into Luke’s geographical understanding as well as his theological agenda. The commission described in Acts 1:8 reads: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In the Acts of the Apostles, the apostolic mission follows that trajectory. Here in this passage, however, “Samaria” and the “ends of the earth” are not included. The explanation can be found in Luke 9:52-53, where Jesus and his disciples are not welcomed in the Samaritan village. Samaria’s time will come, and so will the proclamation to the ends of the earth. For now, Tyre and Sidon, as seaports and in pagan territory, represent for Luke the future direction of the Christian movement. In this passage Luke paints a picture of a mission at the threshold.

### **6:20-49 Sermon on the Plain**

The Sermon on the Plain evidences four sections: the Beatitudes, the



exhortations, the analogy of trees and fruit, and the parable of the two houses.

*Beatitudes.* Jesus descends the mountain before preaching. The Moses typology, so much a part of Matthew's Gospel, does not exist in Luke. He raises his eyes towards his disciples, and addresses the people (v. 20), a simple gesture that calls forth discipleship on the part of the crowd. Because Luke has his Gentile audience in mind, he does not include the *lex talionis* found in Matthew 5:38. Certainly not as quoted or well known as Matthew's Beatitudes, the Lukan redaction is also shorter. Most critics believe that both Matthew and Luke use Q as the source material for their respective versions.

The great reversal theme, first outlined in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), recurs here: the poor will inherit the kingdom, the hungry will be satisfied, those weeping will laugh. Luke addresses the people in the second person, whereas Matthew uses the third person. For this reason, some maintain that Luke foresees an immediate resolution to the suffering of the outcast while holding that Matthew pushes justice into the *eschaton*. The interpretation of the Lukan Beatitudes is not that simple, however. Because the Lukan eschatological vision surfaces through the juxtaposition of the Woes in verses 24-26, there is no reason to assume that Luke sees the resolution of the tension between the blessed and the woebegone occurring only within this lifetime. Likewise, Matthew's Beatitudes challenge people to address social injustices in this world.

Luke, like Matthew, places suffering and reward within the context of the Old Testament, in which true prophets faced torture and death, while the false ones found worldly grace and favor. As the Gospel narrative continues, the reader sees Jesus encountering a similar fate. The heart of the message is that we do God's will on earth to relieve suffering and oppression, realizing all along that ultimate mercy and justice will come only with the *eschaton*.

*Exhortations.* Luke goes to great lengths in explaining love of enemies (vv. 27-38). Human love should match divine love, a love that is "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (v. 35). This call to be "merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful" (v. 36) is a particular Lukan characteristic. Because Luke defines so well the boundless quality of divine mercy, Dante refers to the evangelist as the *Scritsa mansuetudinis Christi*, the "narrator of the sweet gentleness of Christ."

The lesson on judging others is connected to love of enemies. The context surrounding the admonition not to judge others does not refer to assessing the rightness or wrongness of an action or of its moral content; obviously, the whole of the Beatitudes contains elements of judgment. Rather, Luke is addressing

those who would play the part of God by judging the salvation or damnation of others, something only God can do. For those who would assume to take on that role, Luke offers a stern warning: they may end up condemning themselves. Similarly, those who extend the benefit of the doubt will have manifold blessings extended to them (v. 38).

*Analogy.* This comparison of a tree and its fruit is Q material. Matthew contains a nearly identical passage (Matt 7:16-20), but it is not as concise as the one we read here. The image of good and bad fruit and its association with prophecy echo several Old Testament prophetic utterances. Jeremiah performs an action of the good and bad figs (Jer 24:1-10), and a central metaphor for Isaiah (5:1-7) is the vine and grapes. Ezekiel has something similar (Ezek 19:10-14). Thus this short section functions as a reprise for Luke's reference to true and false prophets (vv. 23 and 26).

*Parable.* The comparison of the two houses (vv. 46-49; Matt 7:21-27) yields readings that reflect the geography of the two different communities. In Syria one would have to dig to reach the bedrock upon which to build; in Palestine and Israel, the bedrock is exposed. Syria has permanent rivers and streams running through it. Indeed, Antioch is situated on the Orontes, just one of several rivers in Syria. On the other hand, the country about which Matthew writes has only the Jordan, and no real city stands on its banks. The house for Matthew, therefore, is destroyed by wind and rain. The point in both readings, however, is the same: for one to follow Jesus, there must be care, determination, and full intention. The halfhearted who would try to be a disciple will simply wash away.

### **7:1-10 Healing the centurion's slave at Capernaum**

Although Luke shares this story with Matthew, Luke's difference is most notable in that the evangelist includes the Jewish emissaries who are very supportive of the centurion. Several features draw our attention.

The centurion, as the name implies, was in charge of one hundred men. At this time in history, Romans ruled the country through their clients, with Galilee and Perea under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas. Hence the centurion need not have been a Roman, even though he was a Gentile. That he was a Gentile, however, would have entailed difficulties enough, for a Jew could not enter a Gentile home without becoming ritually impure.

There are two words in Greek used for the term "slave." One is *doulos*, and the other is *pais*. In verses 2, 3, 8, and 10, Luke uses *doulos*, and in verse 7 we

read *pais*. Of the two words, the latter, which literally means, “boy” or “youth,” describes a more personal, endearing relationship. On the other hand, *doulos* expresses the servility associated with such a state. The translation here, with its use of “slave” and “servant” in the respective verses, shows the nuance between the two words. Luke contrasts the two terms in the narrative. When using indirect address, as in verses 2, 3, and 10, or when the centurion speaks in the abstract, as in verse 8, the text shows *doulos*. When Luke quotes the centurion, however, he employs the term *pais*. From this juxtaposition we can see that Luke is emphasizing the kinship the centurion feels for his servant.

The interplay between the Jewish elders and the centurion is notable. Although the centurion is in service to the nominally Jewish tetrarch, Herod Antipas, he is still a Gentile. Herod Antipas, as a Roman client, has to pay tribute to the Romans, and he passes on this expense by levying heavy taxes upon the population. Nonetheless, the picture we have here shows some semblance of mutual respect between the two parties. The Jewish elders say that the centurion “loves our nation and he built the synagogue for us” (v. 5). Furthermore, the centurion exhibits all the signs of faith in the Lord God that the religious Jew shows. It seems that Luke has described a “Godfearer,” a Gentile who found the monotheistic God of the Jews and their moral code appealing, but who was unable or unwilling to separate himself from his own family and ethnic group by dietary laws or circumcision (see Acts 10:22). Thus the Jewish elders in verse 4 can speak highly of the centurion. In addition, knowing that a religious Jew could not enter a Gentile house, the centurion obviates a potentially embarrassing situation by sending a second band of emissaries, this time “friends,” with the advice that Jesus perform his deed from afar. Luke probably included this passage to support the place of Gentiles within the Jewish-Christian movement. As Jesus comes to the Gentile centurion, so, too, does he come to Gentiles in the Mediterranean world.

Finally, we see a positive exchange between the Jewish elders and Jesus. Although Luke often describes a great deal of tension between Pharisaical parties and Jesus, the relationship between Jesus and the Jews is not always hostile, as we see here. The elders may not be Pharisees specifically but may have some position of authority in the community, indicating some degree of formal adherence to the Mosaic Law.

The ruins of the second-century synagogue in Capernaum rest on a foundation of an earlier one, which according to one tradition is the synagogue in question here.

### **7:11-17 The son of the widow of Nain**

This story is found only in Luke, and it is the first occurrence of restoring the dead to life found in this Gospel.

Tradition locates Nain on the southwest side of the Carmel mountain range in Galilee. That the prophet Elisha performed a similar miracle in Shunem, on the northeast side of the same mountain range, no doubt influences the response of the crowd here (see 2 Kgs 4:8-37); they exclaim, “A great prophet has arisen in our midst” (v. 16). Some commentators also see an allusion to Elijah’s raising the son of the widow of Zarephath, near Sidon in present-day Lebanon (1 Kgs 17:8-24).

In both these accounts the respective prophet resuscitates the dead by lying on top of them several times, and this point highlights the difference they have with the story involving Jesus at Nain. Here Jesus simply commands the young man to rise. The action reflects Jesus’ authority, and the crowd recognizes this fact.

### **7:18-23 The messengers from John the Baptist**

This passage is the first formal encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus. Though John baptizes Jesus in 3:21-22, he does so unknowingly. The infancy narratives show the accounts dealing with the Baptist preceding those of Jesus; for example, the annunciation to Zechariah and John’s birth come before the annunciation to Mary and Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. This pattern emphasizes that John the Baptist is not the Messiah, but the precursor to the Messiah. Such an understanding is underscored at the baptism and is further clarified here. John the Baptist has seen himself as the forerunner (see 3:16-17). In sending disciples to ask such a question of Jesus now, he seeks confirmation that Jesus is the Messiah for whom he has prepared the way.

The Baptist’s disciples in this narrative also play a role for the early church. At this time (A.D. 80–90) and even later, there was tension between the followers of John and those of Jesus. Luke’s construction of having John’s disciples asking Jesus if they “should . . . look for another” (vv. 19-20) serves as the Christian community’s invitation to the Baptist’s disciples to join the ranks of Jesus’ followers.

Jesus’ answer to the Baptist’s messengers is based on his ministry thus far, including the raising of the dead, as seen at Nain, which Luke places immediately before this passage. Jesus’ response draws on Old Testament prophecy, especially the sayings of the prophet Isaiah (29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1),

whose preaching is echoed in the synagogue at Nazareth (see Luke 4:18-21). In framing his words by citations from Isaiah, we see how Judaism forms the crucial context for understanding the Gospels and the New Testament.

### **7:24-35 Jesus and John**

Jesus' testimony about John lessens the tensions between their respective disciples as it extends a welcoming embrace to the Baptist's followers. Jesus, the true Messiah, has tremendous regard and respect for John the Baptist: "A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet" (7:26).

The schism motif resurfaces at verses 29-30. Some who had chosen John's baptism see the plan of God fulfilled in Jesus, and others who had rejected John's baptism also reject Jesus and his message. In this latter group, Jesus mentions specifically Pharisees and scholars of the Law. The analogy of the children in the marketplace (vv. 31-32) is apt for them. No matter what the message or the deed, many people will find fault with God's design, because accepting the will of God necessitates a change in one's behavior. It would be wrong to assume that no Pharisees or scribes were disciples either of John or of Jesus; the reign of God split that group as well (see 7:1-10, 36-50; 13:31-33; 14:1-6). The hardness of heart they exhibit here crosses all class divisions.

Lest we tend to overlook the joy Jesus had in his earthly life, it would be good to note that he seems to have had the reputation of relishing good food and drink, as verses 33-34 suggest (see also 5:30; 7:36-50; 10:38-42). In addition, many of his parables and allusions are based on feasting metaphors (see 14:7-14, 15-24). As seen throughout Luke's Gospel, attention to conversion, concern for the poor, and enjoyment of all God's gifts go hand in hand. A dour disciple does not further the reign of God.

### **7:36-50 The woman of loving gratitude**

It is often assumed that the woman is guilty of some kind of sexual sin, yet there is nothing in the text to suggest such a conclusion. The material concerning John the Baptist ("the poor have the good news proclaimed to them"—7:22) forms a good context for this passage. In the tradition this story becomes entangled with Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8, all recording the anointing at Bethany on the journey to Jerusalem. In Luke, Jesus does not turn toward Jerusalem until 9:51, so this occasion, in the Lukan literary outline at least, is set in Galilee.

Simon the Pharisee's lack of attention to the details of hospitality

notwithstanding, such an incident would be shocking in any case. Guests would have been reclining around the outside rim of a *triclinium*, a horseshoe-shaped table. While the left side of their torsos rested on elevated cushions to allow them to take food and drink with their right hand, their feet would be exposed to the wall's perimeter. Before the second century, the Roman custom was to have the *triclinium* open or near the *atrium*. Such an arrangement would explain how the woman gained access to the house. Nonetheless, she would have had to crawl around the outside rim of the table until she found the right set of feet before she could start the anointing. Even with the broadest, most accepting, and opened mind and heart, and even within the public culture of the Mideast, her actions would have been seen as suspicious or at least bizarre. Simon's consternation is understandable, if not permissible.

The text does not mention what kind of ointment the woman uses, but if it is contained in an alabaster jar, it would have been very expensive. The juxtaposition of using this ointment on the feet when the guest should have been anointed on the head accentuates the great release of guilt and shame this woman feels from having encountered Jesus somewhere along the way.

Jesus does not defend the woman by saying that she is sinless; rather, he acknowledges her sins and forgives them. The parable forms the interpretation of the event. Everyone is a sinner and everyone needs forgiveness. Only when we realize that we need the grace of Christ, do we see what a great gift the forgiveness is. This woman becomes the model of the proper response of limitless gratitude all people should show in light of the salvation Christ offers.

Simon's inner thoughts (v. 39) have an ironic twist. Jesus *is* a prophet, and he *does* know what kind of woman this is. That is why he responds in such a manner.

### **8:1-3 Women disciples from Galilee**

Jesus' ministry is sustained and supported by the resources of several wealthy women disciples; three are named here: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. Joanna's marriage to Herod's steward, Chuza, certainly raises speculation on how much Herod and his court would have known about Jesus.

Luke refers to Mary Magdalene as one "from whom seven demons had gone out" (v. 2). The longer ending of Mark is the only other place in the Gospel tradition that describes her similarly (Mark 16:9). Exactly what is meant by the "seven demons" is unclear. If Jesus performed an exorcism over Mary Magdalene, there is no record of it, save for these verses from Luke and Mark;

“seven demons” heightens the severity of her earlier possession.

The other evangelists do not name the women disciples until the death account (see Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25). Because he names the women here, Luke, who avoids repetitions, does not identify them at the crucifixion scene. He does name Mary Magdalene and Joanna as witnesses to the resurrection, however (24:10).

This group of men and women will follow Jesus to Jerusalem and remain there through the resurrection, but only the women and some of the men will stand at the cross (23:49).

### **8:4-18 Parables and response**

The parable of the sower and its explanation appear in all three Synoptics. Luke’s rendition, as usual, is a more compact version of this familiar story, leaving out the detail about the scorching sun, the shallow depth of rocky soil, and the trampled path. While Matthew 13:2 and Mark 4:1 state that the large crowd forces Jesus to preach from a boat, Luke has Jesus standing in the boat earlier in the Gospel narrative (see 5:1-11). Luke also underscores that the people come to him “from one town after another” (v. 4); Jesus’ reputation has spread.

In verses 9-10 Jesus offers an explanation for parables. The “mysteries of the kingdom” (v. 10) are most probably the intuitive knowledge that comes with the intimacy the disciples have with Jesus. Paradoxically, Jesus must still explain the parable to them. This explanation can also be a reference to Isaiah 6:9-10: “Listen carefully, but you shall not understand! / Look intently, but you shall know nothing!”

That this parable is one of the clearest makes Jesus’ commenting on it a puzzlement. Surely there are more difficult parables than this one that demand explanations. This dialogue, however, is the logical follow-up to the preceding one concerning the purpose of parables and an example of that intimacy the disciples have with the Lord. Its presence in the text most probably reflects the redaction of the early church in trying to underline the qualities of good disciples.

The term “seed” occurs six times in Matthew and Mark and four times in Luke. Most of the instances are in this parable and its explanation in all three Synoptics. Its use here and elsewhere shows that the word “seed” represents either the word of God or faith.

Naturally, among farmers the image is apt, and particularly so for Luke,

who is writing for a community that tradition locates in Syria, one of the ancient world's breadbaskets. The farmers at this time would not plant the seed in rows as is done today; rather, they would walk along broadcasting the seed in front of them.

Any interpretation of this parable should allow for the fact that there is no limit given to the number of times the sower casts the seed. Just as a sower will go out at least once a year to plant, so will the word continue to fall on the soil. The emphasis in the parable is on the soil and the soil's response, not on the seed or the sower.

The connection that the parable of the lamp has with the explanation of the sower and the seed flows smoothly from Luke's hand. In a mixing of metaphors, the seed that has taken root in good soil now becomes a lamp. The knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom, which we meet in verse 10, is catalyzed by the interpretation in verse 18: "To anyone who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he seems to have will be taken away." This verse is not describing the moral order; rather, it expresses growth in the word of God. Love and devotion to God build upon themselves and increase within a person to the point that others are drawn to God and the kingdom by the life of those who have let their seed flourish and their light shine. Jesus reiterates this theme when talking about the mustard seed (see Luke 13:19; 17:6).

### **8:19-21 Jesus and his family**

Luke is less harsh in recording this event than either of the other two synoptic writers. Jesus' mother and brothers are unable to reach him "because of the crowd." In the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, his mother and brothers come calling for him as if he were a family embarrassment.

The question of Jesus' brothers often arises, especially in the Catholic tradition, which holds that Jesus was the only child of Mary. Explanations that the Greek word for "brother," *adelphos*, can also mean "cousin" are not at all convincing. A better basis for the claim is also founded on tradition, which sees Joseph as a man older than the young woman Mary. This tradition holds that Joseph lost his first wife to childbirth, a death common for women throughout history. Jesus' brothers, then, are really Jesus' half-brothers from Joseph's first marriage. It is impossible to prove or disprove the details of Mary's perpetual virginity. Of course, the virginal conception of Jesus is not the issue under discussion here. Luke is explicit, as is Matthew, that when Mary was pregnant with Jesus, no human father was involved (see above, Luke 1:26-38).



This short passage redefines human relationships under Christ. At this time and place, the extended family was one's first and only locus of identification. To lose or be ostracized from the family was equivalent to losing all personhood. Jesus redefines the lines of association and kinship by broadening the family boundary. Now, the evangelist seems to say, disciples form a new family, which is all-inclusive of those who hear and do the word of God. These new bonds of relationship are developed in Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles.

### **8:22-25 The calming of the storm**

With the phrase "One day" Luke shifts from Jesus' preaching to his performing miracles. The Lake of Galilee, below sea level and surrounded by hills and mountains, is well situated for sudden summer storms to arise without warning. As the hot, humid air rises, the colder air comes rushing in, causing large swells in a very small lake. Recent archaeological finds suggest that the boat would most likely have been between eight to nine meters in length (twenty-six to thirty feet), two to three meters wide (seven to nine feet), and about one to two meters high (four to six feet), certainly enough space for Jesus and a large group of disciples.

Although natural phenomena could explain the miracle—these storms subside almost as quickly as they arise—the miraculous lies at the juncture of human experience and divine intervention. People today still speak of a sudden prayer as saving them from a nearly fatal collision. There is no way to prove whether this event of calming the storm occurred or not. The believer would not be wrong to follow the tradition, which says that it did.

The importance of this story, however, is theological. Up until this point, Jesus has been ministering in the Jewish areas on the western and northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. When he says to his disciples, "Let us cross to the other side of the lake" (8:22), he means the eastern shore, which at that time was in the pagan district of the Decapolis, meaning "Ten Cities." Encountering a storm on the lake while heading toward pagan territory shows Jesus in a battle. He is taking on the cosmic forces arrayed against his ministry, and he will not be cowed by them. Here a storm, which in the pagan culture of the surrounding region would have been associated with the god Baal (see 1 Kgs 18), obeys Jesus' command and everyone is saved. He is the Lord of the cosmos.

The story ends with a question, "Who then is this . . ." (v. 25). Luke has been prompting us all along throughout this narrative with questions or statements concerning Jesus' identity (see 4:22, 34, 41; 5:21; 7:16, 49), and the

evangelist will continue to do so (see 9:9) before Peter finally declares him to be the Messiah (9:20).

### **8:26-39 Exorcising the Gerasene demoniac**

Having safely crossed the lake, Jesus and the disciples land on the eastern shore, in pagan territory. Immediately demonic forces again challenge Jesus' lordship, but this time from outside the Jewish districts.

All three Synoptics include this account of the Gerasene demoniac. The name of the locale has its textual problems. In the manuscript tradition, an alternate name for "Gerasene" is "Gadarene," a confusion stemming from the attempts of various scribes to harmonize all three accounts. This attempt at harmonization was further complicated by the fact that Matthew 8:28 reads "Gadarene." The names "Gerasene" and "Gadarene" are based on two separate cities in the Decapolis, Gerasa (or Jerash) and Gadara, respectively. Neither is located on the Sea of Galilee, although Gadara is closer to the lake than Gerasa. Most likely each city's name was used interchangeably as the generic term for the area on the eastern shore, and exacting scribes, trying to address the discrepancies in the text, actually caused more confusion. The tradition locates the site at Kursi, in the northeast quadrant of the Sea of Galilee, which sits on a steep hill above the shoreline.

Not only is the man a demoniac but also, since he lives in tombs, he would be ritually impure to the religious Jews. He calls out to Jesus in a "loud voice" (v. 28), a signal of impending judgment. Unlike Matthew or Mark, Luke notes that Jesus had commanded the spirit to depart from the man even before the demoniac speaks.

Jesus demands the demons' name in order to show his authority over them, although he uses the singular of the noun. To know a name is to exercise control, and the demons freely give it, recognizing that they must be obedient to him. Luke alone states that the demons beg not to be sent to the abyss (v. 31). The swine, impure animals to the Jews, represent the demons' own uncleanness. In biblical Jewish thought, large bodies of water symbolized the entrance to the abyss, or Sheol. In his exorcism, Jesus sends the demons back to where they come from, the dwelling of the dead. On the one hand, he countermands their wish, and on the other, he proves to all that the demons had actually left the individual.

The pagan man, now free of demons, but bereft of friends and family due to his former state, wants to follow Jesus (v. 38). Jesus turns him into a Gentile

missionary going through the city (Gadara? Gerasa?). Thus Luke prepares the reader for the mission to the Gentiles, a major theme in the Acts of the Apostles.

In Luke's narrative of Jesus' earthly ministry, Jesus has been battling the diabolical forces in the world ever since his temptation in the desert. The victory he has with this demoniac functions simultaneously as a realization and as an anticipation of the *eschaton*. In the former, all witness the flight of a legion of evil spirits. Yet the decisive showdown with Satan has yet to occur, and it will not come until Jesus dies and rises in Jerusalem.

### **8:40-56 Jairus's daughter and the woman with a hemorrhage**

Luke follows Mark's order of having one miracle, the hemorrhaging woman, surrounded by another, the raising of Jairus's daughter.

Verse 40 informs us that Jesus has returned to the Jewish districts on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Luke, always the evangelist to find joy in the Gospel, specifies that the crowd "welcomed" Jesus. At this point the story of Jairus's daughter is introduced. Verse 42 prepares us for the resolution of the story, when the hemorrhaging woman enters the picture in the next verse and turns our attention.

The woman touches the tassel on Jesus' cloak (v. 44). The term "tassel" most likely refers to the fringes religious Jewish men were commanded to wear on the corners of their outer garment in Numbers 15:38. The Greek Old Testament, or Septuagint, calls these tassels *kraspedon*, the same word Luke employs here. The woman is not merely grabbing at Jesus; she wants to clutch the holiest part of his clothing, a sign of her faith. Fearing rebuke, she falls at Jesus' feet. She bears witness to Jesus' miraculous act in front of all (v. 47), while Jesus commends and blesses her. Her faith opened her to Jesus' cure (v. 48).

Luke keeps the narrative flowing by having a messenger arrive from Jairus's house with the news that the young girl is dead (v. 49) even as Jesus is still speaking. When Jesus states that Jairus' daughter is only sleeping, this crowd, different from the one that initially welcomed Jesus, ridicules him. The comparison between the people in the two groups is noteworthy. The first, not enveloped by the fear and dread of losing a child, are in better straits to receive Jesus and his message with happiness and joy. The second, however, watching the passing of the girl and seeing the suffering of the parents, are too preoccupied to concern themselves with Jesus' visit. The Lord's visitation, however, comes to them, too, with the resuscitation of the daughter. Once again,

faith is the operative condition for this miracle (v. 50).

Jesus allows only Peter, John, and James to enter the house with him. These three are selected out from the other members of the Twelve at the transfiguration as well (9:28). Peter occupies a central role in the Acts of the Apostles and the early church. John and James are the sons of Zebedee (5:10); the latter was martyred by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2), but what of John? There is a tradition that he is the beloved disciple, the author of the Fourth Gospel (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20-24), but this conclusion cannot be substantiated with absolute certainty. Nonetheless, Paul refers to James, John, and Peter (Kephas) as “pillars” of the church in Jerusalem (Gal 2:9).

### **9:1-6 The mission of the Twelve**

The ninth chapter of Luke introduces a shift in focus. Whereas Luke treats the Galilean ministry in chapters 4 through 8, chapter 9 turns the narrative’s attention to the disciples and the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem.

By giving the Twelve authority over the demons, and linking that with the kingdom of God and curing, Luke heightens the eschatological tone of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus empowers his followers to join the cosmic battle with Satan. This warfare begins in the temptation scene (Luke 4:1-13) and surfaces throughout the Gospel, coming to a head at the crucifixion.

The injunction to take nothing for the journey ensures complete trust in God. That the Twelve are successful in their curing demonstrates that the kingdom of God has arrived. While this passage is most likely describing the missionary activity of the early church, it does not discount the probability that Jesus had at least the Twelve performing similar deeds in his life on earth. The parallels in the other Synoptics support such an assertion.

The Twelve are commissioned and sent (*apostellō*, 6:2), from which we get the word “apostle.” On their names, see Luke 6:12-16.

### **9:7-9 Herod’s thoughts**

Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. His query in verse 9 echoes that of the disciples in the storm-tossed boat in Luke 8:25 and gives the reader an idea of the questions circulating during Christianity’s infancy: Who is Jesus, and, in this case, what is his relationship to John the Baptist? In the Jewish tradition, Elijah is supposed to return to usher in the messianic age. See also 23:6-12.

Herod’s wily and suspicious nature comes through in this passage. Unlike

Matthew and Mark, Luke does not report Herod's infamous birthday celebration, which leads to the beheading of the Baptist, although earlier in his Gospel the third evangelist notifies the reader that Herod has had John imprisoned (3:19-20). From the Jewish historian Josephus, (*Ant.* 18.5.2) we obtain the information that Herod put John to death at his fortress-palace of Machaerus in the Transjordan.

In this description, Josephus also mentions the important detail that Herod feared John because the Baptist drew large crowds. Crowds could always fall into rioting and insurrection. Eventually both Roman and Jewish authorities will have similar fear of Jesus and will form an alliance to execute him as well.

### **9:10-17 Return of the Twelve and the feeding of the five thousand**

Luke, as well as Mark, juxtaposes the return of the apostles with Herod's questioning about Jesus' identity. Herod tries to suppress the movement even as the movement continues to grow despite his efforts. Bethsaida, a town east of the Jordan River but on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, is part of the "Gospel Triangle," that segment of the land about which nearly eighty percent of Jesus' ministry takes place. Just south of the town lies a volcanic deposit of basalt rock and rubble making farming or habitation impossible. Most likely this locale is the "private" area mentioned in verse 10.

The account of the feeding of the five thousand occurs in all four Gospels, though Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark 8:1-10 also feature a feeding of four thousand. The action of first blessing and then breaking the bread has strong eucharistic overtones, and as such, provides eschatological imagery.

Other details play into this imagery as well. Fish, because of their abundance, often symbolize the eschatological banquet. They can also refer to *garum*, a relish made of putrefying fish that was in heavy demand throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. The Greek verb *kataklinō* in verse 14 means to sit or recline at dinner, another reference to the eschatological banquet.

Luke has the crowd gather specifically in groups of fifty, which divides into five thousand evenly. Such a refinement allows Pentecost to function as an interpretive backdrop. In the Jewish tradition at this time, Pentecost was a celebration of the grain harvest and took place fifty days or seven weeks after Passover. In time the feast came to celebrate the giving of the Law to Moses, but whether it commemorated the Sinai covenant at this period is difficult to determine. In any case, the abundance of grain at harvest time symbolizes the abundant blessing of the end times. That five loaves of bread plus two fish equal

the number seven underscores the emphasis on Pentecost. Of course, Luke writes about Pentecost in Acts 2, and that feast has prime importance in his work. The feeding of the five thousand, therefore, is one of Luke's ways to foreshadow the *eschaton*.

### **9:18-27 Peter's confession and the cost of discipleship**

Luke is the only evangelist to open Peter's confession scene with Jesus at prayer. Although Matthew has the most elaborate version of Peter's confession, the other synoptic writers recount it. In all three Gospels, Jesus poses the question to the disciples, but Peter is the only one who answers. Their comments about John the Baptist and Elijah recapitulate Herod's thoughts in trying to identify Jesus. Elijah was the prophet whose return would usher in the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist, as precursor, fits into this category as well, and mention of his name here reflects the early Christian community's appeal to the Baptist's disciples, who still feel that the Baptist is the Messiah.

All Synoptics display a set of three passion predictions. This one is Luke's first (see 9:44; 18:31-33). The context colors the moment. The eschatological overtones in both the feeding of the five thousand and Peter's confession take on a stark reality in the passion prediction. Yes, Jesus is the Messiah ushering in a new age in which all can participate, but that new age comes with a price.

An aphorism encapsulates one of the great paradoxes of Christian life: gain is really loss and loss is really gain (v. 24). In the Lukan narrative, these words prepare the disciples for what lies ahead as it encourages the Lukan community. The eschatological term "Son of Man," along with one of Luke's favorite phrases, "kingdom of God," reaffirms the eschatological dimension that must be a part of any disciple of Christ.

### **9:28-36 The transfiguration of Jesus**

Chapter 9 continues to focus on the small group of disciples, and once again we see Jesus at prayer. The interplay between the mission, eschatological feeding, confession, passion prediction, conditions of discipleship, and now transfiguration form a synthesis of Christian life.

What is the purpose of following Jesus, and where will it all lead? Luke as well as Matthew and Mark answers the question with the transfiguration. Many consider this event to be an account of a post-resurrection appearance. That all three Synoptics situate it within the ministry, however, militates against such an interpretation. It is better to view it as a foreshadowing of the glorification of the

resurrection. Placed within this context of passion predictions and discipleship, the transfigured Christ shows the disciples, through Peter, James, and John, the promise that discipleship can bring both to this life and the life to come.

Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, respectively, give their approbation to what the disciples are seeing. Elijah's presence also has an element of foreshadowing; according to Jewish tradition, he is to usher in the messianic age. Both these worthies speak to Jesus of the "exodus" he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem (v. 31). "Exodus" has a double meaning. Naturally, the reader draws on the account of the Israelites' deliverance from death and slavery in Egypt to freedom and new life in the Promised Land. "Exodus," however, can also refer to death. On this basis, Jesus' death is a deliverance from slavery to new life, and his exodus is completed at the resurrection and ascension. Because so much of the material in this chapter deals with discipleship, the meaning death has for Jesus is the same for those who follow him.

The voice from the cloud resonates with the voice at the baptism (3:21-22), but with two differences. At the baptism, Luke writes, the voice comes from heaven and says, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"; but here at the transfiguration, the voice comes from the cloud and says, "This is my chosen Son, listen to him" (v. 35). Because the voice from heaven at the baptism is in the second person, only Jesus hears it. At the transfiguration, the voice is in the third person, allowing the three disciples to hear it as well. The reference to the cloud is an echo from Exodus, where the glory of God's presence (Shekinah) is depicted as a cloud (Exod 13:21). God is present at the transfiguration too.

In Matthew's and Mark's version of the transfiguration, Jesus commands the three disciples not to say anything about what they had seen. Luke simply writes, however, that the three kept silent about the whole event "at that time" (v. 36). Although noting that the place of the transfiguration was of no importance to Luke, the tradition, based on Matthew 17:1 and Mark 9:2, locates it on Mount Tabor.

Placed in the context of the mission, eschatology, passion, and discipleship, the transfiguration becomes part of the promise to those who follow Jesus. As he is transfigured into glory by following the Father's will, so too will each Christian disciple be transfigured.

### **9:37-50 Exorcism and lessons on the kingdom**

This case of demonic possession balances the eschatological tone of transfigured glorification by interjecting an attack from the realm of evil.

Though the boy's symptoms seem like a case of epilepsy, and may very well have been, sickness was often attributed to the machinations of the devil. In the sense that goodness is from God and illness is not a good, the ancient interpretation hits the mark. Jesus, the one whom Peter confesses as the Messiah and the one whose glory is seen in the transfiguration, reclaims creation for God in the cure of the possessed boy. Only Luke concludes this story by saying that all were "astonished by the majesty of God" (v. 43). Not only does this bit of editing direct attention to the true source and goal of the exorcism, but it also enables the evangelist to omit verses that underscore the disciples' poor performance (see Matt 17:19-20; Mark 9:28-29). In his harsh words, Jesus shows his frustration in getting the message across to those closest to him (v. 41).

While all are marveling at God's greatness, Jesus predicts his passion for the second time (vv. 45-46). The redemption of creation will not be easy and will not be without suffering and death, a sober reminder after the transfiguration and the exorcism. The Lukan Jesus is emphatic about the suffering he must undergo (v. 44). Matthew and Mark do not include this heightened urgency in their parallel accounts. All three Synoptics, however, show the disciples afraid to ask for clarification about the upcoming passion. Luke states that the meaning was "hidden" from them (v. 45), a comment that ties into Jesus' frustration at verse 41 and leads into the instruction on greatness.

The disciples have difficulty comprehending the meaning behind the life and work of Jesus, as the argument about greatness demonstrates (vv. 46-48). With all they have seen in the ministry, all they have experienced by way of miracles, healings, and for at least three of them, the transfiguration, they still measure success according to the world's standards. The child whom Jesus placed at his side was most probably part of a group of children who would beg, pester, and tag along with these strangers for part of the distance through a town. Receiving a child like this is not always easy to do, yet that is the point of Jesus' action. Furthermore, in the society of that time, children were obligated to show respect to adults, not vice versa. The placement of this pericope after the second passion prediction for a lesson on greatness is particularly apropos.

The account about another exorcist (vv. 49-50) highlights the dispute about prestige and the rivalry the disciples have among themselves. The jealousies of the petty despots who ruled all of Palestine often prevented them from working toward mutual self-interest. For the Christian, the horizon line must be higher.



## THE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

### *Luke 9:51–19:27*

In all three Synoptic accounts, Jesus makes only one trip to Jerusalem, and that journey ends in his passion, death, and resurrection. Luke is the only evangelist, however, to magnify Jerusalem's theological purpose; it is the crucible into which Jesus' whole earthly ministry is funneled. Jerusalem becomes the city of destiny.

This point also marks the beginning of what some scholars call the "Big Interpolation," a large section of material that cannot be linked to Mark and, with few exceptions, has no parallel in Q. The interpolation extends to 18:14.

### **9:51-56 Departure for Jerusalem and Samaritan inhospitality**

Luke describes the shift toward the holy city most dramatically (v. 51). The phrase "When the days for being taken up were fulfilled" signals the end of his Galilean ministry according to a divine plan. "He resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem" shows an intensity of purpose in completing that divine plan. Luke's vocabulary in verse 51 breathes with metaphor. The Greek for "being taken up, received up" is the word *analēmpsis*, which means both "ascension" and "death." When combined with the "exodus" referred to in the transfiguration (v. 31), there develops the composite picture of death and glorification.

Jesus is going up, both literally and figuratively. Jerusalem is over 900 meters (2700 feet) above sea level, while the Sea of Galilee is nearly 100 meters (300 feet) below; he and his disciples must climb the Judean mountains to reach the city. Metaphorically, after the passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus will ascend to the Father, an ascension that also is his glorification. These events begin and, in a large way, take place within the time frame of Passover, the Jewish commemoration of the Exodus.

Luke's detail about passing through the Samaritan villages raises some questions. Jews in Galilee would avoid passing through Samaria as they made their way south to Jerusalem. The usual route was to walk along the Jordan Valley and begin the ascent at Jericho. It appears that Luke might be relying on some ancient tradition that Jesus passed through, if not ministered in, Samaria. John's story of the Samaritan woman at the well (4:4-41) corroborates Jesus' presence in that territory. Moreover, according to Acts, Samaria was the first non-Jewish region to be converted to Christianity. This short foray into Samaria

functions as a foreshadowing of the missionary activity that the Acts of the Apostles will detail. Jesus' rebuke constitutes his stand against vengeance and violence, as well as reflecting his attitude toward missionary activity (see 9:5).

### **9:57-62 Would-be followers of Jesus**

Whereas the disciples have already heard the discourse on the cost of discipleship (see 9:23-27), others joining Jesus have not. Jesus relates the proper comportment in three situations: one to a person who is ready to give all for the kingdom, another to a person who is asked to give all for the kingdom, and still another to one who wants to hold back from giving all to the kingdom. Jesus challenges them by using imagery and hyperbole. The curt answers he gives show the rhythm of someone hurrying with a direct purpose in mind, and the vacillation Jesus encounters with these three would deflect from that purpose.

To the first individual, Jesus underscores that personal comfort will often have to give way to the demands of discipleship. His response to the second may seem harsh, but in no way is it to be understood as negating one's obligations to one's parents or family. Rather, Jesus is seeing through what constitutes a lame excuse while speaking on a symbolic level. To follow Jesus is to enter into a life-giving relationship. There are plenty of people who refuse this relationship, and in this sense they are dead; they can bury the physically dead. The reply to the third individual likewise shows the immediacy of the call. In the Jewish and Hellenistic societies, family bonds were very tight and could hold one back from being a disciple. Jesus first addresses this situation in 8:19-21, and his answer here is similar.

### **10:1-16 The mission of the seventy-two**

The ancient manuscripts are evenly divided over whether the mission involves seventy or seventy-two disciples. Both numbers have a basis in the Old Testament. Seventy-two is a multiple of twelve, the number of the tribes of Israel; thus, by their going forth, a like number of disciples could represent the universalism of Jesus' mission. Alternatively, the narrative in Exodus 24 includes seventy elders who ascend the mountain with Moses, thereby making the disciples representatives of the Mosaic tradition.

Luke is the only evangelist to have a commissioning of a second group. In comparing the directives to the seventy-two disciples with the commissioning of the Twelve (9:1-6), we can see some differences as well as some points of contact. The Twelve are given authority over demons and the ability to cure

diseases. Furthermore, they are charged with proclaiming the good news. The seventy-two disciples, on the other hand, travel in pairs as they bring the good news to households and towns. They are told to cure the sick, but Jesus says nothing about exorcizing demons; yet, they also do so (see v. 17).

Both the Twelve and the seventy-two are to travel light and perform with a singularity of purpose. In this section Jesus calls attention to attributes of Middle Eastern hospitality: there will always be someone to invite them into his or her home. The seventy-two are also told not to abuse the hospitality shown them (v. 8). Both groups are to shake the dust from the street of those towns that do not accept them (v. 11). An important difference, however, is that the seventy-two are to go ahead of Jesus and prepare towns for Jesus' eventual visit.

There is much debate on who constitutes the seventy-two. Were the Twelve selected from the seventy-two, or did they stand independent of them? Were there only seventy-two disciples, or were these seventy-two chosen from a much larger group? Were women in the line of Deborah, Hulda, Esther, Miriam, and Ruth involved, or was the mission restricted to men? These questions are difficult to answer. The important point is that Jesus commissions others to do his work on earth, and as such, the church does that work in him and in his name. Indeed, like the seventy-two, the church prepares the world for Jesus' visitation.

Jesus' comment about Sodom places the Christian message in context. To refuse the redemption he offers is a more heinous sin than any transgressions of sexual morality or proper hospitality. Even the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon will fare better, since they can read the signs of the times (v. 13).

### **10:17-20 Return of the seventy-two**

The joy of the seventy-two disciples arises from the power they have over demons, a power given them by Jesus and only in his name. Jesus' response in verse 18 seems awkward to many. Some scholars have suggested that the proper translation should be "They have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky," with the subject of the imperfect verb, *theōreō* ("observe"), being "demons" in verse 17. Greek grammar can support such a construction. A conclusion can be that since the demons see Satan fall from the sky, they easily submit to the disciples. The disciples, empowered by Jesus, become agents with him in furthering the realm of God.

The section closes with Jesus reaffirming the purpose and direction of the disciples' new power. They are not self-serving magicians or sorcerers; they are

participants in Jesus' ministry. The disciples, like Jesus and those whom they help, find their reward in God, a point that gains in importance as they follow him to the cross in Jerusalem.

### **10:21-24 The prayer of Jesus and blessing of the disciples**

Luke frequently shows Jesus at prayer. Reflecting the joy the disciples display in their return, Jesus offers praise and thanksgiving to the Father. Luke connects this joy to the Spirit, who, in the Acts of the Apostles, takes on a greater role of consoling and fructifying (see Acts 2:1-36). Luke's reversal theme is evident in verse 21, with revelation coming to the childlike but not to the wise and learned. The whole monologue appears to come from Q (see Matt 11:25-27; 13:16-17) and is one of the few places in the synoptic tradition that shows Jesus explaining his relationship to the Father in a pattern that seems very Johannine.

The disciples, who went out on the mission without money bag, sack, or sandals, receive a great reward in their experience of life in the Lord. The prophets and kings did not see or hear the Messiah of God (Luke 9:20), but the disciples have seen and heard not only the Messiah but also the works done in his name. These works consist in redeeming the world from Satan's clutches.

### **10:25-29 The greatest commandment**

Jesus answers the "scholar of the law" or lawyer with a question. This tack precludes any trap or misunderstanding by unveiling the true motivation on the lawyer's part. The verb "test" in verse 25 is also applied to the devil in the temptation scene (Luke 4:12), thereby emphasizing the sinister quality of the lawyer's question.

Jesus turns the encounter to his advantage. The law that the lawyer quotes is the Jewish Shema, the prayer a devout Jew would recite everyday (Deut 6:4-5). The second half is found in Leviticus 19:18. By endorsing the lawyer's reply, Jesus proves to him and to all listeners that he and his message are not contrary to the Jewish tradition; rather, Jesus forces the audience to see his teaching as an elaboration or refinement of that tradition.

The scholar of the law, however, presses the point with his next question: "And who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). In this verse Luke states that the lawyer wishes to "justify himself," that is, to prove to Jesus in front of the people that he, the legal scholar, is in good stead in the eyes of God. Jesus challenges the lawyer further by responding with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

### **10:30-37 The parable of the Good Samaritan**

Upon the death of King Solomon, Samaria, the region north of Judea, became the center of the northern kingdom at the division of the united monarchy. The Assyrians conquered it in 722 B.C., carted away most of the Israelite inhabitants, and replaced them with conquered peoples from other parts of their empire. These newcomers married into those Israelites left behind, resulting in a population too mixed for the religious Jews in the south to consider part of the covenant. In addition, these northerners, holding only to the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy, maintained their religious cult on Mount Gerizim in Shechem, whereas the Jews in the south saw true worship as taking place only in Jerusalem. The animosity was mutual, as we see in Luke 9:52-54. Samaritans still live and worship on Mount Gerizim today.

This parable exists only in Luke and reflects the theological direction set out in the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. The shock value of using a Samaritan as the protagonist in this parable is twofold. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is solidly in Judea; thus the Samaritan is an unwelcome foreigner in an unfriendly country. The mention of this road also forces the audience to consider the possibility that he has worshiped in Jerusalem. Secondly, for any Samaritans who might hear this parable, this protagonist, by virtue of his journey to Jerusalem, would be a national traitor. On all fronts, then, he can claim no ethnic allegiance, and no people will claim him.

First the priest and then the Levite happen upon the half-dead victim. As officials in the Jerusalem temple, from which they are most probably returning, their prime concern is maintaining ritual purity. There has been shedding of blood, and if the man is dead, they would disqualify themselves from any temple service until undergoing the proper ritual purification, a time-consuming practice. They both avoid the problem by crossing to the other side of the road. The only one to respond mercifully is the outsider of two closed societies.

The searing lesson of this parable comes in verses 36-37. The lawyer would know from Leviticus 19:18 that a neighbor is defined as one's countryman and is limited by ethnic background. The parable, however, breaks through such an interpretation. The neighbor is the one who acts compassionately toward another, ethnic divisions notwithstanding.

Although the parable is prompted by an antagonistic question from a Jewish scholar, it would be wrong to think that this parable is addressed only to the ancient Jewish audience. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke has an evangelizing mission to Samaria. This parable would have been as difficult for Samaritans to

listen to as it would have been for the Jews. After all, the Samaritan is in Jewish territory returning from a Jewish holy city, and, depending on how one would want to view the tale, he aids a Jewish unfortunate.

The lesson for the Lukan community is the same for today's reader. To be a neighbor forces a Christian to go beyond friend and family and extend welcome and mercy to the outcast and even to one's enemy.

### **10:38-42 The discipleship of Martha and Mary**

Traditionally, many have seen this story, which appears only in Luke, as a comparison between the Christian active life, symbolized by Martha, and the contemplative life, represented by Mary. Some exegetes interpret it as Luke's subtle way of silencing and sidelining women in the Christian ministry. The Lukan context, as others have pointed out, challenges both these assumptions.

Mary and Martha share a common ministry in the church. They are models for both men and women of a partnership in service to the reign of God. In this service the love of God is the source and end of all human endeavor, which Mary remembers but Martha seems to have forgotten. The gentle correction that Jesus offers Martha is a reminder to her that work is nothing without its connection to God. For this reason Martha needs Mary as much as Mary needs Martha.

### **11:1-13 Teachings on prayer**

The Our Father or Lord's Prayer (11:1-4) has a revered place within the Christian tradition. With its references to the "name" (v. 2), "bread" (v. 3), and "sins" (v. 4), this prayer underscores a Jewish background. The differences between the Matthean and the Lukan accounts reflect a different theological nuance. While Luke, for example, does not highlight the separation between heaven and earth, Matthew does so by use of such phrases as "Our Father in heaven" (6:9) and "your will be done, / on earth as in heaven" (6:10). This discrepancy led many ancient scribes to try to harmonize Luke's address with Matthew's by adding the phrase "Our . . . in heaven" to "Father" in their versions of Luke's text. Luke's address here, however, matches all the other instances where the Lukan Jesus prays: "I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (10:21); "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me" (22:42); "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (23:34); and "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46).

The structure is the same in the Lukan and Matthean accounts, subtle

differences between the two notwithstanding. They both open by hallowing God's name, thereby affirming the divine majesty. They then move to Christ's intermediary role and conclude with a human petition.

Many see Luke's use of "sins" as his way of demonstrating Christ's efficacy. With his merciful forgiveness manifested in his passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus defeats Satan by breaking the vicious circle of suffering, fear, hate, and revenge the devil uses to hold humankind in thrall. The person at prayer asks Christ to forgive, and Christ has done so; therefore the person must also forgive.

Matthew's version of the Our Father (see Matt 6:9-13) is better known; indeed, this title for the prayer comes from the Matthew's account and not from Luke's. It is Matthew's rendition that also appears to be the basis for the Our Father found in the early Christian work called the *Didache* (8:2). The *Didache's* version of the prayer became the form used throughout the centuries and includes the doxology that many Christian churches use in their worship. With the Lord's Prayer as a background, Luke continues the teaching on prayer with the parable of the importunate friend, a reading found only in Luke. Luke's wry comparison between divine response and human reaction—"if he does not get up to give him the loaves because of their friendship, he will get up to give him whatever he needs because of his persistence"—is echoed in the Lukan parable of the persistent widow (18:1-8). The point is that if humans will act on behalf of the petitioner solely from self-serving interest, how much more will God act from love. According to the Palestinian-Jewish custom of the day, the whole family slept on floor bedding in a single room, above the animals. To open the door would not only rouse the family but would also cause a fuss with the livestock, and all in the dark.

Luke tells us how prayers are answered (11:9-13). In his schema they have a natural, thematic, and visual flow from the parable. Someone coming at night would have to *seek* the house and door of a friend. Once found, he or she would have to *knock* at the door persistently to rouse the inhabitant to *open* it. The references to a snake and a scorpion provide insight into human response to an answered prayer. The listener or hearer would answer the rhetorical questions in verses 11-12 with a firm "None!" Such imagery, however, calls a person to faith. What might appear to be a snake or a scorpion at first glance might actually be the granted request. Again, the reader encounters Luke's analogical style based on divine response and human reaction (11:13).

### **11:14-23 The Beelzebul controversy**

Each Gospel shows some version of the Beelzebul controversy. Although much of this section is from Q, there is evidence of what is called a “Marcan-Q Overlap”; that is, Q material is intricately tied up with Marcan narrative. A comparison between Matthew 12:29, Luke 11:20-21, and Mark 3:27 is such an example. To be sure, there are no Johannine parallels to the synoptic readings here, but there are certainly traces of such accusations against Jesus at several points in the Fourth Gospel: John 7:20; 8:48-52; 10:20-21. This multiple attestation makes certain the conclusion that Jesus was accused of being in league with the devil during his ministry.

Luke uses this pericope as one of the defining moments in his two-volume narrative. Whereas Matthew and Mark both state that someone must first tie up the strong man, Luke states that someone must overcome or be victorious over the strong man (11:22). There has been evidence of victory all along in the Lukan text.

### **11:24-26 The return of the evil spirit**

Luke sees the contest with Satan as a real battle, and the enemy does not relinquish control easily. The house to which the seven other evil spirits return is the same good one from which the unclean spirit had previously departed. Their roaming through “arid regions searching for rest” stands as a metaphor for those people who do not fill their lives with the goodness of God. Nature abhors a vacuum, and thus seven other wicked spirits find a home within the now empty individual (v. 26). This understanding can be applied to Judas, about whom Luke states that Satan “enter[s]” (22:3). Judas never allowed into his heart the grace that Jesus brings, and thus the wicked spirits take up residence there.

In Luke’s Gospel, the battle between Christ and Satan, announced at the birth (1:78-79), begins at the temptation (4:1-13). Jesus has been waging and winning battles against the devil demons all along, but Christ’s ultimate victory over Satan, a victory of light over darkness, will come at the cross. This theme continues in the Acts of the Apostles.

### **11:27-28 True blessedness**

The narrative flow forms a juxtaposition of seeming opposites. After the long deliberation about Beelzebul, the strong man, and unclean spirits, a woman in the crowd turns the subject to blessedness, and does so by making a reference to Jesus’ mother. Jesus’ response, however, demonstrates that his call goes



beyond natural kinship; indeed, natural kinship might even be an impediment (see 8:19-21).

### **11:29-32 The demand for a sign**

Luke avoids redundancy. The narrative sequence has already informed the reader that people are testing and arguing with Jesus (see Luke 11:15), so, unlike Matthew and Mark (12:38; 8:11-12), Luke does not mention Pharisees or scribes badgering Jesus. Jesus simply continues with his teaching.

The book of Jonah forms the necessary background for any interpretation of this passage. The Lukan text in verse 30 is helpful in this regard by supplying the central element of that particular Old Testament work. That Nineveh was the ancient capital of the Assyrians, the people who ravaged the Israelite kingdom under Shalmaneser V in 722 B.C., sharpens the drama of the Jonah story. Jonah is the son of Amittai. Amittai is also the name of one of the prophets from the time of King Jeroboam II (786–746 B.C.). If the name Amittai refers to one and the same person, then it would have been understood that Jonah came from the Israelite kingdom just as the Assyrian Empire was menacing it.

Jonah is sent on a mission, therefore, into absolutely alien and hostile territory, to a land feared and despised by all his compatriots. After fits and starts, including a sojourn in the belly of a great fish (Jonah 2:1), Jonah reaches his destination and preaches judgment, with the result that the whole city of Nineveh, from the king to the lowliest beast, repents. This repentance is the sign of Jonah to which Luke refers in verses 29-30. The explanation continues.

In verse 31 Luke also has a reference to “the queen of the south,” or the Queen of Sheba (see 1 Kgs 10:1ff.; 2 Chr 9:1ff.; Matt 12:42). With this allusion the lesson works in reverse: the pagan makes the journey to the land of the true God. In both cases nonbelievers make acts of repentance or faith. Jesus draws a comparison and contrast between those within and those outside the pale of revelation, and in so doing, proclaims the wide invitation of God’s love and salvation as well as the breadth of human response to it. In the end Jonah, with his example of the Ninevites, and the queen of the south, with her pilgrimage to Solomon, will stand in judgment of those who reject Jesus.

### **11:33-36 The visibility of light**

These verses are a reprise of the lamp motif seen in 8:16ff. Luke elaborates the analogy here. The discourses about Jonah and the queen of the south in verses 30-31 above provide the example of how “lights” and “lamps” can further

evangelization. Matthew uses this Q material as well but places it at two different locations within the Sermon on the Mount (5:13-16 and 6:22-23). Luke, on the other hand, finishes this section with a wonderful simile for a true disciple. The Christian life involves the whole body and all human action. The way people conduct themselves determines the persons they will become. Filled with faith, these people, by their brightness will lead others from darkness into the light of faith. The light and darkness dichotomy in this Q material is reminiscent of John's Gospel.

### **11:37-54 Denunciation of the legal experts**

This section, called the "Woes," has a parallel in Matthew 23:1-38. Differences between the two can be seen in Matthew's concern for and knowledge of the Law, something that Luke, in writing for a Gentile audience, has no need to address.

The Pharisee literally invites Jesus to breakfast, indicated by the Greek verb *aristáō*. If Palestinian social customs of ancient times are in any way similar to those today, the breakfast would be quite substantial and would be taken around ten o'clock in the morning, but it would not be the main meal of the day, which is taken in the evening. The fact that Pharisees and scholars take issue with Jesus in the manner that they do exposes an ulterior motive: they wish to observe his behavior with hopes of gaining evidence against him. If they had really wished to honor him, they would have invited him for the evening repast. Jesus recognizes this plot and responds by revealing their true motives in front of all. He also exhibits the shallowness and hypocrisy of their deeds. Jesus' denunciation at verses 47-51 fore-shadows his own death. The system that killed the prophets will also, by implication, kill him, as verses 53-54 substantiate.

It is difficult to identify which Zechariah (v. 51) Luke is referring to. Many see him as Zechariah the priest, son of Jehoiadah (see 2 Chr 24:20-22). Others have seen him as Zechariah the priest, the father of John the Baptist.

### **12:1-12 In face of persecution**

We last read of the crowds in 11:29. Mention of them here returns our focus to Jesus' preaching. The reference to the "leaven . . . of the Pharisees" (v. 1) thematically connects this scene with the meal at the Pharisee's house (11:27-54).

In verse 4 Jesus calls his disciples, and possibly by extension the rest of the people, "friends." This is the only occurrence in all three Synoptic Gospels in

which we see this form of address applied to Jesus' followers, and it is another example of a tradition Luke seems to share with John (see John 15:14-15).

In a time of persecution, people generally go into hiding and maintain a secret existence. Jesus' admonition describes a situation in which no hiding will be possible, even if it were desirable. True fear should be reserved for the One who can cast a believer into Gehenna after the body is dead (v. 5). This phrase serves as a circumlocution emphasizing that we need fear only God.

"Gehenna" is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *Hinnom*, the name of the valley on the western side of Jerusalem. Often cursed by the Jewish prophets for the child sacrifice that the Jerusalemites practiced there, it is also called Topheth (see 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 7:31-32; 19:6, 11-14). In time, the Valley of Hinnom functioned as the city garbage dump, thereby making it ritually unclean. In both Jewish and Christian canonical and deuterocanonical texts, Gehenna is the metaphor for hell. As Jesus makes plain in other parts of his ministry, we have a hand in determining our salvation by opting to participate in God's grace. He emphasizes that our salvation lies beyond the reach of any persecutor.

Not even denying Christ in the face of danger and threat will bring eternal condemnation; only a sin against the holy Spirit has that power. The sin against the holy Spirit is the refusal of God's mercy and forgiveness when it is offered. Here, too, by having the choice to accept or reject the love of Christ, we have a role in determining our salvation.

God will not abandon those facing the sword. The holy Spirit will not only be present in fortifying the witnesses to Jesus but will also direct them in their actions and speak on their behalf, as Luke demonstrates in the Acts of the Apostles.

### **12:13-21 Greed and riches**

This section consists of a dialogue followed by a parable. The first half, prompted by someone in the crowd calling out to Jesus, succinctly presents Jesus' true role and ministry while offering an ethical and eschatological lesson.

The person who calls out from the crowd misunderstands Jesus' mission. The person errs by viewing Jesus as an arbiter whose judgment rests on interpreting the intricacies of a legal code. Jesus refuses to be cast in such a position, and he turns the table on the questioner as well as the brother. The issue, Jesus implies, is not who is right or wrong about the inheritance; it is about greed and avarice. If both exhibited less covetousness, one would be inclined to share with the other, and the other would not suspect that he was

being cheated. Jesus' ministry is to the lost, and both brothers are sinners. His action allows the two to receive his message. No one loses, and both have the opportunity to enter the kingdom. The parable of the rich fool, which follows (vv. 16-21), illustrates the lesson.

At no point in his discourse does the rich fool credit God for the harvest. Furthermore, he never acknowledges that the bounty should have some purpose other than satisfying his own desires. Because he is so selfish and self-centered, he dies without benefit of both his wealth and God's love. With this parable, Jesus warns the two brothers to guard against ending up like the rich fool—a total loser. An example of how bad it will be for someone like this individual is found in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31).

### **12:22-34 Trust and faith in God**

Matthew places this discourse within the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt 6:25-34), while Luke situates it on the journey to Jerusalem. Nonetheless, the lesson is the same: God's love is so abundant that he looks after every human need. In Luke, this passage provides the proper frame of mind and heart that stands in contrast to the focus of the rich fool seen above (vv. 16-21).

The Greek *korax*, translated here as “ravens” (v. 24), can also mean “crow”; in any case, it refers to a scavenger. Not only was such a creature forbidden as food to Jews, but it was considered a disgusting bird also among Gentile Greeks. Its repulsive character, therefore, makes the comparison all the more striking. Using the rhetorical form of the comparison of the greater, the listener or reader understands that if God tends to the needs of a repugnant carrion-eater, how much more will he care for his beloved people (see also Ps 147:9 and Job 38:41).

This same type of comparison is employed further on in the passage with the flowers, called *krinon* in Greek. Most probably it is the crocus, referred to in other parts of the Bible as the “rose of Sharon” (Song 2:1). Against the green Galilean hillsides in rainy times of the year, these blossoms give a dazzling appearance. Yet the spectacular color of the grass and flowers is short-lived. As soon as the weather turns warm, both the herbage and the blooms shrivel up. In a land with little wood, dried grass is often used for fuel. Once again we hear the comparison of the greater. If God shows so much attention to what ends up in the fire, how much more does he care for his people.

Luke introduces a social justice theme not paralleled in Matthew's version. The “inexhaustible treasure in heaven” (v. 33) comes from almsgiving. Luke underscores the lesson of the discourse with verse 34. If we make ourselves rich

in the eyes of God, our hearts and motivation will lead to union with God both in this life and the life to come. Furthermore, by becoming rich in heaven, we relieve ourselves of earthly anxiety.

### **12:35-48 The need for vigilance**

The metaphors for vigilance all make the same point: the Lord's coming, or parousia, will happen when we least expect it. Each of the examples, however, gives a variety of views of what one can expect.

A master returning from a wedding would come with his bride (vv. 35-38). There would be feasting and celebration associated with the home-coming, which the servants should be ready to facilitate. In a role reversal, this master serves the servants. So too will it be at the eschatological banquet, when Jesus will be the host. The Lord's coming will arrive with the shock and surprise of a nighttime thief breaking into a house.

The notion of preparation introduces a paradox: this passage seems to contradict the parable of the rich fool (12:16-21). There readers are told not to worry about the morrow, food, or clothing, but here they are admonished not to take anything for granted, but to be ready for the unexpected. The paradox lies in the fact that adequate preparation is the result of letting go of worldly concerns and values. The prepared person will not be attached to the concerns of this life, even though she may be immersed in the midst of them.

The parable of the wise and just servant likewise has a strain of irony running through it (vv. 42-48). A good foreman will not take advantage of those under him, and if he does, the master will depose him upon his return. Such a punishment, however, is reserved only for the servant who knew his master's will and acted shamefully. The servant who does not know the master's will and commits the same actions will get off with a lighter punishment. The parable is a lesson in discipleship that parallels Luke 19:11-27. Followers of Christ will be held to a higher standard than nonbelievers.

### **12:49-59 Division, signs, conduct**

Although this section appears to come from Q, verses 49-50 are found only in Luke's Gospel. The evangelist wishes to underscore that discipleship is not without its price, and the world will not gladly welcome the kingdom of God. Fire and water are both elements of destruction and cleansing, and as harsh as the imagery may seem, Luke uses them here to show the immediacy and totality of the impending *eschaton*. The more specific examples of how Christ's message

will be received (vv. 51-53) depict a situation in the early church, most probably within the Jewish-Christian synagogues from which the Christians were eventually expelled.

In Israel and Palestine, rain can only come from the Mediterranean and only in the winter, hence the reference to the west wind (v. 54). Similarly, the Sahara, Sinai, and Arabian deserts lie in the south and are the source of the hot, desiccating breeze (v. 55). The signs of the times should be just as obvious.

This discourse works on several levels. The historical signs are the political precariousness of the Jewish state during the intertestamental epoch: Roman occupation, political dissension, and corrupt administration threatened the society to the point of anarchy. On the religious front, the signs of the times were Jesus' ministry (see Luke 4:16-21). These signs are the same no matter what the period in history. Issues of social justice coupled with the religious and spiritual emptiness are signs pointing to the eschatological reign. The Christian is called to respond to them.

The section ends with instruction to the early Christian community itself (vv. 57-59). As a people baptized in Christ's name, they should settle differences within the community and not resort to the pagan law courts. Christians have a new standard of behavior that encompasses personal behavior as well as ways of resolving injustices. These standards extend beyond restitution and include mercy, redemption, and forgiveness. Such an interpretation does not mean covering up shameful or wrongful behavior behind a cloak of secrecy; rather, it means making the community a living symbol of justice and reconciliation (see Matt 5:25-26).

### **13:1-9 Sin and repentance**

The incident involving Pilate referred to here is one of the few places where he is mentioned outside the passion narratives, and it is very telling.

Many see Pontius Pilate as a weak, vacillating governor who feels overwhelmed by the vagaries of the mob, and, against his better judgment, he hands Jesus over to be crucified (see Matt 27:26; Mark 15:15; Luke 23:25; John 19:16). Luke's narrative counters such an assessment by relating this slaughter, for which there is no other record in the Bible or any other extant work. Josephus refers to an uprising of Jews when Pilate uses temple money to build a Jerusalem aqueduct (*Ant.* 18.3.2 and *J.W.* 2.9.4). Pilate ruthlessly suppresses the tumult by having disguised, weapon-bearing Roman soldiers mixed among the Jews. At a given signal, they begin to hack away at the civilian population.

It is quite plausible that both Josephus and Jesus are referring to the same calamity. Likewise, along the southeastern wall of ancient Jerusalem are visible ruins from a collapsed tower (v. 4) dating to the intertestamental period, that is, the two centuries between the composition of the last book of the Old Testament and the first book of the New Testament.

The lesson that Jesus draws from these events releases human suffering from the capricious judgment of wrathful gods, where many of then contemporary pagan cults had placed it, or even from known or unknown sinful behavior, as many in the Jewish religious establishment then taught. Instead, Jesus is saying that suffering comes to good and bad alike, and that all humankind stands in need of repentance and redemption. Someone's misfortune is not an indicator of moral culpability. John's Gospel (9:2) features a similar lesson in the healing of the person born blind (see also Ps 7:12-13).

With the parable of the fig tree (vv. 6-9), Luke employs a graceful thematic continuity from the stress on repentance to the value of the sinner. The fig tree is highly prized for the luscious texture and sweetness of its fruit (see Judg 9:10-11; 1 Kgs 5:5; 2 Kgs 18:31). Furthermore, the fruit can be dried and preserved for years on end.

The inedible variety of figs looks exactly like the edible kind. Moreover, edible figs can only be pollinated by the female fig wasp (*Blastophaga psenes*), which carries the pollen from the inedible fig and burrows into the buds of the edible one. Hence, for proper cultivation both types of fig trees are necessary. This delicate operation can confuse even the best gardeners, and patience is necessary to ensure a good harvest of the precious fruit. The lesson is that God will not give up on those who struggle with turning toward him. In addition, the great value placed on the fig tree characterizes the value of the sinner in God's eyes—not a reprobate or an outcast, but a prized possession, despite the possibility that the sinner may never “bear fruit.”

### **13:10-17 The cure of the crippled woman on the sabbath**

If Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, he must have originally met with respect from the synagogue leader. In fact, the leader reprimands not Jesus but the crowd of people who seemingly have come on the sabbath to be cured. The cause of the leader's discomfort, therefore, is not that Jesus cured but that this curing occurred on the Lord's Day. Healing was seen as work and therefore prohibited. Jesus uses this opportunity to make several points about his identity, his reign, and the world.

The Jewish sabbath, since it commemorates the seventh day on which God rested from all his labors, is literally the Lord's Day. Because of the holy character of the sabbath, the regulations against work were intended to give everyone access to this life in the Lord. Judging from Jesus' response, it appears that in this situation, the sabbath regulations had ceased to provide the spiritual renewal that originally had been associated with them. Jesus' challenge to the custom is successful only because of his authority. He thus gives the sabbath an eschatological dimension. Access to life in the Lord now becomes a foretaste of the heavenly realm, where sin and suffering are put to rout. This interpretation is evident in Jesus' reply (v. 16).

The reference to Satan in verse 16, combined with the setting of the cure on the sabbath, characterizes a central aspect of Lukan eschatology. Sickness and malady are viewed as a part of Satan's malevolent realm, which has made inroads into God's creation. Jesus' role is to redeem creation, to win it back for God. Jesus overpowers the evil forces and ushers in the eschatological reign. No longer dominated by Satan, the crippled woman now has her sabbath rest.

### **13:18-19 The parable of the mustard seed**

All three Synoptics show this parable. The mustard seed was considered the smallest of all possible seeds. The tree itself, the *brassica nigra*, grows wild throughout Palestine and Israel, but farmers also cultivate it. With small, bright yellow flowers and slender, dark green leaves, it can grow to a large, many-branched shrub or tree. As such, it is a metaphor for the small early Christian community, which has an influence on the world going far beyond its size and number to the point that others (symbolized by birds) make their home in it.

### **13:20-21 The measure of yeast**

This parable appears only in Matthew and Luke. The bread of the time would have been sourdough, as most bread was until the development of dry yeast. Once the dough was kneaded, pieces were pulled away, flattened, and laid over a hot metal dome called a *tamboun*. The result was a large, circular crêpe or pita.

Not much yeast was needed to cause a batch of dough to rise, so, like the parable of the mustard seed, the leaven stands as a measure for the Christian community. In this parable the woman who adds the yeast to the flour is the Christ figure.



### **13:22-30 The narrow door, salvation, and rejection**

With this parable Jesus indirectly answers the question put to him. Restrictions to entering the kingdom do not lie with God but with the human response to the divine invitation. Because Luke recapitulates the point that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem (v. 22), many consider this section as the beginning of the second half of the journey narrative leading to the city of his death and resurrection.

The conventional city gate during this period had one wide, high central arch flanked by two lower, narrower portals. The main arch permitted camels, carts, and goods to pass. Those who wished to enter and who had no baggage trains could avoid the traffic by walking through either one of the narrow gates.

Applying this daily occurrence to the parable, the lesson seems to be directed to those who drag along their religious or social status, their material possessions, or their own ambitions in seeking easy access to salvation. Jesus counters this attitude by extracting a lesson from a familiar scene. Just as today those who travel light reach their destination more easily than those with much luggage, so too will those who keep their eyes and actions on salvation find the swifter path through the smaller doors. Any attempt to interpret these verses as showing that Gentiles are saved at the expense of the Jews is based on a faulty reading. The setting of the story is Jesus' trip to Jerusalem accompanied by his Jewish disciples, but the Lukan community to whom this story is told is composed mostly of Gentiles. All are instructed, therefore, to enter by the narrow gate, a passage that is difficult but not impossible.

The introduction of mixed metaphors in verses 25-30 is a result of various strands of tradition redacted into one parable. The second lesson is similar to the first: one should not rely on status to enter the kingdom. To use a modern parallel, ticket holders who arrive for a concert at the last minute may still not get in if there is a long line at the gate; their reliance on their ticket stubs proves to be no guarantee of entry. If they had been earnest in their desire, they would have arrived early and waited in line to be sure of getting a seat.

### **13:31-33 The Pharisees warn about Herod**

Do the Pharisees come to Jesus as friends and allies, or are they simply trying to frighten Jesus into submission? In either case, Jesus does not alter his intention to head to Jerusalem. Indeed, he uses the occasion to affirm it—he must go to Jerusalem (v. 33).

Lukan eschatology once again surfaces with the blending of three

statements in verse 32. As in the parable of the crippled woman (13:10-17), curing the sick is seen as a successful assault on demonic forces. Furthermore, contained in this statement is a reference to Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection: "On the third day I accomplish my purpose" (v. 32). Jesus predicts his own death with his emphatic resolution to continue to Jerusalem, though, ironically, by traveling to Jerusalem he leaves Herod's jurisdiction.

### **13:34-35 The lament over Jerusalem**

This passage, a rhetorical apostrophe, flows from the scene with the Pharisees immediately above and is a fine example of Luke's narrative finesse. Matthew's Gospel contains a parallel account, but in that Gospel Jesus utters these words after the triumphant entry into Jerusalem (see Matt 23:37-39).

In 13:33 Jesus says that a prophet should not die outside Jerusalem. His words over the city have him identifying with that destiny, and he does so by using a lament, a prophetic genre seen most clearly in Jeremiah and Lamentations. To be sure, prophets were also slain outside Jerusalem, but given the presence of the temple within the city and the city's history with the prophets, Jeremiah and Isaiah make Jerusalem the major symbol of a prophet's destiny (see 1 Kgs 9:7-8; 2 Kgs 21:16; Ps 118:2; Jer 22:5).

In verse 34 the reader should note the feminine imagery inherent in Jesus' self-referential term "hen" (see also Deut 32:11). Contained also is the allusion to his entering the city in 19:28-40.

### **14:1-6 Healing a man with dropsy on the sabbath**

Dropsy, or edema, is characterized by a buildup of fluids, often in the extremities. It is usually symptomatic of a variety of diseases.

There are several similarities between this story and the account of the crippled woman (13:10-17). They are solely Lukan material, and in both cases the miracle occurs on the sabbath. The woman is cured in front of the synagogue leaders, and the man here is restored to health in the presence of leading Pharisees. Furthermore, neither the woman nor the man asks Jesus to be healed; rather, in both instances Jesus, moved by pity, takes the initiative to cure the individual. He explains his action using the rhetorical device of the comparison of the greater: if the Law makes allowances for saving livestock on the sabbath, how much more should one help a fellow human being on the holy day.

Unlike the passage about the woman, however, there is nothing in this story to indicate that the leaders were angry or that they had duplicitous intentions in

“observing him carefully” (v. 1). It seems that the Pharisees here are indeed curious about how Jesus would handle such a case, and, he engages them with his question (v. 3). Because they, too, know the Law and its provisions, they remain silent. Once again, the sabbath setting connects physical well-being with eternal salvation, thereby giving the Lord’s Day an eschatological dimension (see also Luke 6:1-11; 11:37-54).

#### **14:7-14 Proper comportment of guests and hosts**

With the man now cured of his dropsy, Luke continues to describe the action surrounding the dinner. Jesus observes the customs of courtesy and etiquette and ties these issues of daily protocol to a lesson about the kingdom. Luke calls this lesson a “parable” (v. 7), but its genre is closer to a wisdom saying. Only Luke contains this passage, although a parallel to verse 11 appears in Matthew 23:12, making this aphorism most probably a Q saying. It is also found in Luke 18:14.

The dining room would have been a *triclinium* (see 7:36-50). The host would recline on his left side at the top of the right extension of the table; the opening to the horseshoe-shaped construction would have been to his back. The place of honor would have been at the crossbar, making the position of the honored guest directly perpendicular to the host so that they could talk directly to each other. Succeeding places of honor continued along the crossbar and down the left side, with the lowest place situated at the end of the left extension; the guest would have to constantly readjust his position in order to converse with those in the lowest places. What Jesus notices, therefore, is a stream of guests jockeying for the spot perpendicular to the host while avoiding anything along the left extension, especially the last place.

In the Mediterranean world, an honor-shame based culture, the social gaffe of overstepping one’s station, such as Jesus describes, would have been a mortifying experience. On the other hand, being asked to come higher would have been particularly enviable. The lesson goes beyond calculating a social standing among one’s peers, however, and points to the proper disposition toward God and how we define our need for God’s salvation in our lives. Social self-inflation is equated with spiritual self-righteousness. Those who assume that they are righteous enough to let themselves into the kingdom without any regard for the divine initiative will have to give way to those who know their unworthiness and depend on God’s love and grace for everything.

Jesus then turns the lesson to the host. The Roman world ran on the

patronage system, in which the rich and influential would curry favor among their constituencies in return for support, respect, and fulfilled obligations. In such a society, a family holding a lavish banquet for notable dignitaries and lesser functionaries would be renowned for their generosity and would thereby garner a great deal of influence in their local area. Such would be their payback.

The true act of generosity in the eyes of God, however, lies in bestowing respect and dignity on those who would not only be unable to repay in kind but whose very social standing carries no prestige whatsoever. The reward one gains in the resurrection of the righteous (Greek: *dikaïos*) ties this lesson to the one Jesus teaches to the guests (v. 14). In both instances, then, humility before God becomes the proper comportment for entering the kingdom.

### **14:15-24 The parable of the great banquet**

This parable originates in Q and has a parallel in Matthew (22:1-14).

Banquets in the Gospel tradition always contain a strong eschatological element. Luke's creativity shines in this passage as he situates the banquet parable within the setting of a large dinner and gracefully folds the parable into the scene with the guest's remark in verse 15. The excuses that the original invitees give for not going to the dinner are legitimate. A wedding feast would last for several days, and one who has purchased land or cattle would have a strong desire to examine the sources of his livelihood. But these mitigating circumstances arise after they have presumably already accepted the invitation; it is the summons to enter the feast that they refuse. In a society in which a patronage system governs many areas of life, their refusals are a disrespectful insult to the host's generosity.

Moreover, the last excuses introduce an eschatological dimension. According to Deuteronomic law, those who have built a house, planted a vineyard, or married a woman did not have to go on a military expedition or engage in any public duty for a period of one year (Deut 20:5-6; 24:5). By using these exemptions to explain why they cannot attend, they call attention to the dinner. The *eschaton* will not arrive without struggle. In order to sit at the banquet table in the kingdom of heaven, one must value it above any other facet of life, and acting on this value will be a struggle of warlike proportions. The banquet therefore becomes a metaphor for victory in the battle on behalf of the kingdom of God. Those refusing to come to the dinner demonstrate that they recognize this point. They simply do not hold the kingdom in as high regard as their daily affairs, as noble as those affairs may be.

The metaphor continues. The rich and wealthy have no need to participate in a banquet. The poor in the nearby city and district, who need the protection and favor of a rich lord, jump at the chance to go. There is still room at the table, so the invitation goes out to those who have no relationship to the host, and thus neither the host nor these guests have anything to gain from each other. The invitation is a purely gracious act.

The lesson of the parable places Jesus' mission in a microcosm. The self-satisfied, self-sufficient, and self-righteous are welcomed into the kingdom, but their self-inflated importance will block their will to enter. Those knowing their spiritual destitution will enter the kingdom willingly, and the Gentiles, who have no legal claim or right to come and dine, will also be invited to fill the dining hall.

### **14:25-35 The cost of discipleship**

The Gospel of Matthew (10:37-38) shows a shortened parallel of verses 25-27. At the core of both accounts is Q source material, which Luke expands. The expansion continues into verses 28-33, a section that has no parallels. Luke concludes with a form of the saying about salt (vv. 34-35), which appears in all three Synoptics.

The language in verse 26 is harsh. In a reflection of the Semitic convention to employ hyperbole in order to make a point, Luke uses the Greek verb *miseō*, a term meaning "detest" or "abhor." The lesson teaches that no earthly attachment to a person, place, or thing should keep us from following God. Discipleship requires singleness of purpose, and this purpose is to go beyond natural ties and allegiances for the sake of the kingdom. Doing so will not be easy (v. 27).

The image seems to switch in verses 28-33, but the purpose of this scene is closely aligned to the preceding material and, in fact, explains it. Constructing a major building or preparing for a military expedition requires a great deal of planning. An architect or a general must calculate losses and the gains and make a decision accordingly. Being a disciple demands at least as much time and consideration. Disciples must acknowledge what they must sacrifice in order to take up the cross (v. 33).

References to building a tower and marching into battle may have been drawn from the life experience of the day. Herod the Great launched major construction in Caesarea Maritima, Jericho, Jerusalem, and even in the desert. Each of these projects involved a tremendous amount of planning to organize both human and material resources. Likewise, there was a major dispute between

Herod Antipas and King Aretas of Nabatea, based on the former's divorce of his first wife, who was a Nabatean princess, in order to marry Herod Philip's wife, Herodias. Ultimately, this dispute turned into a war, which ended when Rome intervened and forced King Aretas to give up his plans.

The whole lesson ends with the salt metaphor (vv. 34-35). In order for salt to lose its taste, it would have to cease being sodium chloride. Analogously, disciples who shrug off the cross cease being disciples of Christ.

### **15:1-32 Parables of the lost**

At this point in the journey to Jerusalem, Luke has constructed a series of parables and lessons dealing with sinners and their chance for salvation.

Luke groups together three parables dealing with valuables lost and found. These parables form a unit in which the central personage in each story line is the Christ figure, and the person or object lost is then seen as the sinner. Two of the parables, those of the lost coin and the prodigal son, are found only in Luke's Gospel.

### **15:1-7 The parable of the lost sheep**

Although this parable is Q material, Luke's introduction to it is different from Matthew 18:12-14. In Luke, Pharisees and scribes are grumbling about the tax collectors and sinners who gravitate toward Jesus. Their complaining leads into the parable of the lost sheep. The rhetorical question "What man among you . . . ?" (v. 4) relies on the common sense of the listener to conclude that no one would leave a whole flock to go after one lost sheep. The ridiculousness of leaving ninety-nine sheep in the desert to find a stray defies the imagination, but such ridiculousness is the point of the parable. Nearly equally ridiculous is inviting neighbors and friends to celebrate the return of the stray.

God's love for his creatures is so strong that it includes even the sinners, something that self-righteous individuals have a hard time appreciating. The joy that spreads through heaven also strikes our human ears as overmuch, but it emphasizes the divine welcome given to the repentant sinner.

The Greek uses *anthrōpos* for "man" (v. 4) and thus is a gender-inclusive term. Often in the Holy Land, both in antiquity and now, shepherds are boys, girls, and women, an interesting perspective for the story considering that the shepherd is the Christ figure.

### **15:8-10 The parable of the lost coin**

The Greek for “coin,” *drachma*, was of the approximate value of a *denarius* and was worth about one day’s wage for a laborer; the woman’s diligent search, therefore, is certainly justified. When the object of the search, in this case a coin, is compared to the lost sheep in the previous parable, we can see an increase in the stakes. No matter how valuable one sheep is in earthly terms, it is not worth risking ninety-nine other sheep to find it. In this parable, however, the other nine coins are not placed in jeopardy as the woman seeks out the lost coin.

As with the parable of the yeast (13:20-21), the woman is the Christ figure, and her intense desire to find the lost coin is analogous to God’s desire to find the lost sinner. Moreover, the parable says something about the value of the lost sinner in God’s eyes. Here the mention of the rejoicing among the angels (v. 10) echoes the heavenly rejoicing found in the parable of the lost sheep (15:7). In both cases, such a conclusion keeps the eschatological focus of the message.

We read that a woman lights a lamp to sweep the house, a detail that gives evidence of the Syrian origins of Luke’s Gospel. Unlike houses in the Judean Hills or even the semi-arid desert fringes of the south, which were constructed of comparatively lightweight limestone or sandstone, allowing for use of windows and other openings, houses on the Syrian plains and heights had a different building material and style altogether. In these areas the common building block was the very heavy, volcanic, black basalt stone. To support upper stories, the walls of these buildings had to be of solid construction and could not contain many, if any, windows. Consequently, interior living spaces were dark, and lighting a lamp would have been necessary, even in broad daylight.

### **15:11-32 The parable of the prodigal son**

This parable has had a great influence on Western art, being depicted in drama, music, ballet, and painting.

The story opens with the younger son asking his father for his share of the inheritance. Of course, it is for the father to decide whether his son deserves it, not the son himself. By his action the younger son communicates that he does not view the inheritance as a gift bequeathed to him because of his father’s good graces; rather, he sees it as his due.

According to ancient Jewish custom (Num 27:8-11; 36:7-9), an inheritance is the father’s property, which, according to the custom of the day, the father gave to his sons, although he was not bound by any means to do so. When the younger son demands his share of the inheritance, therefore, he is asking the father for a part of the father’s life. It is as if the son is requesting the father’s

very soul, an understanding emphasized by the Greek term for “property,” *bios*, the same word used for “life” or “living” (v. 12). By his request, the son is indirectly demanding the father’s own death. The father, however, instead of taking insult with his son’s effrontery, gives him the inheritance.

The young son squanders the inheritance on “a life of dissipation” (v. 13). The idea is that the son’s living is so extravagant, profligate, wasteful, and glitzy, that there is nothing of merit in any of it. Not only is the son jeopardizing his physical life by dangerous living, but the return of enjoyment on his investment is so meager that it makes the whole venture worthless.

To feed a pig, which represents everything reprehensible to every Jewish sensibility, would be a curse indeed. God-fearing Gentiles in the Lukan community would have been familiar enough with Jewish customs to know how low the young son descended. The son is absolutely alienated from the community. The pods (Greek: *kerátion*) were probably from the carob tree and would be fit for human consumption (v. 16).

With verse 17 the audience is prepared for the next part, where the son acknowledges his sinfulness: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son” (vv. 18b-19). Despite his egregiously bad behavior, he plans to ask for the status of a hired hand, which actually is how his father should have and could have treated him when he asked for the inheritance in the first place.

Father and son meet in verse 20, and the son begins his rehearsed speech, but he does not get to finish it. The father, so moved and filled with emotion at his son’s return, does not hear a word he says. He cuts the son off in mid-sentence and tells the servants to prepare for a party, and he explains, “because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found” (v. 24). Because the son never has the opportunity to call himself a “hired hand,” one cannot say that the father is refuting his son’s assessment. Rather, we the audience can see that the father has always held this son in high regard and has never stopped loving him. The father’s love and generosity toward his lost, now found son so border on the ridiculous that his actions preclude his wayward son’s expression of shame and guilt. We have here a loving father whose love exceeds all bounds.

This parable then switches focus to the elder brother (v. 25). By external measure, the elder brother has been obedient and respectful of the father, whom his younger brother has both insulted and grieved. The dialogue between the son and the father, however, challenges such an assumption of his filial relationship.



The elder brother, after citing off his own virtues, explodes in front of his father (vv. 29-30). The father, defending his own act of forgiveness, corrects the elder brother (v. 32). The father insists that the prodigal son is both a son to him and a brother to his other son. The one who has been alienated is now restored to the family.

The elder son is blind to his father's magnanimity. As an elder son, he has a duty to support the father in his decisions, a duty that he obviously shirks. The positions are reversed. Now it is the elder brother who insults and acts disrespectfully, while the younger son, by humbling himself, shows respect. In spite of this, the father still goes on loving, this time toward the elder son (v. 31). The father's forgiveness and charity maintain the ties of a loving relationship toward both his sons. As with all parables, this one turns to the listener, asking us to identify with either the younger son, the elder brother, or the father.

In each of the successive parables of the lost, that which is lost increases in value, from stray lamb, to a drachma, to a son. With such a progression, the worth of the sinner also increases in God's eyes, and the listener is left with the conclusion that God loves all as parents love their children. Furthermore, in the first two parables the shepherd and the woman are the Christ figure, respectively. In the parable of the prodigal son, however, it is not absolutely clear whether the father is Christ or God the Father, and this ambiguity, no doubt, is intentional.

### **16:1-13 The parable of the dishonest steward**

This parable appears only in Luke's Gospel. That the steward is clever to the point of being crafty makes the fact that Jesus commends him difficult for us to appreciate.

Stewards made a living by collecting rents and debts for their masters and charging the debtors interest on the amount owed, which would then go to the stewards' coffers. Here the steward is shameless in the lengths he will go to maintain his position. He is not trying to hide anything from the rich man; indeed, he may even want his employer to find out about his altering the books. His hope is that his cleverness may win back the rich man's favor, and barring that outcome, he will at least have made some grateful constituents to take him in. The steward's audaciousness in achieving his ends calls attention to Jesus' lesson. Anyone of us would go to the greatest lengths, no matter how unsavory, to ensure a secure place in this world; how much more should we devote our attention to the world to come (v. 8).

Jesus names the problem in verse 9. The term "dishonest wealth" reflects

the danger that inheres in worldly goods. Jesus warns the listener to use the wealth, but not to place any trust in it. Only trusting in God will lead to an eternal dwelling; everything else is counterfeit.

The narrative then discusses the conclusions one can draw from the parable by indirectly referring to the description of the steward (vv. 10-13). In verse 1 the steward is accused of “squandering” the master’s property. The steward has mismanaged, perhaps through incompetence, the “very small matters” of this world, so there is no reason to trust him in the larger matters of the next one (v. 10). That lesson is turned toward the audience in verse 12. Trust is earned, it is not assumed. Those who deal loosely and unethically with others should not expect others to honor and trust them.

Verse 13 is a Q saying that also appears in Matthew 6:24. “Mammon” (v. 13), a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic word, means more than wealth and riches; it can signify anything of this world that one relies on: titles, positions, privileges, and honors. To be sure, wealth is tied up with many of these perquisites, but mammon is anything which takes our attention away from God, the true source of life.

### **16:14-15 Encounter with the Pharisees**

Luke alone features this reproof, which, with the notice that this particular group of Pharisees “loved money” (v. 14), is tied to the warning about wealth above. Jesus directs the criticism at the human desire for self-justification and public praise. The performance of good deeds, then, goes only as far as human acclaim. In such a case, people will never do an act that may be good but unpopular.

### **16:16-18 Sayings on the Law and divorce**

The “law” in this passage refers to the Mosaic Law, the Jewish religious and cultic legislation, and reflects the context from which the Christian movement emerged. The evangelists and other New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament, comprised of books both in Hebrew and Greek, as the precursor to the revelation of Christ. Now the “kingdom of God is proclaimed,” but the ability to move into a new way of viewing one’s relationship with God is not easy; hence “everyone who enters does so with violence” (v. 16). Jewish Christians found that the change from the Mosaic Law to Christ required a major shift in focus, and Gentile Christians, at first not welcome unless they had undergone conversion to Judaism (see Acts 10; 15),

put themselves at risk with their pagan neighbors. Luke's Gospel stresses Christ as the ultimate arbiter of any interpretation of the Law (v. 17); in that sense, the law will not pass away, as the next saying demonstrates (v. 18).

Luke and Mark agree against Matthew in their readings on the prohibition of divorce. While Matthew sees unchastity as a mitigating circumstance for dissolving the marriage (see Matt 19:9; Mark 10:11-12), Luke's version of divorce legislation (v. 18) serves as an example of how the Law has lost its validity. According to the Mosaic teaching, a man could divorce his wife by simply signing a statement of dismissal; the woman had no similar option (Deut 24:1-4). Consequently, the woman and her children would be left to fend for themselves by begging and prostitution. Jesus nullifies this legislation by declaring that no one can divorce, and thereby demonstrates that the law and the prophets ended with John (v. 16).

### **16:19-31 The rich man and Lazarus**

This parable appears only in Luke and reflects the evangelist's overriding concern for the poor and for social justice. In the tradition this is also known as the story of Dives and Lazarus, the former name stemming from the Latin *dives*, meaning "rich person." It is one of the best known of all Gospel stories, even prompting Ralph Vaughan Williams to compose a musical score based on this story. The name "Lazarus" itself is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew abbreviation "Eleazar," a name that means "God has helped." Thematically, it is tied to the saying about God and mammon in 16:13.

The information concerning the rich man's clothing (v. 19) indicates that he is not simply well off—he is excessively wealthy. Purple dye was a costly commodity that very few people even among the rich could afford. These details heighten the contrast between the rich man and Lazarus, who not only has sores that dogs would lick but who even lacks the simplest garment to cover those sores. That Lazarus keeps company with dogs accentuates his dismal state, since dogs were considered filthy, undesirable animals.

Luke illustrates the theme of the great reversal in this parable, first outlined in the *Magnificat* (see Luke 1:46-55). In the parable the hungry are literally "filled with good things," while the rich are "sent away empty" (1:53). The dialogue between Abraham and the rich man amply describes the new state of things. We know that the rich man cannot claim ignorance of the fact that someone hungry is outside his door, for he refers to Lazarus by name (v. 24). There is even an arrogant tone in his request: he does not ask Abraham for the

favor but requests that Abraham command Lazarus to come down and refresh him. Most likely he treated Lazarus in a similar fashion when they both were alive.

Abraham, in his reply, ensures that the rich man knows exactly why he is where he is so that neither the rich man, now suffering the flames of the netherworld, nor the audience can conclude that he is a victim of a great misfortune. No, the rich man's lack of charity and responsibility put him there; indeed, the rich man's great sin of omission fashioned the chasm between the two. We are forced to wonder why the chasm cannot be crossed. The answer says a great deal about salvation and damnation.

The lesson is not that God is a God of damnation and punishment, inasmuch as it gives us an example of how much of a role we play in our salvation. The rich man was oblivious to the needs of those around him while he was alive, and now that he is dead, he is still oblivious, as his call for Lazarus's services suggests. Herein lies the danger of wealth that Jesus always preaches: power and wealth blind us to the kingdom of God in this life and in the next. If we are not wide-eyed to the kingdom and its demands now, as Moses and the prophets tell us to be (v. 31), we will not be sensitive to seeing the kingdom after we die. The great irony in the story is that the rich man needs Lazarus in order to be saved. Had he paid attention to Lazarus begging for table scraps at the door of his house, the rich man would not be in the predicament he is in now.

The last verse of the parable, of course, is a reference to Jesus' own resurrection.

### **17:1-4 Temptations to sin**

The journey to Jerusalem continues with further instruction along the way.

Each Synoptic Gospel has a variation of the warning against giving offense. Verses 3-4 parallel Matthew 18:15, thereby making them Q material. Luke injects a note of reality in verse 1b: as long as there is a believing community, there will be scandals. As great a sin as it is to lead one into temptation, it is far greater to do so to a "little one" (v. 2). Millstones, even one for household use, were heavy and expensive. The punishment suggested is severe indeed.

Where there is sin, there must be forgiveness, and Luke gracefully connects the two. We have another example of the mercy and tenderness that are so much a part of the Third Gospel. This mercy and tenderness, however, are not to be regarded as permission for further injury. Those who sin are to be rebuked, and if sinners repent, they are to be forgiven. The Gospel sees rebuke and

forgiveness as a means of achieving both personal salvation and social justice. On the other hand, lest repentance and forgiveness be exercised on a quid pro quo basis, the saying continues with the proviso that because sins or even the same sin will occur numerous times, it must be forgiven each time the sinner repents. We are to imitate divine forgiveness in its limitlessness.

This passage addresses only how to deal with sinful behavior within the church community, but for Luke, mercy extends to those outside the community as well (see Luke 6:27-36).

### **17:5-6 Saying on faith**

Once again, faith is compared to a mustard seed (see Luke 13:19), but the example switches to a sycamine tree (*morus nigra*; read “mulberry” in the text), a large tree with clustered berries. Both Matthew and Luke use the hyperbole from Q to make their point that nothing is impossible to the person who has faith. Matthew’s phrase, however, refers to moving a mountain, which most scholars believe to be the original version.

### **17:7-10 The attitude of a servant**

This piece on servants occurs only in Luke. The social world of the Gospel is particularly evident in this passage dealing with masters and slaves. The lesson is that Christians should not expect praise and honor for performing those duties that they are obligated to perform. Moreover, the saying counters the thought that salvation can be gained on human merit alone and without God’s grace. If our own deeds render us unprofitable servants, we have no other recourse for salvation than to depend on the divine initiative.

### **17:11-19 The cleansing of ten lepers**

The prescription to the lepers to show themselves to the priests is found in Leviticus 14:2-9.

The most common route for Jews in Galilee to go to Jerusalem was through the Jordan Valley. Although cutting down through Samaria was not impossible, most Jews preferred to avoid Samaritan territory (see Luke 9:52). Did Jesus ever set foot in Samaria? Verse 11 can be translated “through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” This passage is solely Lukan material and shows Luke’s proclivity to highlight the faith of the social outcast over that of the established insider. Both Jews (Galileans) and Samaritans compose this group of lepers; both are society’s outcasts, and therefore they associate with each other.

Luke's eschatological vision comes into focus with the emphasis on faith in verse 19. Jesus instructs the Samaritan leper, not that his faith has cured him, but that his faith has "saved" him. The leper is not only saved from his leprosy but gains eternal salvation—all from faith. The connection of faith with salvation occurs throughout Luke's Gospel, as we have seen with the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:50), the cure of the hemorrhaging woman (8:48), and even at the cross (23:43).

### **17:20-37 The coming of the kingdom and the Son of Man**

In verses 20-21 Luke expresses a realized eschatology that supports the vision displayed in the dialogue with the Samaritan leper above. Indeed, the last phrase in verse 21 seems Johannine in its language as it underscores an *eschaton* already present.

The tone and theme switch suddenly to a future-oriented eschatology in verse 22. The opening words of this verse in Greek, which the English translation expresses, indicate a reversal of thought. In this first encounter with Lukan apocalyptic writing, the reading draws a parallel between sudden acts of destruction in the Old Testament and the Son of Man's impending arrival on the earth. Although found far more often in Ezekiel than in Daniel, the latter's use of "Son of Man" has greater bearing on the synoptic understanding of this term, an understanding that Luke shares. The heavily apocalyptic material in Daniel (see Dan 7:13; 8:15-17) is reflected in verse 22 and also figures prominently in the book of Revelation.

Luke includes a warning about following false prophets (as do the parallels in Mark and Matthew), but he also connects the coming of the *eschaton* with the fate awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem (v. 25). Furthermore, Luke builds a sense of urgency by relating Lot's escape from the explosive conflagration that destroyed Sodom; people should be vigilant and anxious. This sense of urgency also has a social justice theme, for injustice and oppression were the reasons for Sodom's obliteration (see Isa 1:9-16; Ezek 16:49-52). Any desire to hold on to the present is discouraged, and Lot's wife stands as an example of what might happen to the one who tarries. Those who make no permanent claims to this life will always be ready for the *eschaton* (v. 31).

To separate Jesus' words from the Gospel writer's is always extremely difficult. In this passage it is impossible. Verse 31 appears to be a prediction after the fact. Josephus describes the sudden arrival of the Romans at the gates of Jerusalem during the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66–70; *J.W.* 5.2.3]. Few if any

were able to escape the destruction and massacre. The early Christians most likely interpreted the Jewish rebellion and the destruction of Jerusalem with its splendid temple as the fulfillment of Jesus' words, even as those words were mixed into their experiences of the catastrophe. What we have here is an amalgam of Q material, oral tradition, memory, and Lukan editing. (See Luke 21:20-24.)

One cannot take every passage of Scripture literally and apart from a larger theological context. Nowhere is this truer than in apocalyptic literature. Readers should be on guard against determining the saved, the damned, and the rapture by reading this material. Verse 37, in encouraging us to read the signs of the times, advises us to keep the whole Christian tradition in focus as we interpret those signs. And what are the signs? Jesus does not say, and this point is the essential part of the apocalyptic message.

Christians are to concern themselves with doing the will of God, for which Jesus has given his disciples abundant examples: taking care of the poor, trusting in God alone, and forgiving enemies. We are not to waste time trying to predict the future. The paradoxical presentation of the kingdom as already present (v. 21) and not yet here (v. 30) expresses its true reality. The kingdom will be manifested in living the life of Christ.

### **18:1-8 The parable of the persistent widow**

Situating this pericope after the apocalyptic passage regarding the Son of Man offers the believer the proper way to maintain vigilance for the parousia, or second coming. With prayer and praying mentioned over thirty times in Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, the parable of the persistent widow highlights this central feature of Luke's Gospel by emphasizing the necessity and efficacy of constant prayer. Moreover, because widows and orphans were to be special recipients of charity according to Jewish law (Deut 24:17-22), the early Christians would have been particularly attentive to the teaching.

The story appears only in Luke, and there are at least two ways to read it. The first is to see the unjust judge as the protagonist bearing the lesson for the reader. Similar to the literary style found in the parable of the dishonest steward (16:1-8), the intent of the teaching comes through the comparison of the greater: As an unjust judge grants a petition solely for self-serving purposes, how much more will a loving God grant the desires of his beloved petitioner.

A second, feminist interpretation, on the other hand, sees the widow as the protagonist and thus the vehicle for the lesson. In this case, she, in her weakness,

becomes the Christ figure who combats evil and injustice on behalf of the poor and neglected. She is unstinting in her efforts, and the unjust judge, the symbol of oppression, is clearly afraid of her, as seen from the Greek verb *hypōpiazō* for “strike” (v. 5), which means to “treat roughly, maltreat, strike under the eye.” Here, too, the intent of the teaching surfaces through analogy: As persistent as a widow is to secure her rights, so is God in securing the rights of those petitioning him.

The reference to the Son of Man (v. 8) brings the parable in line with the teaching on the last days (17:22-37): Pray constantly while living and working for the kingdom of God.

### **18:9-14 The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector**

This parable, also found only in Luke, continues the theme on prayer. Whereas the parable of the persistent widow (18:1-8) shows the necessity of constant prayer, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector displays the proper comportment for prayer.

No doubt the Pharisee does everything he says he does. Fasting and tithing are not only good things to do, but the former is also proclaimed by the prophets while the latter is required by the Law (see Deut 14:22-29). The purpose of the parable is not to discourage religious and pious practice; rather, its function is to call into question the reasons why people take on devotional works. The Pharisee gives the reasons for deeds: they are to justify himself in the world’s eyes as well as in the eyes of God. Luke underscores this point in verse 9.

In contrast, the tax collector does nothing pious that we know of. In fact, as a tax collector, it would be most surprising if he ever did anything good for anyone. During the Roman occupation, tax collectors were not only traitors to their own people but also extortionists feeding off their compatriots. Furthermore, their dealing with the pagan Romans made them ritually impure, thereby excommunicating themselves from their fellow Jews. Compared with the dedicated, devoted Pharisee, a tax collector would never be considered honest, pious, or holy. Unlike the Pharisee, however, the tax collector knows his sinfulness. He pleads for mercy and demonstrates his need for God. The Pharisee, on the other hand, in singing his own praises, makes God his beneficiary. That the tax collector leaves justified was as shocking to the first-century audience as it is to us. So important is this parable that it sets the tone for those participating in the passion and crucifixion (see 23:48).



### **18:15-17 Access to the kingdom**

This passage stresses that the people brought infants to Jesus, whereas the parallels in Mark and Matthew read only that children came. The mention of infants gives a glimpse of the sociological structure in the ancient world. Conversions were never individualistic or isolated events. If the master or mistress of the household became a follower of Christ, everyone in the extended family and even the slaves did as well. In the Acts of the Apostles we read similar accounts regarding baptism (Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8). Luke's reading could very well reflect and suggest the practice of infant baptism in the early church.

Society today often presents Christianity as a childish, trivial, or trite matter and will use passages like this one to justify doing so. To "accept the kingdom of God like a child," however, means to receive the kingdom of God with an open guilelessness to the gift that God offers, something that requires a healthy maturity. In this case, the tax collector in the preceding passage (18:9-14) is the perfect example of open guilelessness.

### **18:18-23 The rich official**

Although in their respective versions of the story, both Matthew and Mark simply state that a man comes up to Jesus, Luke specifies that the one asking the question is a ruler. Thus Luke informs the reader that the individual is not only rich but also powerful, an important point for the story.

The ruler's fault is one of complacency, and in this regard he is similar to the Pharisee in 18:9-14. When he calls Jesus "Good teacher" (v. 18), Jesus responds in a sharp tone, because he can see through the unctuous language. The ruler hopes that by flattery he can increase in stature to gain eternal life. Jesus continues with listing the prescriptions of the Decalogue. These statutes should recall the whole Exodus experience, in which the people struggle between their ever present faithlessness and their eventual trust in God. The ruler's answer that he has observed all the commandments from his youth demonstrates that he has completely forgotten that covenantal relationship expressed by trust in God.

Jesus concludes by entering the ruler's mind-set. The first half of the answer would catch the man's attention, "There is still one thing left for you . . ." (v. 22a). The ruler can handle the challenge; by his wits he has already accumulated wealth and power. Then comes the surprise: "sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor . . . come follow me" (v. 22b). The man's sadness results from a double realization. The first is that he must surrender everything of worth in his life, and the second follows, namely, that everything he thought

was of great value both in this life and the next is actually worthless. His life from his youth has been an act of faithlessness. To inherit eternal life, he must stop trusting in what he has trusted and place his trust in God.

### **18:24-30 On entering the kingdom of God**

The dialogue with the rich official prompts Jesus' comment on the ease of a camel going through the eye of a needle, one of the most challenging verses in the Gospel (v. 25). The response from the crowd is certainly understandable: "Then who can be saved?" (v. 26).

A long-standing interpretation of this passage is that there was in Jerusalem a gate called the "Eye of the Needle," which required a cargo-laden camel to rest on all four legs and crawl through the door in order to enter the city. There is no evidence anywhere in the Mideast, however, of any gate called the "Eye of the Needle." In addition, camels are unable to crawl. Jesus is using a form of hyperbole that is a natural part of Semitic speech.

The lesson that arises from this encounter with the ruler is similar to the one taught in the parable of the dishonest steward (16:1-13), where trusting in one's own wealth and accomplishments instead of in God makes salvation difficult if not impossible. In both cases the responsibility for accepting salvation falls on us. Those who place all hope in their own accomplishments will never be open to God's mercy, simply because they have let worldly values blind themselves to it. Since power and wealth are idols, and seductive ones at that, the ruler in the story and others like him cannot even see the way into the kingdom, let alone enter it. In this sense, it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye.

Peter, sensing the meaning of Jesus' hyperbolic example, responds in verse 28. His statement implies that he is looking for an answer as to whether he and the other disciples are saved or not. Jesus does not answer directly; rather, his reply is addressed in the third person (vv. 29-30). Jesus' statement reflects a realized eschatology as well as a future one. Forsaking worldly comfort has a present reward, yet the reward is not fully realized until one reaches eternal life. Unlike the Markan parallel, which speaks of persecutions along with the rewards (Mark 10:30), Luke does not mention such hardships. Because the next passage contains the third prediction of the passion, Luke avoids the redundancy by not including the sobering fact here.

This passage has been used over the centuries as a rationale for religious life.

### **18:31-34 The third prediction of the passion**

Being a disciple has its rewards, but it also has difficulties, as Jesus reminds his band of followers with this third, final, and most vivid prediction of his passion (see 9:22, 44-45; but also 17:25).

Although both Matthew and Mark feature parallels to this passage, only Luke contains information about the prophets (v. 31) and the Twelve's inability to understand what Jesus is saying (v. 34).

### **18:35-43 The blind beggar of Jericho**

Jesus is relentlessly pursuing his intent as described in 9:51. In going from Galilee to Jerusalem through the Jordan Valley, one would turn west at Jericho in order to take the Wadi Qelt road up into the Judean mountains. Jericho, an oasis and a prosperous city in Judea, was also the locale of Herod the Great's winter palace. These facts serve to accentuate the beggar's lowly social position.

All three synoptic accounts contain this story, but only Mark gives the blind man a name (Bartimaeus; see Mark 10:46). Comparisons are very important here. This blind man can "see" Jesus is the Messiah, whereas the Twelve cannot understand what he is saying (v. 34). This paradox fits well within the Gospel tradition, where the blind usually "see," while those who "see" are actually blind.

The beggar uses one of the earliest Christian titles applied to Christ, "Son of David" (v. 38), a title that rarely appears in Luke (see 3:31; 20:41). Jesus hears the distressful cry despite the commotion of the crowd and their efforts to silence the man. Jesus could have walked to the man, but he commands that the beggar be brought to him (v. 40). Among religious people of the time, physical disability was linked to sinfulness. By having the crowd lead the blind man to him, Jesus induces them to take responsibility for healing him, thereby redefining both suffering and sin. Jesus does not assume that the beggar wants to see; rather, he asks him to explicitly state his need (v. 41). Of course, the beggar requests sight, because he knows that Jesus can grant it, and by this action he demonstrates his faith. Hence Jesus can say, "Your faith has saved you" (v. 42). In true Lukan fashion, in the end everyone—beggar and crowd—glorifies God.

### **19:1-10 Zacchaeus the tax collector**

This passage appears only in Luke and concludes what many scholars have called the "Lukan Gospel of the Outcast" (15:1–19:10). Its singular character lies in the fact that Luke, who devotes the whole tone of his Gospel toward

embracing the poor and lowly, includes this passage, which focuses on the salvation of the rich and powerful. Unlike the rich official in 18:18-23, Zacchaeus does not depend on his wealth and status but on God's loving mercy to gain entry into the kingdom.

Tax collecting was a lucrative business. Romans used to sell the office to the highest bidder. For his part, the tax collector would then have to pay his contracted amount to the Romans as well as collect the fiscal revenues for them. Anything over and beyond those sums was his to keep. Failing to meet his payments would mean the Romans could confiscate his property and sell him and his family into slavery. Zacchaeus's position as the chief tax collector meant that lesser officials would have bidden for their offices from him, and if they did not produce the payment, Zacchaeus would have applied the appropriate penalties. In a word, Zacchaeus was very wealthy, and the resentment against him would have been very strong.

Despite his occupation, Zacchaeus is determined to see Jesus, even if it means looking foolish in doing so. Scholars are divided on whether to read the verbs "give" and "repay," which grammatically are in the present tense in Greek (v. 8), as present or future. In other words, is Zacchaeus boasting of present practices or making a statement of repentance to guide his future action? His hasty explanation to Jesus is heartfelt, for it would be of no advantage to him, an extortionist, to heed a wandering prophet or wonder-worker. Furthermore, the fact that he does show knowledge of wrongdoing manifests the salvation that is visiting him. If Jesus comes "to seek and to save what was lost" (v. 10), Zacchaeus must be a sinner. Zacchaeus the sinner can make a claim of being a descendant of Abraham, and his earnest desire to get a glimpse of Jesus is proof enough that that is what he desires.

### **19:11-27 The parable of the ten gold coins**

Matthew and Luke differ in the telling of this parable, which, in large part, comes from Q overlapping slightly with Mark 13:34. A major difference between the two is that Luke also has a subtext discussing servants who do not want this particular nobleman to rule over them. This subtext may have as its origin Rome's choice of placing Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, on the throne at the death of his father. Because of his tyrannical and nearly sadistic behavior, the Jews petitioned Rome to have him removed. Rome responded by giving him only one-third of Herod's kingdom and eventually banishing him completely because of his excessive cruelty and incompetence.

Of lesser importance is Matthew's use of *talaton* (25:15) and Luke's *mina* as the denomination of the currency involved, which is translated here as "gold coins" (v. 13). A *mina* ("mina") would be worth about one hundred days' wages, and a *talanton* ("talent") sixty times as much.

Luke introduces the passage by noting that the traveling party was near Jerusalem and that some were supposing that the kingdom of God was about to appear. The parable addresses some of these points. The absentee nobleman returns without notice and thus surprises his servants. The first two servants are prepared for his sudden reappearance and are able to produce interest on the money given them; the third is not so concerned and has only a handkerchief with the original amount. It should be emphasized that the servants are commanded to use the money in such a manner as to earn more; thus the third servant was not only foolish but also disobedient.

As a story that follows the passage about the rich Zacchaeus, this parable gives an example on the proper way to use riches. The metaphor demonstrates that goods are to be employed for the upbuilding of the kingdom, and goods that are not used for this purpose will be taken away, as we see done with the third servant's *mina*.

The Lukan subtext plays a role in this passage by representing absolute refusal on the part of some to acknowledge the kingdom of God at all, whether in Jesus' first coming or in his second. Luke concludes this subtext within the same passage by having the nobleman slay the opposition. Many often cite this passage as an example of Lukan anti-Semitism. There is nothing in it, however, to suggest that those who receive the nobleman/Christ are Gentiles or that those who do not are Jews.

With this parable Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, which begins at 9:51, has reached its destination.

## **THE TEACHING MINISTRY IN JERUSALEM**

### ***Luke 19:28–21:38***

Jesus has taught in Galilee, along the road to Judea, and now he will teach in the holy city. He arrives in Jerusalem, the city where he will meet his passion, death, and resurrection. With this background, his teaching takes on urgency.

#### **19:28-40 The entry into Jerusalem**

All four Gospels contain the account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The respective narratives share a great deal of information, and any

differences among them are seen in some minor details.

For all three Synoptic writers, this triumphal entry is Jesus' first and only trip to Jerusalem, but John's Gospel, along with some details among the Synoptics, shows evidence that he may have gone to Jerusalem several times during his earthly ministry. The possibility of other sojourns to Jerusalem notwithstanding, what distinguishes this visit from all the others is the reception Jesus receives.

Bethphage and Bethany are both on the Roman road from Jericho to Jerusalem. We know from John 11:17-18 that Jesus has friends at the latter. This detail would explain how he could have made arrangements for the colt beforehand (Luke 19:29-31). All four Gospels show a heavy reliance on the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 in their depictions of the scene.

In his descent from the Mount of Olives, Jesus encounters a rejoicing crowd. Matthew and Mark mention that the crowd also set garments and branches on the way; John specifies "palm branches" (12:13) but says nothing of garments, while Luke reads "cloaks" but does not include branches (v. 36). That three of the evangelists specify branches is used as evidence by some that the scene of the entry into Jerusalem described here actually refers to an earlier one at the time of the feast of Booths, or Sukkoth, a pilgrimage celebration falling in mid-September. Either Luke's source did not include branches, or Luke saw the reference as a superfluous detail. Whether or not the entry arises from the community's memory of a fall celebration at Sukkoth or a spring feast at Passover, the pertinent detail is that Jesus arrives in Jerusalem with throngs welcoming him.

The other evangelists have the crowd shouting "Hosanna," an Aramaic expression meaning "Save! I pray," a phrase unfamiliar to Luke's Gentile audience. Whereas the other Gospels have "*Blessed is he* who comes in the name of the Lord," Luke reads "*Blessed is the king*" (19:38, emphasis added). Luke's phrasing links Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem to the instruction on the imminent manifestation of the kingdom of God (see 13:35; 16:16; 18:15-17).

As an echo of the angels' hymn at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:14), the crowd shouts out, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest" (v. 38). What angels sang at Jesus' birth people now acclaim at his arrival.

Luke's depiction of the Pharisees in the crowd is less harsh than that of Matthew, who locates them in the temple after Jesus has cleansed it (Matt 21:16). Luke situates the Pharisees along the road leading into Jerusalem, and they seem more alarmed than hostile (19:39). Jesus' answer, a hyperbolic

statement of fact, also serves as a challenge (19:40).

### **19:41-44 The lament over Jerusalem**

The first lament over the city occurs in Luke 13:34-35 and is a Q saying (see Matt 23:37-39). Here, however, the reading appears only in Luke; both in theme and in imagery it is connected to the third and final reference to Jerusalem's destruction in Luke 21:21-24. Moreover, references to the siege (v. 43) are found in Jeremiah 6:6 and Ezekiel 4:2.

From the slopes of the Mount of Olives, Jesus would have seen the whole city spread out before him on the next hill. The temple with the doors to the holy of holies would have faced him. Tradition commemorates this scene at the Church of Dominus Flevit on the Mount of Olives. Archaeological evidence indicates that the most probable gate of Jesus' entry into the city rests underneath today's Golden Gate, which has been blocked since the eighth century. Today the Palm Sunday procession enters through St. Stephen's Gate, to the north of the Golden Gate along the eastern wall of the city.

### **19:45-48 The cleansing of the temple**

Unlike Matthew or Mark, Luke concludes the entry into Jerusalem with the cleansing of the temple. Luke offers the most economic description of the event by not specifying the money changers, the animals, or even the "whip out of cords" (John 2:15). The phrase "My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves" is a blending of Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11.

The business transactions would have taken place in the Court of the Gentiles, surrounded by the Royal Portico, which was constructed for this very purpose. The merchants are not out of place in conducting their affairs in this area. In fact, the temple court served as the ground where worshipers proceeded from secular to sacred space by changing their pagan money to Jewish coins and purchasing ritually pure sacrificial victims. Jesus' anger, therefore, is not so much directed at those who have profaned a sacred zone with their mercantile greed; rather, he seems to be upset that any business should be associated with the temple at all. With incense, animals, oil, grain, and everything else needed for the sacrifices, the temple was a source of great income to the priests who had shares in most of the shops.

The glorious entry into Jerusalem ends on an ominous tone as the "chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people" (v. 47), but not the Pharisees (19:39), plot to put Jesus to death.

### **20:1-8 Questioning Jesus' authority**

It is natural that after such a dramatic action as cleansing the temple, the priests, scribes, and elders would question Jesus' authority. All three Synoptic Gospels feature this account within the same narrative sequence. The authority of Jesus' teaching was a major question throughout his ministry, as the earlier Beelzebul controversy substantiates (Luke 11:14-23).

The temple leaders named here comprise the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish council. It was composed of three groups: the priests (the high priest as well as the former high priests and family representatives); the scribes (legal scholars); and the elders (the chief members of the leading families and clans). Totalling seventy-one members, this group was the official Jewish court. In Jesus' time it had jurisdiction in religious and secular affairs only in Judea, but capital cases had to be recommended to the Roman governor for approval. It met in Jerusalem within the temple complex.

Jesus' reply is structured to avoid falling into the trap the officials have fashioned. If he were to say that his authority comes from the Lord God, as indeed it does, they could accuse him of blasphemy. As it is, Jesus' response insinuates such a conclusion without providing any incriminating evidence. By referring to John the Baptist, Jesus also draws from the prophetic tradition to make his defense. The comments of the temple leaders indicate the great regard for the Baptist that many of the people held. This devotion to John has implications for the development of Christianity.

### **20:9-19 The wicked tenant farmers**

This parable strikes a note of recognition with both the people (v. 16) and the scribes and chief priests (v. 19). The whole piece is an analogy of the prophetic tradition. The one who plants the vineyard represents God; the tenant farmers, the people; the series of servants, the various prophets; the son, Jesus. The vineyard, as a fundamental symbol of Israel, and indeed the parable itself echo Isaiah (5:1-7), but it also surfaces as such in Psalm 80. Matthew (21:39) and Luke (20:15) reflect a literal understanding of the analogy by having the tenants cast the son from the vineyard before killing him (see Mark 12:8). Many think that a redactor tried to align the story with Jesus' crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem.

The context of this passage is, of course, the altercation Jesus has with the Sanhedrin in Luke 20:1-8. They refuse to recognize the hand of God in John the Baptist, whom Herod had put to death, and they continue in their refusal to see



the hand of God in Jesus. Jesus ties his claim to divine authority by quoting from Psalm 118:22-23 (Luke 20:17), a verse that also resonates with Isaiah 8:14-15.

The schism motif enters here once again (see Luke 2:34). The leaders reject Jesus, but the people do not. God's promise takes root in the vineyard Israel, represented by the people's response, but this vineyard will also be shared with the Gentiles (v. 16).

Luke uses the parable's imagery and interpretation in Acts (18:6; 28:28). It also resurfaces in other New Testament writings, such as Romans 11:17-18 and 1 Peter 2:6-7.

### **20:20-26 Paying taxes to Caesar**

The scribes and the chief priests are relentless in their attempts to trap Jesus by catching him off guard. After being shamed by the parable of the tenant farmers (20:9-19), they now send spies or agents to Jesus with hopes that he might incriminate himself by speaking against the empire. Jesus, however, sees through the ruse (20:23).

Roman coinage was highly symbolic for Jews concerned about paying taxes to the emperor. Engraved on the face of the denarius was the image of Tiberius Caesar—at the very least an offense against Jewish sensibilities, since it would go against the prohibition of graven idols. As a subject people, the Jews were required to use this currency for paying taxes and tribute to their occupiers. The question about the legality of paying taxes, therefore, involves the legality of handling idols to do so; the religious Jew should not be in contact with such pagan objects. Combined with these religious principles was the humiliation of paying the conqueror in the coin that transgressed their law code, thus forcing the Jews to participate in Roman paganism. Jesus' response not only avoids the trap the leaders set for him but also calls into question the meaning of true, righteous behavior.

Jesus gains the upper hand against his adversaries by not pitting allegiance to Rome against fidelity to the Torah (the holy writings of the Jewish religion, especially the first five books of the Old Testament). The lesson is that one is not defiled by paying taxes to Rome. Being righteous before God is an issue deeper than paying taxes to a pagan power.

The idea of rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's has often been mistakenly used as an injunction for keeping religious and ethical questions separate from political or secular policies. Correctly read through an eschatological lens, Jesus' aphorism states

that the things of this world have an impact on the next, while standards of the age to come should have an influence on this present life.

### **20:27-40 Sadducees and the resurrection**

The Sadducees, opponents of the Pharisees, particularly over the teachings on the resurrection, are the next group to question Jesus with an eye toward tripping him up. Not much is known about them except that they were aristocratic conservatives tied to the temple cult (unlike the Pharisees, who promoted the synagogue movement). The circumstance they describe is based on levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-6), whereby a widow's brother-in-law marries her to ensure that the lands stay in the first husband's family and that his name is carried on. Jesus responds by discussing first the nature of a resurrected life and then the basis of the resurrection in the Jewish tradition.

The resurrected life goes beyond the dimensions of earthly existence. Thus expectations and practices in this world do not hold in the next. Moreover, the resurrected life transcends this one (vv. 35, 36, 38). By citing Moses, Jesus taps the source of Jewish faith as well as the sole component of the Sadducees' teaching, for their belief extended no further than the first five books of Moses, often called the Torah or the Pentateuch.

Jesus' argument is impeccable. The scribes, who along with the Pharisees believe in the resurrection, affirm Jesus' answer; the Sadducees who brought up the matter, on the other hand, are silent (vv. 39-40).

Unlike the parallel accounts in Matthew 22:23-33 or Mark 12:18-27, Luke's version contains a teaching that supports celibate life (v. 35; see also Matt 19:12).

### **20:41-44 David's Son**

Jesus' opponents would want to make sure that there is nothing about him which would suggest that he is the Messiah. At the same time, they have to acknowledge that the people see him as a great man, and therefore he could quite possibly be the one long promised by the prophets. At that time the tradition existed of a Messiah arising from David's line, a belief to which the infancy narratives attest. The narrative here draws on this tradition.

In verse 42 Jesus cites Psalm 110:1, a coronation psalm, which in the Greek Septuagint is reflected in this translation. In Psalm 110 the psalmist is speaking, and "Lord" (uppercase here) refers to Yahweh. The "lord" (lowercase here) is the king whom Yahweh is placing on the throne. In its New Testament

interpretation, “Lord” still refers to Yahweh, but David the king is speaking. Consequently, “lord” represents a messianic figure who is greater than David. In these verses Jesus states that the term “lord” refers to himself.

The early church drew on this tradition of a Davidic Messiah both here and elsewhere, and this psalm was used as one of the Old Testament writings prefiguring Christ. The other Synoptics contain passages parallel to this one.

### **20:45-47 Denunciation of the scribes**

Jesus, after defending himself before both the Pharisees and Sadducees, takes the offensive. Scribes, as ones who could read, write, and interpret texts, are synonymous with the Pharisees. As a scholarly religious class who knew the Torah and the oral tradition with all the astuteness of master lawyers, they expected honor and deference as their due. As with all professions, there were good and bad members among them. Even Jesus was considered by his disciples to be a teacher.

The condemnation Jesus levels here (vv. 46-47) is directed toward those who are a part of the temple power structure and use their status and expertise for personal advantage at the expense of the poor and unprivileged. This short passage also reflects the debates between church and synagogue in the early days of the Christian movement. It sets the context for what follows in Luke 21:1-4.

### **21:1-4 The poor widow’s contribution**

Luke shares this story with Mark (see Mark 12:41-44). Each coin is a *lepton*, which is worth slightly more than one-hundredth of a denarius. Since a denarius is a day’s wage, the widow places about one-fiftieth of a day’s living into the treasury, and, as Jesus remarks, this is her whole livelihood.

Many hold that this story shows the widow’s pious devotion, and she has become a model of religious dedication in that all should give from their sustenance and not their superfluity. The context, however, suggests another interpretation.

Jesus’ first order of business upon entering Jerusalem is to go to the temple and drive out those “selling things” (19:45). His violent response to revenues generated by temple worship in that section of the Lukan narrative would be indicative of anger here. In addition, in the preceding passage Jesus has denounced the scribes for “devour[ing] the houses of widows” (Luke 20:47). Jesus is upset at seeing a poor woman think that God’s will demanded making herself destitute so that others could become rich.

### **21:5-6 The destruction of the temple foretold**

All three Synoptics contain the prediction of the temple's destruction. The building of Herod's temple, the edifice under discussion in this passage, began in 19 B.C. and was still under construction during Jesus' lifetime (see John 2:20). The whole complex was completed in A.D. 64, only to be totally razed six years later during the First Jewish Revolt. When it was completed, it was considered one of the most beautiful buildings in the whole Roman Empire. The people's awe and wonder at the stones were totally justified. As the house of God, its destruction would seem like the end of the world in the minds of the people (see Josephus, *Ant.* 15.11.1-7 and *J.W.* 4-5).

Is the prediction of the destruction a *vaticinium ex eventu*, that is, a foretelling after the event? If so, then the writer, Luke, is theologizing about the temple's destruction by placing a prediction of it on the lips of Jesus. On the other hand, anyone sensitive to the political climate of the day would know that the tensions would someday explode, resulting in catastrophic disaster for the nation.

This account forms a bridge between the story of the poor widow (21:1-4) and Luke's apocalyptic section (21:7-36).

### **21:7-11 The signs of the end**

Luke 21:7-36 forms the Lukan apocalypse, but it is not the only place in the Third Gospel where apocalyptic imagery occurs (see Luke 17:22-37). Matthew 24 and Mark 13 have parallel passages.

The great part of the language and metaphor used here is characteristic of apocalyptic writing: signs, natural upheavals, disasters, wars, persecution, and a call to vigilance. Apocalyptic language is often, but not exclusively, associated with eschatological teaching, and in this sense this section is more rightly called the Lukan eschatological discourse. By definition, *eschatology* deals with the interpretation of the end times, the fulfillment of history, and culmination of human destiny. In general, we can say that this section shows eschatological concerns in apocalyptic language.

Rarely has anyone been able to identify conclusively the particular historical references to the events mentioned in verses 7-11. There has never been a time in human history when wars, earthquakes, famines, and plagues have not been a part of the picture. Since any one of these events and phenomena can occur without warning or notice, it is better to be prepared, and preparation consists in always looking for Christ in every person and circumstance.

### **21:12-19 The coming persecution**

The early Christian community faced persecution from the home as well as from rulers of both synagogue and state. These Gospel verses, in non-apocalyptic vocabulary, are meant to console and strengthen the believers facing their tribulation.

Verses 14-15 form a doublet with Luke 12:11-12.

### **21:20-24 The great tribulation**

The words that Jesus speaks in this passage ring true to the history of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Roman general Titus arrived at Jerusalem and set up his main camp about one mile north of the Mount of Olives at Mount Scopus in the spring of A.D. 70. By July his men set to constructing a siege wall around the city to prevent the people of Jerusalem from escaping while protecting the Roman soldiers from Jewish raiding parties. Since such procedures were standard Roman military operations, the description in these verses need not be considered peculiar to the Roman siege in A.D. 70. Nonetheless, the arrival of the Romans came with unexpected suddenness, and internecine fighting among various Jewish sects had reduced the food stores, so that starvation became a major problem within the city (see Josephus, *J.W.* 5.2-3i). On August 28 (Ninth of Ab, by coincidence the same day the Babylonians breached the city some six hundred years earlier), Jerusalem fell to the Romans. Any Jewish survivors were taken captive, and the city, including the temple, was razed to the ground.

Old Testament prophecies are employed in the description: Hosea 9:7 in Luke 21:22; Sirach 28:18; Deuteronomy 28:64; and Zechariah 12:3 in Luke 21:24. Tradition has it that the Christians in the city fled to the city of Pella in present-day Jordan at the outbreak of hostilities. The “time of the Gentiles” (v. 24) foreshadows the great missionary ventures outlined in the Acts of the Apostles.

### **21:25-28 The coming of the Son of Man**

The scene shifts from Jerusalem to the whole world. The language returns to apocalyptic terminology, drawing on Isaiah, Joel, Zephaniah, and Daniel. What has happened to Jerusalem may be a harbinger of the Son of Man’s visitation upon the earth, but it is not an immediate warning signal. The scene is not bleak, however. The astral signs and natural calamities serve to notify that redemption is at hand. Just as the people of Jerusalem were mixed in their

reception of Jesus, so too will the world be at his second coming.

### **21:29-33 The lesson of the fig tree**

If people can read the signs in nature, they should be willing and able to read the signs of their deliverance.

The reference to “this generation” (v. 32) is ambiguous. In one sense, there is every reason to believe that many in the then contemporary generation would not pass away until after the First Jewish Revolt. On the other hand, if “all these things” refers to upheavals in nature ushering in the Son of Man, “this generation” is a timeless reference to the world; the *eschaton*, or end time, is always imminent.

### **21:34-36 Exhortation to be vigilant**

One must stand with apocalyptic vigilance. The note of surprise resurfaces here (v. 34). Under an imminent understanding of the *eschaton*, the coming of the Son of Man will always be sudden. The directive to pray (v. 36) is a particularly Lukan concern. Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane (22:39-46), and his note of “tribulations” (v. 36) looks toward his own passion.

### **21:37-38 Conclusion to the ministry in Jerusalem**

During the pilgrimage feasts most people, particularly those without relatives in Jerusalem proper, camped on the fields and hills surrounding the city. The Mount of Olives appears to have been one such place.

Despite the discourse on the temple and Jerusalem, Luke is ambiguous toward both. Jesus teaches in the temple even as he speaks against it. Furthermore, in the Acts of the Apostles the temple becomes the site of many events in the ministry of Peter, Paul, and the other disciples. Jesus’ public ministry ends with these verses.

## **THE PASSION**

### ***Luke 22:1–23:56***

The passion narrative, the nucleus of the kerygma, forms the oldest part of the Gospel tradition. The accounts of the four evangelists show the greatest similarity with each other in this section. Nonetheless, each evangelist shapes the information to fit the theological architecture of his respective Gospel. In Luke, the themes found all along reach their climax. The schism motif, the great reversal, and the victory over evil all manifest Jesus’ reclamation of the cosmos

from Satan's clutches as Christ brings the promise of future glory to all.

### **22:1-6 The conspiracy against Jesus**

The diabolical force that has been mounting challenge against Jesus from the very beginning (Luke 4:1-13) increases in intensity here when Satan "enter[s] into Judas" (v. 3). In Luke's narrative, now is the "time" (4:13) for which the devil has been waiting.

Both priests and scribes are at the center of the conspiracy, but by making Judas his agent, Satan fashions a more serious inroad against Jesus. Hence the passion is not merely a human drama; rather, it is an event that involves the whole cosmos. Luke's account of Jesus' passion, with its collusion between Satan and Judas, departs from the synoptic presentation and aligns itself more closely with the Johannine text, and in so doing respects the cosmological nature of the drama.

One of the major pilgrimage feasts that brought thousands to Jerusalem, the feast of Unleavened Bread was originally an agrarian festival celebrated in the spring during the grain harvest. Passover began as a nomadic feast, also held in the spring, when people took their flocks of sheep and goats from the winter to summer feeding grounds. The Jewish practice at the time of Jesus had joined these two feasts into one commemorating the Exodus from Egypt.

For the Romans, this annual spring holiday posed a major security risk. The throngs of people, coupled with the nationalistic overtones inherent in the Exodus event, set the stage for riots and insurrection. The temple leaders, functioning as colonial lackeys of Rome, were well aware that Jesus was a popular figure who fulfilled the messianic expectations of a great many. A conspiracy between Judas, the chief priests, and the guards that tries to find an opportunity to arrest Jesus away from the crowd is indicative of the volatility of the situation (v. 6).

### **22:7-38 The Passover meal**

According to the synoptic dating, the meal takes place on Passover (v. 7); in John's Gospel (13:1) it is on the day before. Jesus must have had disciples and acquaintances in Jerusalem for him to give such specific instructions to Peter and John (vv. 10-12). For this reason, many scholars believe that Jesus went to Jerusalem on several occasions and not just this once, as Luke and the other Synoptics portray. Since women alone generally carried water jars, a man walking with one would attract attention. Jesus leaves the exact location for the meal

unspecified to maintain secrecy in the face of impending danger. The Greek for “guest room” (v. 11) is *kataluma* (see 2:7).

It is nearly impossible to determine with absolute accuracy the Jewish Seder, that is, the Passover meal, at this period of history. Nonetheless, all indications are that it involved a total of three blessings of the cup. Luke mentions two of them—one at the beginning of the meal and one at the end (vv. 17, 20). Paul’s version of what has come to be called the “institution narrative” is remarkably similar to that of Luke here (see 1 Cor 11:23-26). The elements of the Exodus sacrifice, such as blood, are reinterpreted in the light of Christ’s life. He sheds his blood to ensure the life of God’s people (see Exod 12:12-16; 24:5-8).

The mention of the betrayer’s hand (v. 21), whom the reader knows to be Judas Iscariot (22:3), sparks an argument at the table. Jesus intervenes with a lesson that continues the reversal theme introduced in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55). Here at the Last Supper, Jesus gives a more positive rendition of the theme: disciples should reverse the roles themselves in order to further the kingdom. Doing so leads to true greatness (22:24-30).

Just as Jesus predicts the role of Judas, though unnamed (vv. 21-23), so too does he predict Peter’s denial (vv. 31-34). The devil has already claimed Judas, and now he is attempting to take the rest of the Twelve, Peter included, as Jesus is well aware. Jesus needs Peter to support the others (v. 32), but Peter will falter, as Jesus predicts. Luke alone acknowledges in this manner the cosmic battle Jesus’ life and death entail.

In a crisis one should be sure to prepare for the worst, a worry not present in easier times (vv. 35-37). The Twelve still have difficulty understanding Jesus’ teaching and mission. They take his metaphors literally, and he loses patience (v. 38).

### **22:39-53 The agony and arrest**

Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives, as is his custom (21:37-38). Prayer is a key element in the makeup of Luke’s Gospel, and at this moment Jesus prays. The disciples, however, oblivious to the seriousness of events, fall asleep.

Many reliable ancient manuscripts do not include verses 43-44, but many other ones, just as reliable, do. Whether these verses belong in the Lukan text is a debated issue, but the balance tips for their inclusion. In Luke’s temptation scene (4:1-13), the devil “depart[s] for a time,” and because he does, Luke has no need of including the ministering angels found in Matthew 4:11 and Mark



1:13. In Luke's narrative, Satan's time comes at the passion (22:3, 31). With Luke, therefore, the angel comes to minister to Jesus during his agony, the time and place where Satan exhibits his fury; it is Satan's "hour, the time for the power of darkness" (v. 53), an "hour" that will last through the crucifixion (see 23:44).

Jesus' emotional state is fragile, and he prays. The road from Jerusalem to the Judean desert passes up and over the Mount of Olives. He agonizes over a decision on whether to stay or to flee, and the tension brings him to the verge of a nervous breakdown (v. 44). A rare medical condition called "hematidrosis," a bloody sweat, sometimes occurs in people under extreme duress. For this reason some speculate that Jesus actually sweat blood. The text reads, however, that his "sweat became like drops of blood," that is, heavy and thick.

Judas finds his opportunity to hand Jesus over as he had planned with the temple authorities. It is unclear from Luke whether he actually kisses Jesus, although Matthew and Mark say so. Luke, the evangelist of "sweet mercy," is the only Synoptic to have Jesus heal the ear of the high priest's slave, while John's is the only Gospel to state the slave's name (John 18:10). Jesus' followers are ready to fight, but Jesus forbids them (v. 51).

### **22:54-65 Peter's denial**

Peter's denial is recounted in all four Gospels. Peter, always impetuous, follows as Jesus is led to the house of the high priest. Presumably the other disciples are hiding or at least keeping their distance from Jerusalemites. Fear overpowers Peter's usually forward manner, and he denies any contact or involvement with Jesus. Luke mentions that Jesus looks at Peter once the crowing has stopped. The glance acts as an acknowledgement of the action; Peter cannot hide from Jesus or himself, so he goes off weeping bitterly. His denial, followed by his remorse, displays Satan's near capture of him as well as the power of Jesus' prayer, for Peter, unlike Judas, will return (22:32).

Jesus spends the night in the house of the high priest, located, according to tradition and some scholars, on the southwestern slope of the city at a site currently called St. Peter in Gallicantu. Other archaeologists place the high priest's house on top of the western hill. Luke mentions only the priests and temple guards as ridiculing and demeaning Jesus here (vv. 64-65); the Romans will have their turn (23:36-37).

### **22:66-71 Jesus before the Sanhedrin**

The Sanhedrin heard all cases dealing with Jewish law but could not inflict capital punishment, the penalty for blasphemy. Thus Jesus also has to undergo proceedings in a Roman court. The Sanhedrin uses this opportunity, therefore, to build their case before presenting him to Pilate, where they supplement the charge against Jesus with treasonable offenses (23:2).

The interrogation scene echoes details from the annunciation of Jesus' birth (1:32, 35). Jesus responds to the questions by quoting from Daniel 7:13, a text that asserts the divinity of the Messiah and thereby places the Sanhedrin under Jesus' judgment. They recognize his ploy immediately and hasten him to Pontius Pilate.

### **23:1-5 Jesus before Pilate**

Like every colonial power in history, the Romans made friends with a certain class of the native population. This enabled them to impose foreign rule by wearing a domestic mask. In Palestine the temple priests were the class whom the Romans supported and who supported the Romans. They received revenues from performing the sacrifices of the people. In addition, they had shares in many of the shops and food providers of Jerusalem, and during the great pilgrimage feasts like Passover, this provided them with a healthy income. Roman stability secured the priests' status.

The Romans, on the other hand, needed the priests to guarantee their legitimacy. The priests enabled the Romans to appear as supporters of the Jewish faith. They acted as mediators between the emperor and the Jewish people, and as such they made Roman tax collection easier. In sum, there was an elite ruling class composed of Romans and Jews, both of whom had a vested interest in keeping the peace and suppressing any insurrection. Jesus, whose very presence garners crowds and who often questions the abuse by the authorities, presents a major threat to both parties.

Pontius Pilate's official residence was in the cosmopolitan seaport of Caesarea Maritima, Herod the Great's magnificent construction project. Within the amphitheater at the northern end was found a stone tablet incised with Pilate's name. From the Gospel accounts and Josephus, we know that Pilate went to Jerusalem only to strengthen the Roman presence among the crowds of pilgrims visiting the city during the Passover feast.

Pontius Pilate was not the weak, misinformed, and vacillating leader many think he was, and Luke notes his barbarity (13:1). The emphasis in this passage on Jesus' innocence is Luke's way of stressing that Jesus was not crucified for

being a common insurrectionist (although that is the accusation), as many early Christian detractors at that time were saying.

In all of ancient literature, the only extant record of a Roman criminal court proceeding is the New Testament account of Jesus' trial before Pilate. Despite the variations of the trial among the four evangelists, their narrative lines are all quite similar: questioning by Pilate along with hesitancy on his part over Jesus' guilt; release of a criminal named Barabbas in Jesus' place; and a handing over of Jesus for crucifixion.

### **23:6-12 Jesus before Herod**

Luke alone features this account. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, is the Jewish client-king of Galilee and Perea, and he is probably in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Because Jesus is originally from Galilee, Pilate sends him to Herod as a diplomatic courtesy. The two leaders had been at enmity with each other, probably because of Pilate's slaughter of Galileans (13:1), but Pilate's action here reconciles the two.

Herod has an interest in Jesus (9:9), and it appears that he wishes to see some spectacle (23:8). Jesus never indulges in such displays. Consequently, Herod and his soldiers mock Jesus, as the Roman soldiers will do in 23:36. Jesus is returned to Pilate, where he is condemned. The Christian tradition sees this episode as a prophetic fulfillment of Psalm 2:1-2. See Acts 4:25-28.

### **23:13-25 The sentence of death**

The Gospel presentation of a vacillating Pilate is most apparent in this scene. Any information about releasing a prisoner in honor of the holiday we have from Matthew, Mark, and John, but not Luke (ancient and dependable manuscripts omit v. 17, which appears to have been an added gloss prompted by the readings in Matthew 27:15 and Mark 15:6). Luke simply mentions that Pilate releases Barabbas (v. 25). The Gospels are the only source we have that mentions this custom; ancient Roman historians never refer to such a policy. Is Luke, or the other evangelists for that matter, relating a historical fact? Scholars are divided on the issue. In any case, the guilty Barabbas serves as a point of comparison with the innocent Jesus.

### **23:26-32 The way of the cross**

Crucifixion was a feared form of execution that the Romans reserved for slaves, subject populations, and the lowest criminals. The vertical shaft of the

cross usually remained standing at the place of execution for successive use and to serve as a grim warning to the resident population. To add to their shame, the condemned were stripped naked and made to carry their own crossbeam amidst the jeers, taunts, and jabs of the crowd.

The Romans press Simon the Cyrenian into service, not because they pitied Jesus, but because they wanted to ensure that he lived long enough to undergo the ignominious death. By following behind Jesus, Simon becomes a model disciple, a point that would be important for the Cyrenians who formed part of the early Christian community (Acts 11:20; 13:1). The Gnostics, who denied the humanity of Jesus, will claim that Jesus was swept into heaven at the crucifixion and that Simon was mistakenly nailed to the cross, an interpretation that early Christian writers effectively counter.

People are following Jesus on the way (v. 27), and Luke's schism motif again surfaces; some are disciples, others are not. Luke often shows people divided along lines of discipleship, and this episode provides an example of that theme. The words to the "daughters of Jerusalem" (vv. 28-30), who bear a strong resemblance to a Greek chorus, reflect the scene described in the Lukan apocalyptic material (21:6-28). Here the context is one of forgiveness.

### **23:33-43 The crucifixion**

Luke does not use the term "Golgotha"; he simply calls the area of crucifixion the "place called the Skull" (v. 33), which at the time of Christ was located outside the walls of Jerusalem. The spot of both the crucifixion and burial have been venerated as such since the second century, and the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre has covered the place since the time of Empress Helena. The biblical, historical, and archaeological records confirm the area marked by the basilica as the true spot of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

In this section there is another bracketed verse: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (23:34), probably one of the most gentle verses in the whole Bible. Nearly the same manuscripts that do not include 22:43-44 are the ones that also exclude this one. Although scholars are also divided on whether this verse should be part of the original text, a strong case can be made for its inclusion. In addition to its presence in dependable manuscripts, the verse certainly fits with the theme of forgiveness that runs through Luke's whole Gospel, including the passion (22:49-51).

While Luke has Herod's men alone ridiculing Jesus in 23:11, the evangelist situates the mocking by the Roman soldiers here at verses 36-37. Matthew and

Mark mention that the two criminals revile Jesus, but only Luke provides a dialogue in which one criminal reprimands the other. At this point Jesus again utters words of mercy, and again we see the schism motif, with one criminal acknowledging Jesus and the other cursing him.

Throughout the crucifixion and death, there are intentional echoes from Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, Wisdom 2–3. These Old Testament works become the lens through which the kerygma is interpreted.

### **23:44-49 The death of Jesus**

Luke's portrayal of the death of Jesus has important differences from the other two Synoptics. As the scene opens, we read of the description of the three hours of darkness. Luke adds the detail about the eclipse of the sun (v. 45). An eclipse is impossible during a full moon, which would have been the case during Passover. This verse should be read, therefore, as a circumstantial phrase well translated as "while the sun's light failed." If there is any historical background to three hours of darkness, it is most likely attributable to a dust storm coming from the desert, which is a common occurrence in this area during the spring of the year. The important point, however, is to see this passage as an echo of the many apocalyptic prophecies and writings that describe the Day of the Lord as one in which the sun will not shine (see Isa 13:10; Amos 8:9).

The tearing of the temple veil in Luke comes before the death of Jesus and not after it, as it does in Matthew and Mark. Luke is a fine literary artist, and by such a placement of the verse, he constructs the ripping of the curtain as a part of the buildup to the death of Jesus, the climax of the passage. The tearing of the veil itself is laden with a great deal of Old Testament symbolism. We really have no way of knowing to which of the several veils in the temple Luke (or the other evangelists) is referring. The bigger question is whether Luke sees the tearing as a means to let the divine presence out or the means to allow humans in. Since this Lukan version occurs before the death of Jesus, letting the divine presence out is the better conclusion. This is the day of the Lord, and God's presence, his judgment, now centers on the cross.

Among the four Gospels, there are three versions of Jesus' last words from the cross. In each case Christ's final utterance is an expression of each evangelist's theology, which for Luke is trust in God. Jesus shows absolute confidence in the Father during this last moment, a mood quite different from his prayer on the Mount of Olives (22:39-46). With the word "Father," Luke connects this last prayer with the two other prayers Jesus has spoken throughout

his passion: the agony (22:42) and the prayer for forgiveness (23:34). See also the prayer for the disciples (10:21) and the Lord's Prayer (11:2).

The centurion offers the first reaction and therefore the first interpretation of Jesus' death in verse 47. The statement that Jesus is innocent (or righteous, just) recalls the deliberations of the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and Herod. On another level, the use of "innocent/righteous/just" harks back to the passage from Wisdom 3:1-3: "But the souls of the just are in the hand of God, / and no torment shall touch them. / They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead; / and their passing away was thought an affliction / and their going forth from us, utter destruction. / But they are in peace." Luke sees the centurion's statement as an act of glorification of God. Jesus has accomplished his "exodus," which he set out to do in 9:31. The "hour . . . of darkness" (22:53) has passed; it is now the hour of the Lord's glorification, ushered in by Jesus' loud cry from the cross (v. 46), a paraphrase of Psalm 31:6.

In the last two verses of the death scene, Luke portrays another dichotomy among several people; he separates the disciples and acquaintances from onlookers and mockers. The emphasis on the eyewitnesses will become an important point for the early church and will be used against those Gnostic detractors who would deny Jesus' actual death by crucifixion.

The Lukan proclivity to emphasize God's mercy becomes evident with the breast-beating onlookers as they return to their homes. The only other occurrence in Luke of breast-beating is in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14). In that parable the tax collector knows his sinfulness and asks for forgiveness. The onlookers, like the tax collector, know their sinfulness and depart asking for forgiveness. From Jesus' prayer from the cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (23:34), we know that forgiveness is already there.

In Christian piety, verses 34, 43, and 46 are counted among the seven last words of Christ (see also Matt 27:46/Mark 15:34; John 19:26, 28, 30).

### **23:50-56 The burial of Jesus**

The inclusion of the detail "a rock-hewn tomb in which no one had yet been buried," mentioned in some fashion in all four Gospels, underscores that Jesus' body is not laid in a tomb as part of a multiple burial. The evangelists stress that the tomb is new and unused. This detail later becomes important for the early church in countering Gnostic and Jewish charges that Jesus' body was confused among the corpses. All the activity has to be completed before the sabbath

begins at sundown.

Joseph of Arimathea, like Simeon and Anna in the infancy narrative (2:25-38), awaits the “kingdom of God” (v. 51). With him, Jesus’ universal message penetrates the Sanhedrin and, ironically, has a positive effect there. Joseph’s concern for extending the legal prescriptions regarding burial of the dead ensures that Jesus is not totally excommunicated from his own nation. The women disciples from Galilee (8:1-3) are faithful throughout Jesus’ ministry, are present at the crucifixion, and for the burial (v. 56).

## **THE RESURRECTION**

### ***Luke 24:1-53***

Discrepancies among the four Gospel accounts reflect the oral transmission of the stories. Each Gospel account relates the respective evangelist’s theological interpretation of the fact that Jesus bodily rose on the first day of the week.

Resurrection accounts among the four Gospels can be arranged in several categories. First, there are those dealing with the empty tomb on the first day of the week. Second, there are Jesus’ appearances in Jerusalem and environs. And third, there are his appearances in Galilee. All four Gospels feature accounts of the empty tomb, and, to a greater or lesser extent, they all recount appearances in Jerusalem. Luke’s is the only one, however, that does not contain any narratives of the Galilean appearances. On the other hand, the most protracted Jerusalem story (24:13-35) is found only in the Third Gospel. Because the second volume to the Lukan corpus, the Acts of the Apostles, relates the whole missionary venture of the church as starting in Jerusalem and from there “throughout Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), Christ’s presence in Galilee is simply folded into the broader picture with references to the spice-bearing women (23:55-56) and the “men of Galilee” (Acts 1:11).

### **24:1-12 The resurrection of Jesus**

Tombs were often sealed with a large, wheel-like stone that was rolled in a carved trench in front of a rectangular doorway. Several strong men were needed to move it. The lowly status of women in ancient society not only kept them from politics, but it also meant that they were not to be taken seriously. Paradoxically, this condition gave them some power, since they could come and go in the most volatile areas without raising suspicion, as their standing at the crucifixion and their visit to the tomb attest. Mary Magdalene is the only woman witness common to all four Gospels. For this reason, she has been called

*apostola apostolorum*, the “apostle of the apostles.”

That the stone has been rolled away when the women arrive is the first sign of something out of the ordinary. Luke has men, described in angel-like terms, stilling the women’s fear and placing the resurrection in the context of Jesus’ teaching and ministry. The men do not command the women to tell the others, but the women do so out of their own joy and enthusiasm, a truly Lukan ideal of the faithful disciple, and these women have not yet seen the risen Lord. Unfortunately, the men remain incredulous of the women’s story, although Peter finds it sufficiently convincing to see for himself.

### **24:13-35 The road to Emmaus**

The spice-bearing women have spread the word concerning the empty tomb, so the disciples in town know about it (24:9). One of the disciples along the road is called Cleopas (v. 18), a name similar to Klopas, the husband of one of the women at the cross, according to John’s Gospel (19:25). Many have speculated with good reason that the two mentioned here are married to each other.

Luke is the only Gospel to present this passage, and there may be historical accuracy associated with it. At least three towns lay claim to being the Emmaus of this pericope. The text says that it is situated sixty stadia from Jerusalem, which is the distance for the round trip between the city and Emmaus, a walk one could make at that hour of the day, especially if as excited and enthusiastic as these two disciples. The Emmaus matching most of the criteria lies opposite present-day Moza, whose ruins from the 1948 war are still visible.

The reply to Jesus’ questions summarizes the ministry as disciples would have seen and understood it (vv. 17-24). Jesus’ explanation places all the events within the context of Old Testament prophecies and Jewish experience (vv. 25-27). They recognize him in the breaking of the bread, a detail reiterated when they relate the story to the Eleven and the others. They can fully *see* who Jesus is, however, and therefore *believe* in him only once the “traveling companion” explains the Law and the prophets. None of this information is new to these disciples; they are merely hearing it again as though for the first time, and the little hope they may have had has blossomed into faith: “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” (v. 32). This passage presents a balance between the word (vv. 25-27) and sacrament (vv. 30-32), and as such, it is highly eucharistic and liturgical. See also Mark 16:12-13.



By specifically using “eleven” (v. 33) instead of “apostles,” Luke highlights Judas’s betrayal and prepares the narrative for the election of his replacement in Acts 1:15-26.

### **24:36-49 The appearance in Jerusalem**

Maintaining that the resurrected Jesus is a ghost is more comprehensible to the disciples than believing that he is risen. With this Jerusalem appearance, paralleled in John 19:19-29, Luke presents an apology for those who deny the reality of the resurrection. He does so by having Jesus call the question on the nature of his current existence (v. 39a). Jesus then allows the disciples to feel his flesh and bone while he presents the marks of the crucifixion (vv. 39b-40). Finally, he expresses hunger, and they give him fish to eat. Because it symbolizes overabundance, fish is a sign of the eschatological age, which Jesus’ resurrection has indeed ushered in.

As he does with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus here explains his life, ministry, and resurrection in light of the Old Testament prophecies and experience. The role of the disciples as witnesses to these events is emphasized. They are to start in Jerusalem before heading to the nations. This geographical plan is restated in Acts 1:8. The “power from on high” (v. 49) is the Holy Spirit, who descends upon them in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-13).

This passage introduces the nature of the glorified body, a reality that goes to the heart of Christian belief. The resurrected life that Christ initiates goes beyond spiritual existence in eternity. It is a new life involving the glorified body that is not immediately recognizable to friends and loved ones, and therefore different from the mortal body, yet this glorified body has continuity with the mortal one. The glorified body transcends the limits of time and space, and yet it is physical. Wounds and blemishes are apparent, yet they do not scar or cause pain. Not much more can be said on the nature of the resurrected body than what Luke describes here. Luke wants faithful believers to know that the same destiny awaits them (see Acts 2:14-41).

### **24:50-53 The ascension**

Luke recapitulates the ascension in the Acts of the Apostles (1:6-12), with some additions. The two ascension stories serve as a bridge connecting the two-volume work. Here it occurs on the same day as the resurrection; in Acts, it begins the apostolic ministry. This ascension account completes the journey to Jerusalem (9:51), while it also ends the Gospel. Jesus’ exodus, first voiced in

9:31, is completed with the glorious ascension.

The road to Bethany passes over the Mount of Olives. Jesus was last on the mount during his agony and arrest, when the hour of the “power of darkness” held sway (22:53). His presence on the Mount of Olives now is the triumph over the dark power of Satan.

In Scripture, the Mount of Olives is considered the hill of God’s judgment and glorification, and it takes on that role here. Jesus raises his hands in the Old Testament priestly blessing, he ascends gloriously into heaven, and the disciples are filled with joy. Although the Spirit does not come until they are gathered together at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), they participate even now in Christ’s glorification by praising God in the temple (v. 53). They are the models for all Christians who await the fullness of Christ’s reign.

# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO **JOHN**

Scott M. Lewis, S.J.

## **INTRODUCTION**

At first glance the Gospel of John seems deceptively simple and straightforward. As we read and study the text carefully, however, it becomes obvious that there is more to the text than we thought. John is a master of irony, and as the privileged readers we are in a position to appreciate the irony-laden words and actions of the Gospel's characters. John's Jesus uses ordinary words in a manner charged with different layers of meaning, which his listeners usually misunderstand. Water is not just water, nor is bread only bread. Finally, many concepts with which we are familiar are used in a unique way. The word "truth" in verse 14 of the prologue will be unfolded along with the narrative of the Gospel. We are familiar with the word "life," which is used fifty times in the Gospel of John. Its Johannine meaning, however, dances tantalizingly beyond our immediate comprehension. It is wise not to approach the text with preconceived ideas, but as if we are reading it for the first time. Let the text provoke, challenge, and enlighten you. Don't be afraid to question the text or argue with it.

One of the most striking features of the Gospel of John is its different portrayal of Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), we see much more of the humanity of Jesus. In John, Jesus is a majestic, serene figure, omniscient and totally in control of his destiny at all times. One scholar described John's Jesus as "God striding across the face of the earth." There are no exorcisms in John, and only seven miracles are described. Important miracles such as the raising of Lazarus in John 11 are absent in the other Gospels.

It is likely that John represents a parallel but independent tradition and is not dependent on the Gospel of Mark, as in the Synoptic tradition. Although the name "John" is ascribed to the Gospel, the actual author is unknown, the text

referring to him merely as the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (see 13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20). The text as we have it went through at least three stages of development and represented the tradition and teaching of the Johannine community rather than just one individual.

The Gospel of John reflects the tensions, pressures, and influences of the time and place in which it was written. John has a very black-and-white view of the world: good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and flesh. His narrative is not given to the sort of nuance that we would normally expect and can seem unduly harsh and abrasive at times. Scholars tell us that the Gospel was written around A.D. 90, while the community was involved in acrimonious polemics with fellow Jews. The term “the Jews” (*hoi ioudaioi*) is often used in a very pejorative way, usually to describe the enemies of Jesus. It is important to remember that the author and his community were also Jews. We should not assume that the historical Jesus vilified or rejected his people.

Likewise, John reserves his strongest vitriol for fellow Christians who differ with him in matters of theology, especially those that relate to Jesus (christology). This is especially evident in the First Letter of John. Reading the text in a superficial and unquestioning manner often leads to sectarian or anti-Judaic misuses of the Gospel. Tragically, this has occurred often in our history. As we study the text, it is helpful to put ourselves in the shoes of the “enemies” of Jesus. What does the world look like through their eyes? Why did they respond as they did? Would we respond differently if we were in their place?

The famous prologue (1:1-18) is often described in terms of the overture to an opera, giving the reader a foretaste of the themes that will be developed at length through the rest of the Gospel. It contains John’s theology in a compact form and introduces us to the plot of the Gospel narrative. Matthew and Luke narrate the earthly birth of Jesus, but John develops the theme of preexistence and takes us back to the very beginning, before the world was ever created. We as readers know where Jesus is really from, while most of the characters of the Gospel of John do not. John’s Jesus is not the product of human societies; he is a stranger and alien in the world, even though it was created at his hands. The prologue introduces the theme of the descent and ascent of the emissary of God, as well as the opposition arrayed to thwart the mission of the Word made flesh, an opposition that is represented by the “world” and the “Jews.” Finally, it contains the promise that the revelation and perfection of God’s gifts brought by the eternal Word will make it possible to become children of God.

# COMMENTARY

## PROLOGUE

### *John 1:1-18*

#### **1:1-3 In the beginning**

The phrase “In the beginning” in verse 1 echoes Genesis 1:1 and alerts the reader to the new creation motif present in the Gospel. The “Word” (*Logos*) is present in the Old Testament as the creative energy of God, as in Genesis 1 and Isaiah 55. The Greek term *logos*, a widely used philosophical term meaning “order,” “reason,” or “harmony,” was chosen to express this aspect of God. The role of the *Logos* is parallel to that of divine Wisdom in the late Old Testament, as in Psalm 33:6; Wisdom 7:25; 8:5; 9:1; 9:9-11; and Proverbs 8:22-31. These passages describe a feminine Wisdom figure who is the divine artisan and co-creator and who was with God before creation. The *Logos* in John is the one through whom all things were created and who was with God and turned toward God even before creation. This is not a simple identification of God and the *Logos*, but a statement that what God was, the *Logos* also was.

#### **1:4-5, 9 Life, light, and darkness**

In verse 4 the theme of “life” (*zōē*) is introduced. Jesus has the power of life in him and is able to impart it to whomever he chooses (5:24; 11:25; 14:6). John sees the world in a stark contrast of light and darkness (vv. 4 and 9). The light comes from above, while darkness is from below (3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46). The contrasting themes of light and darkness would have been readily understood by people in a variety of religious and philosophical traditions.

#### **1:6-8, 15 John the Baptist**

Verses 1:6-8 and 15 represent an “intrusion,” meaning that they break the flow of the poem and possibly represent a later insertion. They emphasize the subordinate status and supporting role of John the Baptist. There was some rivalry between the disciples of Jesus and John the Baptist (see 3:22-36 and 4:1-2). His role was not completely clear in the first century, and many continued to follow him (Acts 19:1-7).

#### **1:10-11 Opposition to the light**

Rejection by both the world and “his own”—presumably the “Jews”—is

introduced in verses 10 and 11. Opposition will intensify as Jesus approaches the climax of his mission. This resistance will be present in almost every encounter that Jesus has with people and represents John's stark contrast between the world above and the world below.

### **1:12-13 Divine empowerment**

Believing in the one from above is the key to empowerment, the power to become children (*tekna*) of God (vv. 12-13). This will be expressed in extended form in chapters 14–17. People are not children of God by nature; it is what they become when they are born from above (3:3), and it is by divine initiative, not human. For John, this is a status to be experienced in this life. It is not necessary to wait until the end times or death, as in traditional eschatology. This is similar to the principle of adoption and empowerment by the Spirit found in Romans 7–8.

### **1:14 The incarnation**

This verse contains the most theologically provocative statement in the Gospel. The one who is the object of faith is described: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Greek word that describes the dwelling of the Word literally means “to pitch one's tent” and possibly alludes to the instances in the Old Testament where Yahweh is said to dwell in the tent or tabernacle (Exod 25:8; 29:46; Zech 2:14; Sir 24:8).

The notion of the divine becoming flesh was a scandal to Greeks, who devalued the flesh and exalted the spirit or the mind, as well as to Jews, who safeguarded the oneness and transcendence of God. It is the concept of the incarnation that separates Christianity from both Judaism and Islam. Its vigorous assertion by John's community resulted in its marginalization from other groups of followers of Jesus. In addition to the notion of a physical body, flesh also means the limits of time and space, as well as mortality. With the incarnation, Jesus becomes the point of unity between the world above and the world below.

In the Old Testament, God's glory (*kabod*) is divine power perceptible on a human level (Exod 33:22; 40:34-35), and is all that human beings can bear. Verse 14 insists that they have seen his glory (*doxa*), signifying that God's power has become visible in and through a human being. “Grace and truth” is an attribute of God found in Exodus 34:6 (*hesed w-emet*). Grace is both a sign of God's favor and a description of God's goodness and kindness. John's definition of truth will unfold, as in 4:24; 8:32; 18:37-38. Truth is part of John's high

christology, which unmask the world and its pretensions.

### **1:16-17 God's gifts**

This fullness of grace and truth has bestowed grace (or gift) in place of (or upon) grace (v. 16). This does not imply an inferior status of the previous gift, but its perfection or completion in the new. In verse 17 law is juxtaposed with grace and truth in a way that suggests the theme of fulfillment and perfection of Judaism in Jesus present in nearly every scene of the Gospel.

### **1:18 The unknown God**

No one has ever seen God, who cannot be known through normal human means. All human claims about God are erroneous or incomplete. Human limitations are such that God is unknowable unless the doors of perception are cleansed, which can only be accomplished by the Spirit given through Jesus. In every scene Jesus reveals a God whom we have never known, and this will be reflected in the use of language that emphasizes the sharp dichotomy between above and below, spirit and flesh, light and darkness. There are similar ideas present in Gnostic literature and the Odes of Solomon (late first or early second century A.D.). They share the notion of a redeemer/revealer who reveals the unknown God and awakens humanity to its true origin and destiny. Gnostic groups who shared these ideas made liberal use of the Gospel of John, and it is for this reason that this Gospel was viewed with suspicion by many communities in the early church.

## **THE BOOK OF SIGNS**

### ***John 1:19–12:50***

Many scholars believe that this section of the Gospel draws on a preexistent collection of miracles or signs. The evangelist selected and refined only seven of the miracles of Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels, they are deeds of power (*dynamis*) and reveal the arrival of the reign of God. In John, however, they are called signs (*semeia*) and are a revelation of the identity of Jesus as the one sent from the Father above. Verses 1:29, 35, and 43 begin with “the next day,” which is clearly an artificial literary device. Some are able to discern a pattern of seven days, which, coupled with 1:1, seem to signify the seven days of creation. This pattern is rather strained in some places, and there are other possibilities. Others see a three-day preparation patterned after Exodus 19, with God's glory being revealed on the fourth day (2:1-12). We will assume this pattern.

### **1:19-28 Day One**

This interrogation of John at the hands of the Jerusalem delegation is unique to John. In verse 20 the Baptist himself denies a messianic status and admits a secondary status with regard to Jesus (cf. vv. 6-8, 15). He denies that he is Elijah (v. 21), but it is interesting to note that in Mark 9:11-12, Jesus reveals that John the Baptist was indeed Elijah. Elijah was the prophet who was expected to reappear in the last days to prepare the way for the Messiah (Mal 4:5-6; Sir 48:9). His replies “I am not” (*ouk eimi*) parallel the many “I AM” (*ego eimi*) statements of Jesus throughout the Gospel. The “prophet” referred to in verse 25 is one promised in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18 and amplified in the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran (1QS 9:11; 4Q Flor). The self-declaration from Isaiah 40:3 (vv. 23-27) and John’s assertion of his baptism of water are paralleled in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke).

### **1:29-34 Day Two**

John the Baptist witnesses to Jesus, beginning with a proclamation that he is the Lamb of God (v. 29) who takes away the sin of the world. John portrays Jesus as the paschal lamb (19:36) described in Exodus 12, although the paschal lamb of Exodus did not take away sin but was a sign of reconciliation. The paschal lamb imagery is also used in Revelation 5 and 1 Corinthians 5:7. Jesus came after John but ranks ahead of him because he existed before him (v. 30). This refers to the preexistence of the *Logos* in 1:1-3 and alludes to his divine status. The Spirit descending on Jesus is witnessed by John the Baptist rather than Jesus or the crowds, as in the Synoptic accounts (Mark 1:10; Matt 3:16; Luke 3:22). In verse 34 the Baptist acclaims Jesus the Son of God, the second in what will become a string of titles.

### **1:35-42 Day Three**

Again John the Baptist recognizes the role of Jesus as the Lamb of God. Two of his disciples follow Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels it is Jesus who seeks out and calls his disciples, while in John it is the disciples who search for Jesus. When Jesus asks them what they want, they ask, “Where are you staying (*menein*)?” The word is identical to that used in chapter 15 with the parable of the vine, when Jesus promises that the believer who remains or abides in him (*menein*) will enjoy the indwelling of Jesus and the Father.

The question has levels of meaning, and that is confirmed when Jesus invites the disciples to “come and . . . see.” Verbs of perception in John have a



deeper meaning than the mere physical. Here they are an invitation to the two disciples as well as John's readers to experience and comprehend where Jesus truly abides—with God. Andrew, one of the two disciples, proclaims to his brother Simon that they have found the Messiah. When he brings his brother Simon to Jesus, he immediately receives the nickname Cephas (Peter, meaning "rock"). In Mark 8:27-30, this occurs after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah and occurs halfway through his ministry.

### **1:43-51 Day Four**

In verse 43 Philip is the only disciple directly called by Jesus, and the command "Follow me" is the formulaic call to discipleship present in all four Gospels. Philip proclaims to Nathanael that they have found the one prophesied by Moses and the prophets and that he is the son of Joseph from Nazareth (v. 45). His insistence is met with a contemptuous retort, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (v. 46), reflecting the unimportance of Nazareth in the first century. In the ancient Mediterranean world, it was sufficient to know one's village of origin and the name of one's father to place one in society. The irony is that Jesus as the Word made flesh is not from Nazareth, and his Father is God, which we already know as privileged readers.

Jesus addresses Nathanael as a true Israelite, with no duplicity or guile in him (v. 47). This is unlike Jacob (Gen 27:35) and is in line with a similar description in Psalm 32:2: "in whose spirit is no deceit." When Nathanael asks Jesus how he knows him, Jesus replies that he saw him under the fig tree even before Phillip called him, clearly an instance of supernatural sight (vv. 48-49). In amazement, Nathanael proclaims him Son of God and King of Israel (v. 50). All these titles—Lamb of God, Son of God, King of Israel—are true only to a certain point, but they are human categories and therefore inadequate. Jesus will transcend even these, and in a solemn pronouncement Jesus declares that they will see even greater things—the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man (v. 51). This is a variation on Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:12-13, an important theme in rabbinic literature. Rents in the veil separating the physical and spiritual worlds are a favored aspect of apocalyptic theology, as in the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:10, where the "heavens [were] torn open." Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth, as well as the gateway.

### **2:1-3 A wedding banquet**

It is the third day after the four-day preparation. This is the first of seven

signs that the evangelist presents to disclose the divine identity of Jesus and is present only in John's Gospel. The wedding celebration would have lasted for several days, and the family honor would have depended on providing an adequate feast for the guests. The mother of Jesus is never referred to by name in the Fourth Gospel, nor is the Beloved Disciple, for it is discipleship rather than individual personalities that is important.

### **2:4-5 A request and a strange answer**

When Jesus' mother brings to his attention the fact that the hosts have no more wine, he replies in what seems to us a very brusque manner. The address "Woman" in verse 4 sounds rude to modern ears, but it is actually an Aramaic form that is not disrespectful, although rather formal. "How does your concern affect me?" (*Ti emoi kai soi*: literally, "What do you have to do with me?") is an idiom found in both Aramaic and Greek and expresses defensiveness in the face of attack, as with the demons in Mark 1:24; 5:7, or a concern that someone is forcing an issue or intruding into one's private business.

There is a bit of tension in the story, for Jesus remains slightly aloof from the situation. It is clear that he is defined by his relationship with God the Father and not earthly family ties. His insistence that his hour has not yet come is an indication that he must adhere to the divine timetable. His hour is defined throughout the Gospel as the glorification or crucifixion (12:23), although in this context it probably also alludes to the first public manifestation of his power—he does not feel that the time is right to manifest himself. His mother does not doubt at all that Jesus will respond, and her order to the waiters to do whatever he says displays the absolute trust that is taken as an exemplar of discipleship.

### **2:6-12 The stone jars**

Verse 6 describes six stone jars, each holding approximately twenty-four gallons. Stone jars were often used because, unlike pottery, they did not transmit impurity or defilement. The water that is drawn out of the jars has become wine (vv. 8-9). The steward's statement about the good wine being saved until now (v. 10) suggests John's theme of fulfillment and perfection (1:17), bolstered by the fact that six jars were used in Jewish rituals, one short of the number of perfection and fulfillment. The miracle seems unimportant and even trivial in itself, but it is symbolic of a change of the eon, a new world, and the advent of the Messiah. In Amos 9:11, 13; Joel 3:18; Isaiah 25:6, the advent of the messianic age is signified by an abundance of rich and sweet wine. Through this

sign Jesus reveals his glory (v. 11) or divine power (*doxa*; 1:14; 5:41-44; 7:18; 11:4, 40; 12:43; 17:5, 22-24), and his disciples begin to believe in him.

### **2:13-17 The cleansing of the temple**

In the Synoptic Gospels the cleansing of the temple is almost the last public act of Jesus and occurs after his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, preceding his arrest (Mark 11:15-17; Matt 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-46). In John's Gospel it is one of the first public acts and takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, during one of his three trips to Jerusalem. There is no way to reconcile this discrepancy other than to acknowledge that John's Gospel is an independent witness to the life of Jesus and orders the events in accordance with its own theological concerns and literary structure.

This is the first instance of opposition on the part of the "Jews." Jesus drives out the sellers of oxen, sheep, and doves, along with the money-changers. In a rather violent Johannine twist, he uses a whip of cords and overturns tables and coins in the process. The quotations in verses 16-17 are from Zechariah 14:21 and Psalm 69:9 instead of Jeremiah, as in Mark 11:17 and contain no references to thieves. The offense is turning his Father's house into a marketplace.

### **2:18-22 A new temple**

Jesus is asked for some sort of sign to authenticate his prophetic behavior (v. 18), which is consistent with an Old Testament prophet such as Jeremiah. His reply (v. 19) is "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Thinking that he is referring to the Jerusalem temple (v. 20), they object that the temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and his claim must have seemed ludicrous. The rebuilding of the temple began in 20–19 B.C. and was completed and finished in the sixties of the first century. Forty-six years would have placed this event in A.D. 28.

This is one of many instances in which Jesus speaks on a symbolic higher plane but is misunderstood by people who interpret his words in literal and mundane ways. He is speaking of the temple of his body (v. 21), and of course the three days becomes a prediction of his resurrection. Two words for "temple" are used. The first, *hieros*, possibly refers to the entire temple precincts. The temple of Jesus' body is described with the Greek word *naos*, usually referring to the inner sanctuary, where the image of the god is to be found. This is written after the destruction of the temple, and Jesus is seen by John's community as the

new temple (*naos*) or place of encounter with God. The final verse (v. 22) is a perfect illustration of how the Gospels were written. The words and deeds of Jesus are remembered after the resurrection and interpreted in light of that experience.

### **2:23-25 Imperfect faith**

Although it appears that many begin to believe in Jesus because of the signs, Jesus is not convinced, as he is all too cognizant of the vagaries of human nature. The dangers of superficial or incomplete belief will be a recurrent theme in the rest of the Gospel.

### **3:1-2 Nicodemus by night**

The introduction of Nicodemus in verses 1-2 is linked with the description of people with imperfect faith in 2:23-25. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, plays a symbolic role. He represents those who possess a natural human understanding of reality, as well as those who are sympathetic to Jesus but lack the conviction to make a full and unequivocal stand in faith. He appears again in 7:50 and 19:39 as a well-intentioned but rather timid figure.

In John's uncompromising polemic, Nicodemus is used to challenge followers to make a public commitment and face the cost; he cannot straddle two different worlds. Nicodemus comes by night (v. 2), which here accentuates his limited human understanding and his attraction to the light represented by Jesus. He acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher come from God, for the common expectation is that the ability to perform signs is proof of the presence and approval of God.

### **3:3-6 Second birth**

The reply of Jesus is almost a non-sequitur (v. 3). He makes a solemn pronouncement that no one can "see" the kingdom of God (cf. 1:12-13) without being born from above (*anōthēn*). To "see" means to experience and understand, and the "kingdom of God" is not a place but a state of being. The word *anōthēn* has two meanings—"again" and "from above." The theme of spiritual rebirth is widespread in ancient mystery religions and esoteric philosophies. Nicodemus takes it in the first sense (v. 4), which leads him to an absurdity, for Jesus is speaking on a spiritual plane but is understood in the physical or natural sense, a consequence of the natural barrier to knowing God described in 1:18.

Jesus rephrases the need for rebirth (v. 5) and insists that one enters rather

than sees the kingdom of God, but only after being born both of water and Spirit. Does water mean normal human birth or baptism? Although the latter is likely, the first meaning is not thereby excluded. Additionally, the kingdom of God is also represented by the community of believers, and one receives the new life promised by Jesus by entrance into the group by means of baptism. The chasm between the earthly and human and the heavenly and divine is stated emphatically (v. 6). Those who are of the flesh judge according to the senses (7:24; 8:25). The Spirit, however, provides believers with a new mode of perception and understanding.

### **3:7-8 Wind and Spirit**

Jesus explains this necessity in terms of wind and Spirit—the Greek word for both is *pneuma*. The Spirit, like the wind, is mysterious and cannot be controlled by human beings (Eccl 11:5; Sir 16:21), since it does not originate from them. Nicodemus’s puzzled question is met with a rebuke from Jesus (vv. 9-12). Nicodemus represents the best of a religious tradition, but he does not have a deep understanding of the “earthly things,” which were part of his own tradition, so Jesus questions whether he can comprehend the “heavenly things” that he will reveal. The status of Jesus is unique, for as the divine emissary (v. 13), he is the only one to have been in God’s presence (see 1:18). Even the great spiritual figures who had ecstatic or revelatory experiences (Moses, Abraham, Enoch, etc.) are unqualified to reveal what Jesus can, because he has descended from above.

### **3:14-15 Lifted up**

In his portrayal of the salvific nature of Jesus’ death, John uses the story of Moses and the fiery serpents from Numbers 21:8-9. The Greek word (*hypsōsen*) means both “lifted up” and “exalted,” representing a Johannine double meaning. The crucifixion is referred to in this Gospel as the exaltation or glorification of Jesus. The serpent’s venom is human death, and Jesus follows with a discussion of the cure, which is eternal life through belief in the one sent from above.

### **3:16-17 God’s love**

Verse 16 is one of the most famous passages in the New Testament. Despite the many negative references to the “world” (*kosmos*), here it is an object of God’s love. It is unclear whether “perish” means through death or apocalyptic judgment, as in 5:28-29; both eschatologies are present in John. The incarnation

is for salvation rather than condemnation (v. 17).

### **3:18-21 The mystery of belief and unbelief**

One's salvation or condemnation depends on belief in the name of the Son of God. Belief is not intellectual assent to doctrine, but total surrender and openness to the object of belief. Verses 19-21 reflect the prologue, especially verses 10-11. Rejection of Jesus and a refusal to believe reflect the inner state of the individual. Those who are evil in orientation will not come to the light, while those who live the truth welcome it. Our modern awareness of human psychology and the dynamics of faith and doubt are more subtle and sophisticated, but John has a dualistic, either-or worldview.

### **3:22-36 Rivalry**

Clumsiness in wording and transition indicates that verses 22-36 probably comprise several traditions. Verse 22 is evidence that Jesus is associated with John the Baptist, possibly as a disciple, and that they have gone their separate but harmonious ways. Both Jesus and John work in concert and appear to make a deep impression on many people. It is clear that Jesus is baptizing, but contrast this statement with 4:2. The locations of Aenon and Salim (v. 23) are unknown, although several sites have been proposed.

The dispute that arises between the disciples of John and a Jew is over ceremonial washings (v. 25). In the Synoptic Gospels, the disciples of Jesus are criticized for not washing their hands. A similar criticism is perhaps at the core of the disagreement, because in verse 26 the disciples of John complain to him that Jesus is baptizing independently and is gathering a following of his own. John replies that any power or influence can only be that which is granted by God (v. 27), similar to Jesus' reply to Pilate in 19:11. This reflects a strong current of divine predetermination throughout the Gospel of John, one also present in the sectarian writings of Qumran. John reconfirms his testimony from 1:19-34 (v. 28); his only role is to witness to Jesus (1:6-8, 15).

Verse 29 is similar in nature to an incident from Mark 2:18-20, which was also in the context of a controversy between disciples, although over the issue of fasting. Here the parable is interpreted in a manner that stresses the secondary and supportive role of John the Baptist. Recognizing the power granted to Jesus from above, John begins his fading exit from the scene (v. 30). He clearly is totally open to the Word of God, and he proves this by insisting to his own disciples that both he and Jesus are part of the same mission, which should

eliminate any reason for resentment or competition.

### **3:31-36 The one from above**

Verses 31 and 32 place Jesus in a completely different category. He has come from above and is above all, and he reveals what is from above and out of the reach of ordinary earthly people and will be rejected by many for precisely that reason (cf. 1:11). Jesus speaks for God (vv. 33-36), who has given over everything to him, and to accept the words of Jesus is to accept the God who sent him (cf. Luke 10:22). The promise of eternal life is again given for those who believe in the one who has been sent (v. 36). There is an ominous note: those who reject Jesus will not receive eternal life, and the wrath of God remains on them (cf. Rom 2:5), which presumably includes judgment and punishment.

### **4:1-6 The new spiritual order**

The story of the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman expands on the dawn of the messianic age revealed in 2:1-12. Verses 1-3 explain why Jesus leaves Judea and heads to Galilee. The Pharisees have heard that Jesus appears to be outstripping John the Baptist in baptisms, although the evangelist (or someone much later) adds that Jesus himself did not do any baptizing, leaving that to his disciples. The number of disciples who are baptizing indicates the birth and spread of a new movement, and this is disquieting to the Pharisees. Jesus must pass through Samaria (v. 4), the region in central Israel and the habitation of the Samaritans. They enter Sychar (v. 5), near the ancient city of Shechem and site of Jacob's well (Gen 33:19 and 48:22). At noon Jesus sits down to rest by the well.

### **4:7-9 The woman at the well**

When the Samaritan woman comes to draw water, Jesus asks her to give him a drink (v. 7). By entering a Samaritan village and speaking with this woman, Jesus has crossed ethnic, religious, and gender boundaries. The Samaritans were seen as ethnically impure, having intermarried with colonizers after the Assyrian invasion in 722 B.C. They were religiously suspect, worshiping in a different manner and having their own version of the Torah. And it would have been considered scandalous for him to speak directly to a woman, especially alone. Verse 8 underscores the fact that his disciples are not present, and he is alone with the woman. Her response is rather surly and aggressive (v. 9), emphasizing that Jesus is a Jew and she is a woman and a Samaritan. "Jews

use nothing in common with Samaritans” is an understatement, for there was strong animosity between the two groups. The Greek wording is stronger: “Jews do not associate with Samaritans.”

#### **4:10-15 Living water**

The preliminaries over, Jesus begins probing by stating that if she recognized who he is and understood the transcendental nature of the water he is offering, she would be asking *him* for a drink (v. 10). He promises “living water,” which in a technical sense is any water that is flowing and not stored in cisterns or stagnant. As in other scenes, Jesus is using an ordinary word in a spiritual and transcendental sense, and at first the woman understands only on a mundane and human level (v. 11). She assumes that Jesus means some sort of water from the well in front of them. Her question in verse 12 is ironic: “Are you greater than our father Jacob?” John would answer in the affirmative, consonant with 1:17.

The symbolic use of the well becomes apparent in verse 13, as Jesus states that the water from the well will leave one thirsty again, representing the received religious tradition. The water that Jesus will give, on the other hand, will satisfy fully and abolish thirst forever. It will be a spring of water welling up to eternal life (cf. 1:4). In the Jewish tradition, the Torah was likened to living water. “The words of Torah are received into the heart till the Torah becomes a flowing spring” (*Yalkut Shimoni* 2, 480).

Water is used as the symbol of life in countless instances in the Old Testament, but it is used in an eschatological sense in the prophets (Zech 14:8; Ezek 47:1-12; Isa 44:3-4; Jer 2:13; 17:13f.) to symbolize the outpouring of the Spirit of God. That this is the meaning intended is clarified in 7:37-39, where Jesus makes an identical proclamation in the temple, with a parenthetical comment from the narrator that he was speaking of the Spirit. It is clear that although she is intrigued, the woman has still not caught the deeper meaning of the words, thinking only of an inexhaustible supply of water (v. 15). She addresses him as “Sir,” which is a progression from her rather rude initial response.

#### **4:16-19 A prophet**

When Jesus tells the Samaritan woman to call her husband and come back (v. 16), she replies that she does not have a husband (v. 17). Jesus affirms the truth of her words in an ironical sense (v. 18), for she has had five husbands and



is living with a man to whom she is not married. His words are not condemning, but merely a statement of fact. Stunned, the woman replies that he is a prophet (v. 19), and she moves closer to her recognition of his identity. This provides a transition from the dialogue about the living water to the verses that follow, which discuss proper worship in the new age.

#### **4:20-24 Burning religious questions**

The woman seeks a definitive answer about the correct place of worship: the center of Jewish worship is in the temple of Jerusalem, while Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim (v. 20). In reply, Jesus informs her that the hour is very close when both forms and places of worship will be transcended by a new and universal spiritual order (v. 21).

Verses 23-24 are the essence of this scene's revelation. "The hour is coming" represents the traditional eschatology: the final days and the new age are in the future on the horizon, but Jesus adds, "and is now here," meaning that in his person the new order is present. A true worshiper is one who worships the Father in Spirit and truth, and they are the particular focus of God's attention. "Truth" refers to Jesus himself, who is filled with truth, as in 1:14, 17. Jesus promises to impart the Spirit—the Living Water—4:13-14 and 7:37-39, as well as the Paraclete in 14:15-17, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-11, 12-15. The locus of the encounter of God is being shifted from particular places such as the temple or Mount Gerizim to Jesus himself, who provides access to the Father. Since God is Spirit, God must be worshiped in Spirit (v. 24), which Jesus alone imparts to believers.

#### **4:25-30 Messianic expectations**

The woman voices a messianic expectation, possibly a Samaritan variation referred to as the *taheb*, or restorer, of the prophetic figure foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15-18 (v. 25). This messianic figure is to have a teaching function, as in 14:25; 16:13-15; and Qumran 1QS 9:1. Jesus affirms that he is in fact this messianic figure.

The disciples return from town and are not a little shocked and scandalized that Jesus is conversing with a woman, but no one has the courage to challenge him (v. 27). The woman leaves everything and relates the event to those in the town, and the foreknowledge of Jesus seems to have been the crucial element in her hesitant question about the possibility of his being the Messiah (vv. 28-29).

#### **4:31-34 Divine sustenance**

When the disciples urge Jesus to eat something in verse 31, he replies cryptically that he has food from another source unknown to them (v. 32). The disciples, of course, interpret this in a literal and physical way, assuming that someone has been providing him with food on the side (v. 33). Jesus has to be very explicit as he insists that doing the will of the One who sent him is in itself sustaining, for the mission on which he has been sent is the work of God and is all-consuming (v. 34).

#### **4:35-43 The harvest**

This rendition of the proverb found in Matthew 9:37-38 is meant to heighten the sense of urgency concerning the mission. The eschatological harvest is ready now, not in the future, as the openness of the Samaritans to the Word of God proves. In verse 38, Jesus says that the way has already been prepared by others, probably alluding to John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Non-Jews—Samaritans—have responded to the words of Jesus in faith and are being welcomed, and the followers of Jesus are invited to take part in the harvest. The new universal order described in verses 21-24 is making its appearance.

It is possible that these verses are addressing a situation in John's community around A.D. 90, namely, a number of Samaritan converts who might not have been welcomed enthusiastically by everyone. The message is clear: the Samaritans are the first to receive the words of Jesus and believe. The woman's testimony about Jesus' knowledge of the details of her life is convincing for her and apparently for many others (v. 39). Jesus accepts an offer of hospitality from the Samaritans and stays with them for two days (v. 40). Many come to faith independent of the testimony of the woman, believing that Jesus is "the savior of the world" (v. 42). The coupling of "world" with "savior" is found only here and in 1 John 4:14. After two days Jesus departs for Galilee (v. 43).

#### **4:44-45 Uncertain welcome**

The proverb in verse 44 is present in the Syn-optic tradition (Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24) but seems strangely out of place here, since Jesus has been welcomed in Samaria and the next few verses relate his welcome in Galilee. The people of Galilee welcome him (v. 45); many of them saw what he had done in Jerusalem (see 2:13-25). But Jesus did not trust the people in Jerusalem who were dazzled by his signs (2:23-25). He saw them as fickle and imperfect in

faith, and this rather ominous note could refer to future trouble.

#### **4:46-54 Healing of the royal official's son**

Jesus returns to Cana for his second sign, completing a cycle that began in 2:1-12. This is a different rendition of the healing of the centurion's son reported in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10. When a royal official asks Jesus to come and heal his son, Jesus responds with a rebuke of people requiring signs and wonders in order to believe (v. 48). The man persists; Jesus tells him to go and his son will live (v. 49). When the official returns home and discovers that his son has been healed, he and his entire household believe. He is most likely a Gentile, and he comes to an authentic faith when faced with the sign that Jesus has performed, unlike many others in a similar situation.

In the context of four Jewish feasts (5:1–10:42), opposition to Jesus increases in tempo and vehemence. Jesus will be portrayed as the perfection and fulfillment of four feasts: Sabbath (5:1-47); Passover (6:1-72); Tabernacles (7:1–10:21); and Dedication (10:22-42).

#### **5:1-9 The healing**

The feast is not specified; the sabbath is most likely (v. 1). There are three variations to the name—Beth Zatha, Bethesda, and Bethsaida, but most commentators accept Beth Zatha (v. 2). The pools were thought to have curative powers, even in Canaanite times. The remains of the pool and its structures have been excavated near St. Anne's Church in Jerusalem. Some later manuscripts, none dating before the fifth century, describe an angel who stirs up the water periodically, providing healing for the first person to enter the agitated waters (v. 4). It was most likely a later explanation of the rather cryptic response in verse 7, and the verse is omitted in modern translations. Jesus seeks out the man who has been ill for thirty-eight years rather than the usual supplication from the sufferer (v. 6). Asking if he wants to be well is likely an attempt to evoke some sort of response on the man's part. The man seems to dodge Jesus' question and does not respond with any sort of faith or even a request (v. 7). His reply is more of a complaint. Jesus orders the man to rise, take up his mat, and walk in a manner reminiscent of Mark 2:9-12 (v. 8), and the man complies. The statement that it was a sabbath is the transition to the next part of the narrative, the controversy and the descriptions by Jesus of his relationship to God the Father (v. 9).

#### **5:9-18 Controversy over the sabbath**

The focus shifts to the “Jews,” who object because the healing took place on the sabbath. Work is forbidden on the sabbath, which is to be kept holy. This is one of the Ten Commandments and is central to Israel’s religion (Exod 20:8-11 and Deut 5:12-15). Israelites have even died rather than violate the sabbath, as when they refused to fight on a sabbath during the Maccabean Revolt (1 Macc 2:29-41).

The man immediately shifts the responsibility to Jesus (v. 11). The Jews begin interrogating him to determine the identity of his benefactor (v. 12). The man does not know who it was, both in the ordinary and the deeper sense (v. 13); in fact, he does not seem to be affected at all by the physical healing. Unlike the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, his encounter with Jesus has not resulted in faith or even curiosity. Jesus warns him not to sin anymore, implying that there is a link between sin and illness, as in Mark 2:5-7 (v. 14). This link is denied in the case of the man born blind in chapter 9, suggesting that Jesus’ warning is meant for this man in particular and is not to be taken as a universal statement.

In a striking instance of ingratitude, the man informs the authorities that it was Jesus who healed him and commanded him to walk (v. 15). The authorities then begin to harass Jesus for his sabbath activities (v. 16). This represents the core of the passage and is the key for its interpretation. Since his Father continues to work, so must he; as the Son, Jesus can only do what his Father does (v. 17). Jesus does not deny or denigrate the sabbath, but because of his status transcends it. Birth and death occur even on the sabbath; therefore a long Jewish tradition insists that God continues to sustain and give life and to judge. This incites the authorities to a murderous rage, for in addition to breaking the sabbath, Jesus appears to have uttered blasphemy by making himself equal to God (v. 18).

### **5:19-24 Jesus answers the charges**

In this verse and those that follow, Jesus does not deny the charge but enhances and clarifies his relationship with God, which empowers him to give life and to judge (v. 19). It was widely believed that a true son behaves in a manner that mirrors his father. This issue of paternity is also at the center of the debate in 8:31-59. The relationship between the Father and the Son is described in terms of love, which is at the core of the new divine-human relationship described in 14:10-14 and 15:9-11 (v. 20). The powers and prerogatives of the Father are shared with the Son, which in turn are shared with believers who abide in the Son. Jesus also shares in the divine power of giving life, continuing

the theme of 1:4 and culminating in 11:25-44 (v. 21). God the Father is the sole judge of humanity, but being the emissary of God, Jesus shares the divine prerogatives, standing in the place of the one who sent him. Rejection or acceptance of Jesus is at the same time rejection or acceptance of God (vv. 22-23).

The exalted rhetoric associated with the identity of Jesus is not meant for christological speculation or doctrinal definition but describes the mission of Jesus and his role as revealer and giver of eternal life. Those who hear the word and believe in Jesus thereby believe God and already have eternal life. By belief in Jesus, one passes into a new order or relationship with God even before death (v. 24). The reference to condemnation anticipates the verses that follow.

### **5:25-30 The eschaton**

Coupled with verses 28-29, this formal pronouncement (v. 25) is a reinterpretation of the traditional eschatology. It combines the coming eschatological judgment with what is called a “realized eschatology” (“the hour is coming, and is now here”—see 4:23). The *eschaton* and judgment have arrived with Jesus. Those who hear his voice and believe will live, while those who reject it continue in the realm of death. Only God the Father has life within himself (v. 23), but this is shared with the Son (see 1:4; 5:21; 11:25-44). The power of judgment has been given to the Son of Man, but this should be compared with the description of judgment in 3:17-21 (v. 27). Verses 28-29 represent a traditional eschatology with its roots in Daniel 12:1-3. The resurrection is for both the good and the wicked—the first for reward, the second for punishment. The power of Jesus lies in his complete openness and transparency to God, as well as his total harmony with the divine will (v. 30).

### **5:31-47 Witnesses**

Jesus continues his defense against the charge of blasphemy and violation of the sabbath. According to both the Old Testament (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6) and the later rabbinic tradition, at least two witnesses are required for testimony in capital cases. John the Baptist was a witness (vv. 33-35), but they were content to rejoice in his light, not realizing that Jesus bears the greater light. Jesus has performed works (v. 36) that testify that the Father has sent him. His primary witness is God the Father (vv. 37-38), but they have never heard his voice or seen his form (cf. 1:18), and they do not recognize that Jesus himself is the voice and word of God. Even though the Scriptures witness to Jesus, they fail

in their studies to recognize him (v. 39).

Finally, their unbelief is the result of not having the love of God within them, and the reason is that they have opted for human glory (*doxa*), which is only esteem and praise, rather than the divine glory revealed in Jesus (vv. 41-44). Moses will be their accuser, for if they had really believed and interiorized the law of Moses, they would recognize who Jesus really is. This alludes to 1:17: the gift of Moses and the gift of Jesus are not in conflict with each other, for belief in the former prepares one to receive the latter.

The miraculous feeding is followed by an interlude with Jesus walking on the sea (vv. 16-21) and concluded with the “bread of life” discourse (vv. 25-59) and a conversation between Jesus and his disciples, with a confession of faith by Peter (vv. 60-71). John does not have an institution narrative of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, so many see this chapter as eucharistic in intent. Although it was certainly fruitful in later reflections on the meaning of the Eucharist, its *primary* meaning concerns the identity and mission of Jesus.

### **6:1-15 The miraculous feeding (cf. Mark 6)**

Jesus has just been in Jerusalem and now suddenly turns up in Galilee (vv. 1-3). In chapter 7 he will be back in Jerusalem, leading some scholars to speculate that chapters 5 and 6 may have been transposed at some stage. Tiberias is mentioned only here in the New Testament and was a city founded by Herod Antipas in A.D. 20 in honor of Tiberius Caesar. The crowds follow Jesus because of the many signs he has been performing with the sick, evidence that his work extended far beyond the seven miracles presented in the Gospel.

The feeding of the multitude will evoke memories of God’s providing manna for the Israelites during their desert journey, as well as the imagery in Psalm 23. In the Synoptic accounts, there is no mention of Passover, and the concern for food occurs at the end of a long day of teaching, the issue being raised by the disciples rather than Jesus (vv. 4-5). Jesus is testing the disciples, for he is always in complete control of the situation and omniscient (v. 6). Philip responds with the enormity and seeming hopelessness of the situation (v. 7).

After the boy produces the five barley loaves and two fish, Jesus takes the loaves and gives thanks (*eucharistein*), suggesting a connection with the Eucharist (v. 11). There is a striking parallel with the account of the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 4:42-44:

A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing the man of God twenty barley loaves made from

the first-fruits, and fresh grain in the ear. “Give it to the people to eat,” Elisha said. But his servant objected, “How can I set this before a hundred men?” “Give it to the people to eat,” Elisha insisted. “For thus says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and there shall be some left over.’ ” And when they had eaten, there was some left over, as the Lord had said.

The Elijah/Elisha cycle forms a thematic backdrop for the New Testament portrayal of Jesus. Gathering up the fragments so that nothing may be lost is subject to several interpretations (v. 12). “Gathering” and “fragments” are eucharistic terms found in early patristic literature. In the *Didache* 9:4, the Eucharistic Prayer echoes similar concerns: “As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom.” It can therefore also refer to believers, as Jesus is concerned that he might lose nothing of what has been given to him (see 6:39 and 18:9) “Twelve” usually symbolizes the twelve tribes of Israel, but the emphasis is on the abundance of the food provided by Jesus.

As a result of this sign, the people acclaim Jesus as the prophet like Moses foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15 (vv. 13-14). He is the fulfillment of prophetic expectation; there is no mention of a Messiah. The sign has dazzled the crowds, and their faith and understanding are defective and incomplete, as is often the case in John. This deficient understanding is borne out by their desire to make him a king (v. 15). Since Jesus is aware of their intentions, he withdraws to the mountain to be alone and to escape them.

### **6:16-21 Interlude: Encounter on the sea**

Verses 16-21 represent an interlude and a transition to the discourse back in Capernaum. They parallel the encounter on the sea after the feeding of the multitude in Mark 6:45-52 and Matthew 14:22-23. The disciples leave by boat without Jesus and soon find themselves in the midst of a storm (vv. 17-18). The appearance of Jesus walking toward them on the sea arouses fear (v. 19). His reply of “It is I” (*ego eimi*) can be construed as a simple identification of self or as a divine predicate, as in 6:35; 8:12, 58; 11:25; Exod 3:14; Isa 41:10 and 43:10 (v. 20). In Isaiah 41:10, *ego eimi* is even coupled with the injunction “Fear not.” Given the importance of “I AM” statements in John, it is more likely a divine predicate, indicating that the presence of Jesus is also the presence of God. The crowd notices that Jesus did not leave with his disciples in the boat, and when they can’t find him, they converge on Capernaum looking for him (vv. 22-25).

### **6:25-29 The bread from heaven**

Jesus accuses the crowd of lacking comprehension of the signs and pursuing him only because of their satisfaction with the miraculous food (v. 26). He exhorts them to raise their sights higher and to seek lasting spiritual sustenance that only he can give (v. 27). God has set his seal on the Son of Man, signifying his authentic and unique status as an emissary from God. The crowd's question is a perennial one: what must we do to please God? Here it is phrased rather strangely as the "works of God" (v. 28). The "work of God" is singular in nature, namely, to believe in the one sent by God. Belief in the one sent by God is not mere intellectual assent but a complete reorientation of one's life and a personal relationship with him (v. 29).

### **6:30-33 Request for a sign**

Since Jesus has challenged the Mosaic tradition, the crowd asks for an authenticating sign (v. 30) to justify his actions. Signs were supposed to lead one to faith (Gen 9:12-17; Exod 4:8-9; Isa 7:11-14). The crowd refers to the archetypal feeding miracle, the gift of manna in the desert (v. 31). The phrase "He gave them bread from heaven to eat" is not found in the Old Testament but probably echoes Exodus 16:4, 15; Nehemiah 9:15; and Psalm 78:24. The rest of the chapter is an exegesis (what the Jews would call a "midrash") of that passage. The true bread is that which only God can give, giving life to the entire world, not just Israel. The manna in the desert cannot even approach this (vv. 32-33), as it is temporary and perishable.

### **6:34-40 The bread from heaven**

The crowd understands in a literal and physical way, as did the Samaritan woman in the case of the living water (4:15), so they ask that Jesus give them this bread always (v. 34). In a solemn pronouncement, Jesus declares that *he* is the bread of life (v. 35), providing food and drink that will never leave one hungry or thirsty (4:14; 7:37). In the Old Testament tradition, Wisdom is depicted as providing nourishment (Sir 24:21; Isa 49:10), but as sustainer and life-giver, Jesus perfects and surpasses both Wisdom and the Torah. He is aware that some do not believe or have incomplete faith (v. 36). The universal nature of God's gift of life is emphasized by words such as "anyone," "everyone," and all (vv. 37, 40). God's will is that all people who believe in Jesus receive eternal life and be raised up on the last day (vv. 36-40).



### **6:41-51 Murmuring and rebellion**

The bystanders begin “murmur[ing],” which calls to mind the rebellious behavior of the Israelites in the desert (Exod 16:2-12; Num 14:2-29). Interpreting Jesus’ words literally as Nicodemus did, they marvel at the impossibility of his coming down from heaven. Their familiarity with the family of Jesus and his earthly origins becomes an issue as in Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:53-57; and Luke 4:16-30 (vv. 41-42), although the privileged reader knows that his descent is from the Father. The universal thread is taken up again from Isaiah 54:13. “They shall all be taught by God” (v. 45) signifies that anyone who has really understood or listened to God will believe in Jesus. As the living bread that came down from heaven, Jesus grants eternal life to those who eat this bread. This bread given for the life of the world is his flesh (v. 51), which alludes to his impending death.

### **6:52-59 Eat my flesh and drink my blood**

Drinking blood would have been unthinkable for a Jew, especially in view of the strong prohibition in Leviticus 17:10-14. Likewise with eating flesh; the image is made even more graphic by the use of a different verb for eating that describes munching or chewing. This invitation to ingest eternal life through the flesh and blood of Jesus is explained further in verse 57: Jesus has life in him from the Father; the one consuming his flesh and blood will therefore have that same life.

The primary focus is on the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus that is given over in order to give life to and nourish the world. But the language is also eucharistic in nature, evoking Mark 14:22-25 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-28. The discourses in chapters 13–17 suggest that being nourished and sustained by Jesus, while including the Eucharist, does not exclude many other aspects of the Christian life (vv. 53-57). One must assimilate Jesus as one would food, allowing his life-giving presence to become the very fiber of one’s being. In the context of the Passover, in which Jews celebrate God’s gift of the manna in the desert, Jesus claims to transcend and perfect even this gift.

### **6:60-71 The first defections**

In verses 60-66, many of the disciples take offense at the words of Jesus and his claim to be the source of life. The insistence that the spirit gives life but the flesh is of no avail signifies the limitations of human understanding. The words of Jesus are of a different order and represent both spirit and life, but

many of his disciples leave because they cannot go beyond human categories and receive his words. Jesus asks the Twelve, the inner circle, whether they also want to leave, but Peter affirms their faith (v. 67). His confession of faith in verses 68-69 makes it very clear that there are no other possibilities; Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. It is not that they completely understand his teachings, but they trust him enough to know that their understanding will grow during their journey with him. The Twelve not only have come to believe, but they now know that Jesus is the Holy One of God—the One from above. Even this is open to question, for Jesus knows that Judas is going to betray him (vv. 70-71).

### **7:1-9 Jesus and his brothers**

In chapters 7 and 8, Jesus goes to Jerusalem during the feast of Tabernacles, and his visit to the temple provokes threats, accusations, and attempted arrests. In several places Jesus states that the “Jews” were trying to kill him (5:18; 7:19). This prevents him from moving freely about, and Judea appears to be a place of danger (see 11:7-8). This is the feast of Tabernacles or Booths (Sukkoth), a popular annual harvest festival that celebrated God’s care and guidance while the Israelites were in the wilderness (v. 2). The feast takes place on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, Tishri (September–October), and is described in Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Deut 16:13-15; Lev 23:39-43. The feast became increasingly eschatological in orientation, pointing toward God’s redemptive action at the end time.

Jesus’ brothers advise him to go to Judea to show his works to his disciples. But this would be garnering human rather than divine glory. This attempt on their part to goad Jesus into making a public splash by performing miracles is evidence of their lack of understanding and true faith, and the narrator states tersely that they did not believe in him (vv. 3-5). That there may have been tensions and misunderstandings among Jesus’ family members is probably more accurate than later piety would admit, for this is corroborated by Mark 3:21, 31-35, and 6:1-6, where his family is depicted in rather negative terms.

Jesus refuses, stating that his hour has not yet come, as in 2:4 (v. 6). The time is always right for his brothers; the world does not hate them because they have given it no reason to do so. Jesus, however, is hated because he is from above, and his presence shows the works of the world for what they are. Refusing to go, Jesus insists that they go on their own, stating that his time has not yet been fulfilled (v. 8). This initial reluctance to accede to the requests of

others is also found in 2:4-7 and 4:48-50, which is indicative of the fact that his mission is totally defined by his relationship with the Father and obedience to the divine will.

### **7:10-36 Jesus goes to the feast**

Jesus asserts his complete autonomy in verse 10 by his decision to go to Jerusalem alone. There is an air of expectancy surrounding his arrival, and a division has already occurred among the people. Some are open to his message, while others think that he is a deceiver (vv. 11-13). As Jesus begins to teach in the temple, his knowledge of the Scriptures evokes amazement from the crowd (vv. 14-15), questioning the origin and legitimacy of his teaching. Although the literacy and education of Jesus are debated by scholars, he is presented in John and in Luke (4:16-30) as being literate and conversant with the written tradition. Jesus insists that his teaching is not his own or a matter of learning but is of God, and this is obvious to anyone who seeks to do God's will (vv. 16-18).

The controversy in verses 19-36 centers on the origins of the Messiah. The argument Jesus has with the crowd concerns his healing in 5:9-10, which he defends on the basis of law and practice with respect to circumcision. Just as the sabbath is technically violated in order to do the will of God, Jesus does so in order to give life. He challenges the crowd to judge justly rather than by appearances; that is, sense data and rationality (vv. 19-24). They engage in speculation about the identity and possible messianic status of Jesus, but militating against this is their assertion that they know his origins, whereas the origins of the Messiah will be unknown. This is Johannine irony, for they don't really know where he is from; his origins and identity are not defined by earthly categories (1:1-3) but by God. There is also an extrabiblical tradition of the Messiah's hidden nature in *1 Enoch* 48:6 and *4 Ezra* 13:51-52.

Their failure to discover and accept his origins prevents them from believing in him. Again they try to arrest him, but his fate is determined by a divine timetable rather than a human one (vv. 25-31). Some of the crowd appears to be swayed by his signs, causing the chief priests and the Pharisees to send guards to arrest him. Jesus' enigmatic words about his departure and the inability of others to come will be repeated in 13:33. They of course misunderstand, believing that he is going to the Greeks (Gentiles) in the Diaspora, when in fact he is returning to the Father (vv. 32-36).

### **7:37-39 Last day of the feast**

Jesus' solemn revelatory statement in verses 37-39 is an amplification of 4:13-14 and occurs in the context of the celebration of the feast of Sukkoth in the temple. Twigs of myrtle, palm, willow, and a citron are bound up in what is called a *lulab*, which is waved during processions around the altar while Psalms 113–118 are sung. A ceremonial water libation for abundant rain is celebrated on the eighth day. A procession to the Pool of Siloam brings back water in a golden vessel through the Water Gate to the temple for pouring onto the altar (*m. Sukkah* 4:9; Josephus, *Ant.* 3:245, 247). This was a ritualization of the prophecies in Zechariah 14:6 and Ezekiel 47:1-11, which spoke of water pouring out from the temple, the center of the world, and giving life wherever it flowed.

By naming himself as the source of living water, Jesus claims to be the fulfillment and embodiment of what is symbolized in the Sukkoth ritual, and the origin of the life-giving water is shifted from the temple to him. There is an ambiguity in the Greek in verse 38 that allows for a translation that describes the rivers of living water flowing from either Jesus or the believer. In either case, Jesus is the ultimate source, and he shares this with those who believe. A parenthetical comment explains that the living water is the spirit and that it was only given after the glorification (crucifixion) of Jesus (cf. 19:34).

### **7:40-52 A division in the crowd**

Some in the crowd respond to Jesus' words with a proclamation of him as "the Prophet" (see 1:21; Deut 18:15), while others proclaim him Messiah. But many reject Jesus because he is from Galilee, and the Messiah is supposed to come from Bethlehem. John does not tie Jesus in any way to Bethlehem, but the tradition in Matthew and Luke must have been widely known. Either way the statement is ironical: in one tradition Jesus was born in Bethlehem, while in John he is from above (vv. 40-43).

The guards sent to arrest Jesus are impressed by his words, earning the contempt of the Pharisees and an accusation that they, too, have been deceived by him. They also show a common contempt for the people of the land as being ignorant and accursed. Nicodemus reappears and seeks a fair hearing for Jesus in accordance with the law. The authorities chide him for being sympathetic to what is perceived as a Galilean movement, and they again assert that no prophet arises from Galilee (vv. 44-52).

### **7:53–8:11 The story of the woman taken in adultery**

This incident is not included in the earliest handwritten manuscripts of

John's Gospel, and in some later manuscripts it is placed either in other locations within John's Gospel or in the Gospel of Luke. It is probably an independent, free-floating tradition about Jesus.

The story focuses on the murderous impulses of the crowd and their projection of their own darkness on a helpless victim or scapegoat. A woman has been taken in adultery and is liable to stoning according to Leviticus 24:1-16; Deuteronomy 13:10; 17:2-7. She is being used by the Pharisees as a means of trapping Jesus into denying the law of Moses. He has been aware of their murderous impulses for some time, and hatred is equated with murder itself.

Jesus refuses to take the bait and merely writes in the sand and invites those who are sinless to cast the first stone. We cannot know what he wrote, and it does not matter, for it was sufficient to trigger a remembrance of sin on the part of the bystanders. Those present have been brought to an awareness of their own inner darkness. This story is more about non-condemnation than forgiveness, for Jesus only admonishes her not to sin again.

### **8:12-30 The light of the world**

Verses 12-59 relate a long polemical encounter between Jesus and "the Jews," some of whom are initially open to his words. In the course of the encounter, Jesus echoes the "I AM" epiphany in Exodus 3:14 four times. The first three instances provoke controversy, the last an attempted stoning for blasphemy.

In verse 12, Jesus proclaims that he is "the light of the world," an image usually ascribed to God, as in Psalm 27:1. The light of life that his followers will have resonates with a passage in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran (1QS 3:7) concerning God, as well as their self-description as "the sons of light." This proclamation is in the context of the Sukkoth ceremony of light (*m. Sukkah* 5:1-4). Four huge menorah or candlesticks were placed in the Court of the Women, and it was said that the light was sufficient to illuminate all Jerusalem, calling to mind Zechariah 14:6. The Torah was described in terms of light for the world in Wisdom 18:4; Proverbs 6:23; Psalm 119:105; and Baruch 4:2, as well as in the rabbinic tradition.

John is portraying Jesus as the embodiment and fulfillment of these passages and as an expression of the light coming into the world in 1:4-5. People bring judgment on themselves by their acceptance or rejection of this light (3:19-21). The Pharisees question the validity of his testimony, to which Jesus claims the Father as a corroborating witness (vv. 13-18), necessary under a tradition in

which two or more witnesses are required (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15) and no one can testify on his or her own behalf (*m. Ketub* 2:9). Jesus insists that the root problem is that the crowd does not know him or the Father (cf. 1:18; 14:7); indeed, they do not do so because they are from “below,” with all the accompanying ignorance and limitation, while Jesus is from “above” (vv. 19-24). Verses 24 and 28 link the “I AM” assertion with life-giving power to overcome sin and Jesus’ revelation of the Father. The final instance (v. 58) refers to the preexistence of Jesus, as revealed in 1:1-3.

### **8:31-59 Son of Abraham, Son of God**

The sharp exchange between Jesus and a group of halfway believers has for centuries provided fuel for anti-Semitic theological attitudes. It is important to place it in the context of the struggle of John’s community with Jewish authorities toward the end of the first century. The negative images and statements should be understood as the rhetorical devices of the author and not a condemnation of the Jewish people by Jesus.

Addressing those who had begun to believe in him (v. 30), Jesus exhorts them to remain or stand fast (Greek: *menein*; cf. 15:10) in his word in order to be truly liberated, for their incipient faith still has a long way to go. The truth that they will then know will make them free (v. 32). This truth consists in knowing God through Jesus (1:14; 4:23-24; 14:6) and has nothing to do with human or conceptual knowledge. Taking his statement literally, they retort that they have never been enslaved, conveniently forgetting the sojourn in Egypt and their current occupation by the Romans.

But sin itself is slavery (Rom 6), and in order to be truly free, they need to be liberated by a son who abides or remains in God’s household (Rom 7). The crowd first claims to be offspring of Abraham, then of God. By denying that they are illegitimate in verse 41, they are possibly impugning the parentage of Jesus. Jesus rejects both of their paternal claims, for parentage is revealed in the behavior and attitudes of offspring. Abraham was noted for his faith and openness to God; if they were his offspring, they would believe in Jesus, since he was sent from God. If God were their Father, they would love Jesus as the one sent from God. Since they reject Jesus and want to kill him, they are displaying deceitful and murderous behavior, proving that the devil rather than God or Abraham is their father (vv. 41-44). Those who reject Jesus do not belong to God (v. 47).

Amid accusations of being a Samaritan or possessed (v. 48), Jesus insists

that he honors his Father and is in turn glorified by him. When Jesus proclaims that whoever keeps his word will never die (v. 51), derision and an accusation that he is trying to make himself greater than Abraham (vv. 49-55) are the response (cf. the ironical question concerning Jacob in 4:12). His statement that Abraham rejoiced to see his day and that he existed even before Abraham (1:1) results in an attempt on his life, leading Jesus to flee (vv. 56-59).

### **9:1-7 The healing of the man born blind**

The healing is the mere prelude to the extended controversy between the blind man and the Pharisees in verses 8-34. The blind man and the Pharisees move in opposite directions—the man toward the sight of faith, and the latter deeper into the sightless darkness of willful ignorance. The disciples ask the perennial question concerning the blind man: Whose fault is it? “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” (v. 2). It was traditionally held that physical infirmity was the result of sin on the part of the individual or his parents (Exod 20:5; Luke 13:1-5). Jesus rejects this explanation (vv. 3-4); the man was born blind in order to play a role in revelation of the works of God.

With a reference to 8:12 and an allusion to his approaching death, Jesus declares that he is the light of the world as long as he is in the world and so must act accordingly (vv. 3-4). After anointing the man’s eyes with a paste of saliva and mud, he tells him to wash in the Pool of Siloam (vv. 6-7), which, according to a loose etymology, means “sent.” Jesus, of course, is the one who is “sent,” indicating that it is by means of an encounter of faith with him that human eyes are opened to the truth.

### **9:8-23 Controversy**

People first question whether the man who now has his sight is in fact the same one who used to sit and beg, then whether he was actually blind or not (vv. 8-13). The healing, performed on a sabbath, sparks a tremendous controversy with the Pharisees. They question the man’s parents concerning his blindness, but they refuse to answer (vv. 18-23). Their fear that they will be expelled from the synagogue reflects the situation in the eighties and nineties rather than during the lifetime of Jesus. The main objection on the part of the Pharisees is that Jesus sinned by healing on the sabbath, so God cannot be with him (vv. 16, 24).

### **9:24-34 Second interrogation**

The Pharisees’ insistence that they do not know where Jesus is from (v. 29)

is ironic, for that is the crux of the problem. Had they recognized his divine origin, they would have been open to his message. The man grows bolder as the interrogation continues: in verse 17 he proclaims that Jesus is a prophet, while in verses 30-32 he insists that God must be with Jesus for him to be able to restore his sight. He has read the meaning of the sign correctly and his conclusion is self-evident. But he is ridiculed, called one born in sin, and expelled from their presence.

### **9:35-38 Coming to faith**

Jesus finds the man and asks him if he believes in the Son of Man. Strangely, there is no mention of the Messiah. “Son of Man” refers to Jesus and describes his human revelatory role (1:51; 3:13-14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62). When the man asks who the Son of Man is so that he might worship him, Jesus reveals himself, and the man does reverence. His journey has been from blindness to sight in many respects, and from unbelief to faith. Throughout the controversy the man repeatedly admitted his ignorance on many matters, but he was spiritually open and astute enough to read the meaning of the sign that Jesus performed, while the others plunged deeper into darkness and ignorance.

### **9:39-41 Blindness**

The proclamation in verse 39 is the core of the story: Jesus came for judgment, in the sense that those who are blind but open to God’s word might see, while those who claim to have sight will be shown to be completely blind. When some of the Pharisees take umbrage at the suggestion that they are blind, Jesus responds that blindness is not a sin; the greatest sin is to claim to see (and understand) when one does not. The presence of Jesus as the light provokes judgment in the acceptance or rejection of others (1:9-11; 5:27; 8:12; 12:46-48). The story is the antidote for dogmatism of any sort and can be understood on one level as a metaphor for humanity, for only by admitting “blind[ness]” can humanity receive the sight that Jesus offers.

### **10:1-16 Good and bad shepherds**

The extended metaphor in verses 1-16 is opaque and puzzling, even for the immediate audience (v. 6). Who are the ones referred to in the metaphor? Are the thieves, robbers, and hirelings messianic prophets and pretenders, the current Jewish leadership, or members of other Christian communities? The images from the Old Testament are clear enough: bad shepherds, representing the



compromised leadership of Israel, are portrayed in Jeremiah 23:1-8; Ezekiel 22:27; Zephaniah 3:3; Zechariah 10:2-3, 11:4-17. Numbers 27:16-17 speaks of the need for a leader to lead the people in and out, ensuring that they are not like sheep without a shepherd. There is an extended tirade against bad shepherds in Ezekiel 34:1-11, but God promises to seek out his sheep and place a Davidic shepherd over them (Ezek 34:23-24).

In the New Testament the followers of Jesus are sheep (John 21:16-17). In the Synoptic tradition a number of instances refer to the lost sheep of the house of Israel or sheep without a shepherd (Mark 14:27; Matt 9:36/ Mark 6:34; and Mark 15:24). Although the metaphor could be directed at other Christian groups, the most likely targets are the Pharisees and Jewish leaders, especially since chapter 9 ended with their condemnation by Jesus. They have already been shown to be blind; now John will portray them as deaf to the word of God. Using the "I AM" proclamation (vv. 7, 11), Jesus establishes that he is both the shepherd and the gate for the sheep. Those sheep that truly belong to God and to Jesus will hear his voice and follow, and will not listen to those who are not from God and do not have the well-being of the people in mind. This is understood more clearly in the context of the intracommunal struggle depicted in 1 John. Jesus provides access to God by being the gate (Ps 118:20), the mediator between God and humanity. Those who enter through the gate will have life in abundance (1:4; 3:16; 5:21; 11:25-44). The other sheep that do not belong to the fold (v. 16) possibly represent the Gentiles (17:20-23) but can also refer to other Christian groups. The motif of one shepherd drawing others into the fold of the one God is found in Micah 5:3-5; Jeremiah 3:15; 23:4-6; Ezekiel 34:23-24.

### **10:17-21 Laying down one's life**

Jesus is loved by the Father because he willingly lays down his life and takes it up again in fulfillment of the Father's command. He is not a victim; his death is a deliberate act of self-giving love. The claims of Jesus provoke another controversy (vv. 19-21).

### **10:22-42 A Hanukkah encounter**

The feast of Hanukkah (vv. 22-23) probably occurred in December, and the encounter takes place in the Portico of Solomon (Acts 3:11). Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Temple in 164 B.C., as recounted in 1 Maccabees 4:52-59. A long argument erupts over whether Jesus is truly the Messiah, to which he offers as evidence the works he has performed. The sheep

that hear his voice follow, and he will give them eternal life, so that they will never perish. No one can take them away, because they have been given to Jesus by the Father, who is greater than all (vv. 24-29). He follows that with an assertion that he is one with the Father (v. 30), but in 14:28 he states that the Father is greater than he. The assertion of unity refers to the mutual indwelling and relationship of the Father and the Son and should not be seen as a metaphysical statement concerning the divine nature.

The bystanders attempt to stone Jesus for blasphemy (vv. 31-33), because as a man he has tried to make himself God. In reply, Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6, in which heavenly beings (*elohim*) are addressed as gods. If those to whom the word of God came could be addressed as gods, he reasons, then it is not outrageous to do so for one consecrated and sent into the world as the Son of God. The crowd is not impressed with his exegesis and tries to arrest Jesus, but he escapes across the Jordan. Many begin to believe in him, noticing that John the Baptist performed no signs, but that what he said about Jesus is true.

### **11:1-16 A delayed mission of mercy**

The raising of Lazarus is found only in John's Gospel, although Jesus restores life to the son of the widow of Nain in Luke 7:11-17. In the Synoptic tradition it is the incident in the temple that pushes the authorities to move against Jesus, whereas John represents this as the last sign and defining act of the public ministry of Jesus. This is the first mention of Mary and Martha in John (cf. Luke 10:38-42), and the anointing of Jesus by Mary is mentioned, although it will not appear until chapter 12.

When Jesus receives word from the sisters that his friend Lazarus is ill, he echoes the reason for the illness given in the case of the blind man in 9:3: the glory of God and his Son. Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, so his intentional two-day delay upon hearing of Lazarus's illness is shocking and baffling from the human point of view. His disciples are appalled at his intention to return to Judea (v. 8), for his life has been in danger there.

Jesus continues with the symbolism of light as in 8:12 and implies urgency in his intention. The disciples still do not understand, and when Jesus states that Lazarus is asleep, they take his words literally. Jesus has to tell them bluntly that Lazarus is dead (vv. 11-15). Thomas expresses a resigned willingness to return with Jesus and die with him, ironical in light of later events (v. 16). The prelude in verses 1-16 makes it clear that the situation that greets them on their arrival in Bethany is the result of a deliberate decision by Jesus.

### **11:17-33 Jesus encounters Martha and Mary**

Jesus will encounter Martha in verses 17-27 and Mary in verses 28-37. Upon arrival, they are greeted with the news that Lazarus is dead and has been in the tomb for four days (v. 17). This underscores the fact that he is definitively dead, for according to rabbinic tradition the spirit of the departed hovered around the body for three days. The “Jews” who have come to mourn with the sisters are here portrayed in a positive manner. Martha’s pointed greeting in verse 21 expresses disappointment and perhaps even a bit of reproach, but she is still hopeful in verse 22. In reply to Jesus’ reassurance that her brother will rise, Martha acknowledges the conventional Jewish (Dan 12:2) and early Christian (Mark 12:18-27; 1 Thess 4:13-18; John 5:28-29) view of the resurrection as occurring in the future on the last day (vv. 23-24).

Jesus’ “I AM” statement in verse 25 is unequivocal: as the one who is the resurrection and the life, he has the power of life within him (1:4; 5:24-26). Life (*zōē*) is used thirty-six times in John, seventeen of these with the modifying word “eternal.” This is the life not of the world to come but of the world above and does not apply only to the afterlife. The promise of life to the believer in verses 25-26 seems nonsensical if it is taken to refer to biological life and death. But spiritual and biological life and death are contrasted in a manner to convey the promise to the believer that he or she will never be separated from God, even by death. Eternal life, which is direct knowledge of God, begins in the present rather than in some distant future.

Martha responds in faith to Jesus by acknowledging him as the Messiah, Son of God, and the “one . . . coming into the world,” which is probably a prophetic figure as in Deuteronomy 18. Mary confronts Jesus with the same words as Martha did in verses 21-22, but she kneels at his feet in reverence.

### **11:33-37 A puzzling grief**

Jesus is moved and upset by the weeping of Mary and the Jewish mourners with her, and he begins to weep (v. 35), which is puzzling considering the deliberate nature of his delay, his intention to restore the life of Lazarus, and his complete foreknowledge. Although some remark at how much Jesus loved Lazarus, others comment that given what he had done for the blind man, he should have been able to help his friend.

### **11:38-44 Roll away the stone**

Jesus orders the stone to be removed from the tomb despite Martha’s

protestations that there will be a stench after four days in the tomb (vv. 38-39). The prayer of Jesus in verses 41-42 is for the benefit of the crowd so that they might believe. After his command to Lazarus to come out, the man appears still bound hand and foot with his face wrapped in a cloth. This is not a resurrection but the resuscitation or reanimation of a corpse. Lazarus will have to die a second time. The resurrection involves a qualitative change in the nature of the body. When Jesus rises from death, the face-covering is rolled up and placed to one side in a definitive gesture (20:7), while Lazarus is still bound.

### **11:45-54 Panic in high places**

The raising of Lazarus brings many to faith (v. 45). When the news is related to the Pharisees, the lights burn late in the Sanhedrin as the Pharisees and chief priests meet to decide what to do about Jesus. Verses 47-48 are both poignant and ironic: the chief priests and Pharisees are afraid that Jesus, left unchecked, would attract many followers, causing the Romans to deprive them of their land and nation. This, of course, is written after that had become a fact.

Caiaphas, high priest from A.D. 18–36, makes his first appearance in verses 49-50. His comment is meant as a solution for ridding themselves of a meddlesome prophet. With Johannine irony, he unwittingly prophesies in his office as high priest that Jesus would die on behalf of the people and the whole nation. John adds that his death is also to gather into one the dispersed children of God, possibly referring to the Jews in the Diaspora, although Gentiles may also be included (v. 52).

From that day on, there is a plot to kill Jesus (vv. 53-54), causing Jesus to hide in a town called Ephraim. He in effect becomes a hunted man. The crowd heading for Jerusalem for Passover asks aloud whether he will make an appearance or not, and the chief priests seek to arrest him. The tension builds for the transition to entrance into Jerusalem and the passion in chapter 12.

### **12:1-9 The anointing at Bethany**

There are parallels to this anointing (vv. 1-8) in Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; and Luke 7:36-50, although they vary in form. John's version is unique in many respects: the one raising objections is named as Judas, the woman performing the anointing as Mary, and the location of the dinner as the home of Lazarus and his sisters rather than Simon the Leper or Simon the Pharisee.

Anticipating the impending death of Jesus, Mary anoints him as an act of love and devotion, as well as a proleptic preparation for burial. Judas cannot

comprehend this act of love and objects to the expense and the possibility of giving the money to the poor. But the poor are not at the heart of his concern, only his own lack of love and the gathering momentum of evil in his life (v. 6).

### **12:12-16 The entrance into Jerusalem**

Jesus' messianic entrance is essentially identical in all four Gospels, but in John it represents his third trip to Jerusalem (2:13; 7:10), and there is no cleansing of the temple. The crowd cries "Hosanna," meaning "Save," which is taken from Psalm 118:25-26. A royal messianic acclamation is indicated, but Zechariah 9:9 is the prophetic passage used to modify the description of the entrance, depicting Jesus seated upon an ass's colt rather than mounted or riding a chariot. This can signify the distinctively nonpolitical nature of his messianic status or emphasize the universal elements found in Zechariah. This reinterpretation is a post-resurrection theological insight by the disciples (cf. 2:22).

### **12:9-11, 17-19 The whole world goes after Jesus**

The presence of Lazarus causes a sensation and attracts many to faith in Jesus (vv. 9-11; 17-19). The fear of the Pharisees in verse 19 that the "whole world" is going after Jesus is well-founded and fulfills the fears voiced in 11:50-52. If this is accurate, it is hard to understand why there is no mention of Lazarus in the other Gospels.

### **12:20-33 The hour of the Son of Man**

The "whole world" is indeed going after Jesus, which is indicative of his universal mission and the ingathering of the scattered children of God (11:52). This is confirmed by a request via Philip and Andrew (vv. 20-22) from a group of visiting Greeks (Hellenes) to "see" Jesus. The Greeks were likely "God-fearers"—Gentiles attracted to Judaism and its practices but not full members. This is the trip wire that signals that the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified has arrived (v. 23). His hour was always associated with his future glorification (2:4; 4:23; 7:30; 8:20).

The image of the grain of wheat (vv. 24-25) dying and bearing fruit is also found in some Greek mystery religions but is also similar to the seed analogy used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:36. This grain of wheat expresses the principle of death and life and the necessity of the earthly to give way to the heavenly. It is coupled with the pronouncement about loving one's life and losing it, hating it

and preserving it for eternal life (v. 25), which counsels a “letting go” of one’s life rather than a fearful grasping. This principle is a fundamental and well-attested element in early Christian tradition: Mark 8:35; Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:24, as well as a parallel tradition in Matthew 10:39 and Luke 17:33.

Likewise, verse 26 is similar in some ways to the command to take up one’s cross found in Mark 8:34; Matthew 16:24; and Luke 9:23. John does not portray Jesus as the Man of Sorrows but the Lord of Glory. Jesus admits to being troubled in verse 27, but his request for the cup to pass from him in Mark 14:36 is here only a brief rhetorical question, followed by an assertion that this hour is his sole reason for being there.

Jesus’ request to the Father to glorify him (v. 28) is answered by an affirmative voice from heaven. Some of the crowd hear thunder, others an angel; not all are attuned to heavenly realities. There is some similarity to a *bat qol* (“daughter of a voice”), which Jewish tradition believed to be a heavenly voice that declares God’s will, teachings, or commandments to individuals or groups. Jesus’ death is a judgment on the world (v. 31), which will be one of the dimensions of his trial. Being “lifted up” (3:14; 8:28) from the earth is clearly his impending crucifixion. As a result, he will draw all people to himself, which, coupled with 3:16, implies a more universal mission than Israel alone.

### **12:34-36 The light will soon depart**

Puzzlement is the reaction of the crowd in verses 34-36. Tradition depicts the Davidic Messiah as remaining forever, but Jesus insists that the Son of Man will be lifted up, which contrasts popular expectations with the early Christian reinterpretation of the messianic tradition. There is a warning: the light (Jesus) will not be around much longer, so his listeners are encouraged to believe while they can, lest they walk in darkness. Believing in the light will enable them to become children of the light, which is echoed in Luke 16:8; 1 Thess 5:5; and especially in the literature of the Qumran community (1QS 1:10; 1QM 1:1).

### **12:37-50 Human praise and the glory of God**

In spite of Jesus’ signs, most have not believed, and Isaiah 53:1 (v. 38) and 6:1-10 (v. 40) are invoked to explain their unbelief. This is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament: Rom 10:16; Mark 4:11-12; Acts 28:26-27. The revelation of God’s glory is a thread running throughout Isaiah (6:1-10; 40:5; 42:8; 48:11; 60:1), so John is able to assert that Isaiah saw the preexistent glory of Jesus (v. 41). Among those who have come to believe in Jesus are many authorities, but

with a fear reminiscent of 9:22, they refuse to do so openly for fear of expulsion from the synagogue, as in the case of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (3:2; 19:38).

John's accusation that they preferred human praise to the glory of God depicts a conflict in the Gospel between the transcendent and earthly, the human and the divine, and those who are open to God's revelation and those who cling to human traditions and perceptions. Such examples can be found in every age and in every religion. The gauntlet is thrown down in verses 44-50: since Jesus represents the Father who sent him, rejection of him is rejection of the Father. Those who refuse to believe are not condemned by Jesus, who did not come for that purpose (3:18-21), but will be judged by the word revealed by him on the last day. Today we would have a much more nuanced explanation of conversion and the dynamics of faith and doubt, and it is hoped that we do not condemn those who do not share our views. These words conclude the section of the Gospel designated by scholars as "The Book of Signs."

## **THE BOOK OF GLORY**

### ***John 13:1–20:31***

Scholars designate chapters 13:1–20:31 as "The Book of Glory" because they describe the glorification of Jesus and his return to the Father. The farewell discourse that follows the meal is in the ancient tradition of testaments of famous men (see Gen 49; Josh 22–24; Deut; Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*; *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*). These testaments usually consisted of exhortations, prayers, consolation of followers, predictions of the course of future events, and the appointment of a successor. Chapters 13–17 are a composite work, woven together artistically from collections of teachings. This is reflected in their repetitious quality and by "seams" in the discourse. For instance, at the end of 14:31, Jesus says, "Get up, let us go!" but the discourse continues for three more chapters. The discourses describe the impending departure of Jesus and the change of mind, heart, and behavior necessary to overcome the world as he has. The union of Jesus with the Father is dying to the world; the union of the believer with Jesus is the same, and these teachings provide the means. Love is the path to God, but John's depiction of love is very specific: laying down one's life for others.

John's version of the Last Supper is comparable to those of the Synoptic tradition (Matt 27:17-29; Mark 14:19-25; Luke 22:7-38), but with some significant variations. John does not describe the preparations for the meal, and it

is not a Passover meal, for Jesus dies on the day of preparation for Passover (19:31, 42). Jesus himself is the Paschal Lamb (1:29; 19:36), although the paschal lamb for Passover does not have an expiatory function. The account of the foot-washing takes the place of the Synoptic institution of the Eucharist. The practice of the Eucharist by the Johannine community is assumed (6:55-58), so the foot-washing becomes an interpretation of the Eucharist's significance.

### **13:1-5 Fully aware and deliberate**

In keeping with the theme of the omniscience and foreknowledge of Jesus (6:6; 12:30), he is fully conscious of his heavenly origin and destiny. Throughout the Gospel Jesus moved about with an awareness that his hour had not yet come (2:4; 7:30; 8:20), but now he fully realizes that it has arrived. His love for his own in the world has been to the end or utmost (*telos*), and the end is his self-giving death (v. 1), which Jesus demonstrates with the foot-washing. Judas, as the tool of Satan and the forces opposed to God, has already decided on his treacherous mission (v. 2). Speculation concerning the motives of Judas is futile, for the four Gospels give different reasons. For Matthew, money is the reason, while John ascribes the instigation to Satan.

### **13:5-11 The foot-washing**

Foot-washing was a job considered too menial for a Jewish slave to perform, and it was usually reserved for the lowliest slaves of the household. It is similar to the pattern of the descent and humiliation of the Son as he assumes the condition of a slave that is described in Philippians 2:1-11. For John, however, it is a pattern of self-giving love. Peter objects to being washed (vv. 6-8) because he does not understand the meaning of Jesus' death. One of the things that he does not understand is that Jesus' action bears witness to a rejection of worldly honor and shame values of domination and subservience. He replaces it with a new model for human relationships: loving and humble service and laying down one's life for others (15:13; 16:2; 21:19; 1 John 3:16). The egalitarian nature of the early Johannine community reflects this model. It is later that he and the others will understand, as is often the case (2:17, 22; 7:39; 12:16; 14:29).

The foot-washing symbolizes the salvific death of Jesus, so when Jesus tells Peter that unless he is washed he will have no part in him, the laying down of one's life for others comes to mind (15:13), as well as the kind of death Peter himself will later experience (21:19). The insistence on being washed (vv. 8, 10) likely evokes the baptism that is the rite of passage into the community and a



sharing in Jesus' death.

### **13:12-17 A model of discipleship**

As teacher and lord, Jesus was willing to wash their feet; how much more they should be willing to do the same for one another. The foot-washing is given as a model or paradigm not only of humble and loving service, but of self-sacrificing love. He is not proposing an anemic Holy Thursday ritual, but a pattern or model to be imitated in every aspect of life, from small acts of kindness to sacrificial death. It only has the power to bless when it is understood and put into practice (v. 17).

### **13:18-30 A traitor in their midst**

Jesus is again troubled, as in 12:27, but this time it is because of his knowledge that there is a traitor in their midst (cf. Matt 16:21; Mark 14:18). When the disciples want the identity of the traitor, they must go through an intermediary—the Beloved Disciple (vv. 23-25). This disciple reclines with his head on Jesus' chest, but the word used is *kolpos*, which means "bosom." The same word describes the close relationship that exists between Jesus and the Father (1:18), suggesting that the Beloved Disciple was believed by his community to enjoy an analogous relationship with the Lord, endowing him with more authority and respect.

Jesus reveals the identity of the traitor by giving him a morsel to eat (v. 26). The significance of the morsel is open to interpretation: some see it as a sign of the unfailing love of Jesus even to the one who betrays him (see Ps 41:9-10), while others detect hints of early eucharistic practices. After Judas accepts the morsel, Satan enters him (v. 27). Jesus orders him to do quickly what he has planned to do, making Jesus fully in control of his fate. Even at this stage, none of the disciples have any understanding of these words or actions (v. 28); awareness will come after the fact. After Judas leaves, the narrative states tersely that it was night, for on a deeper level the darkness has the upper hand (v. 30).

### **13:31-35 Something new, something old**

In verses 31-33 Jesus enigmatically refers to his departure and the inability of others to find him or follow him (7:33-36; 8:21-22), underscoring his divine and otherworldly origin. He gives his "new" commandment (vv. 34-35) as a parting legacy that is in effect a summation of the foot-washing and his impending death. The love commandment is not new, for Jesus quotes

Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 in Mark 12:28-34. The author of the Johannine letters admits as much (1 John 2:7; 3:11); it has been told from the beginning. Its newness here is its eschatological nature and its radical definition: laying down one's life for others. This is the guiding principle for the dawning messianic age.

Love in John is not emotion, sentiment, or personal attraction, but very practical, dynamic, and demanding. Jesus himself is the revelation of God's love (3:16; 1 John 3:16) in his ministry and in his death (15:12-13). Love will now be the distinguishing mark of disciples of Jesus (v. 35) rather than dress, diet, rituals, or observance of the law, as Christians are always in need of calling to mind.

### **13:36-38 Peter's boast**

Simon Peter wants to follow Jesus and can't understand why he cannot. The cross is where Jesus is going, and Peter will follow later (21:19). Peter's brash promise that he will lay down his life for Jesus reveals just how little he understands the meaning of the foot-washing and the new commandment, and it is met with the prediction of his threefold denial before the cock crows (vv. 37-38).

### **14:1-4 The departure of Jesus**

Jesus gives words of consolation and encouragement to his disciples, who are still captives of their ignorance and lack of comprehension. They continually ask where he is going and why they are unable to go. At this stage it is a solitary journey; Jesus has descended from the Father and is now returning to him. Jesus reassures them that there are many dwelling places in his Father's house and that after preparing a place for them, he will return and take his followers with him (vv. 2-4).

### **14:5-7 The way**

Jesus' assertion that the disciples know the way is met with puzzlement by Thomas, which provides Jesus with the opportunity to declare, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (v. 6). The "Way" is the self-designation of the early Christian movement in Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; and 24:14, 22. Additionally, the term was used in the Qumran community (1QS 9:16-21) and in a stream of Jewish writings known as "two-way" spirituality, for example, the *Didache* (chs. 1 and 5). Jesus is a manifestation of the truth (1:14, 17), and knowing him sets

one free (8:32), but not all are able to accept it (18:38). “Life” has been a constant thread throughout the Gospel, and the granting of eternal life is the root mission of Jesus (1:4; 3:16; 5:24-26; 11:25-26).

The association of all three terms—“the way and the truth and the life”—with the person of Jesus is a christological proclamation that asserts the utter uniqueness of Jesus and the inability of anyone to come to the Father except through him. This exclusive and sectarian statement was probably generated in the Johannine community’s struggle with the synagogue and with other Christian groups. From our own historical vantage point, it is possible to broaden our understanding. Jesus can also be defined as “the way and the truth and the life” with respect to his example of complete self-giving, love, and service to humanity. Although Jesus is the gate to the Father, it is in the living out of this spiritual path or pattern that one has access to God, regardless of who one is.

#### **14:8-14 The indwelling and empowerment**

Knowing Jesus is the same as knowing the Father, since Jesus manifests him perfectly in his own person (v. 8). This is not understood by Philip, whom Jesus chides for his inability to get it despite his long association with him. In verses 10-12 Jesus elaborates on his words, insisting that he dwells in the Father and the Father dwells in him, the evidence being the works that the Father performs in him. But this divine empowerment is also available for those who believe in him (v. 12); in fact, believers will be able to do even greater things.

This stunning promise is given scant attention in modern church settings, much to our spiritual detriment. Even though Jesus is returning to the Father, his disciples are expected to continue his work. This will be developed in chapters 15–17. Jesus will also do anything that is asked in his name (vv. 13-14). To pray in the name of Jesus has nothing to do with a quasi-magical power in pronouncing a name; it means to ask for something with the same mind and heart as Jesus and presupposes abiding in him through the Spirit, as commanded in chapter 15.

#### **14:15-24 The love commandment revisited**

Loving Jesus is only accomplished by keeping his commandments (vv. 15, 21, 23, 24). Although Jesus gave his disciples only one commandment—to love one another—it is clear from other passages and the letters of John that the other commandment is to believe that Jesus is the one sent from God. Love is a mode of knowing God as well as an empowering principle, for both Jesus and the

Father will love and reveal themselves to those who love Jesus. All these things are possible through the sending of the “Advocate” (Paraclete), which is a fulfillment of the requirement for rebirth in the Spirit in 3:1-8 (cf. 20:22). It will be the alter ego of Jesus and his continuing and permanent presence in the community (14:15-17, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-11, 12-15).

“Paraclete” was originally a legal term meaning advocate, counselor, or stand-in. It fulfills a variety of functions: teaching, 14:17 and 15:4; prophecy, 14:2-3 and 16:13-15; witness, 8:17-18 and 15:26. Its origin is God (15:26 and 16:28), and the world cannot receive it (14:17). It is clear that John’s community is a Spirit-filled community in which teaching and revelation are continuous.

### **14:25-30 Jesus’ gift of peace**

Jesus bestows his peace on the disciples, signaling his departure. He makes it clear that it is not an earthly peace, which is merely the temporary absence of violence. This is God’s peace—wholeness or *shalom*—given through the Spirit to abolish fear and the sense of distance or separation from God. Because of this gift of peace, Jesus is able to repeat the opening line of the chapter: “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (v. 27). All other forms of peace depend on this transcendent peace. He assures them that he will come back (v. 28) and observes that they should rejoice that he is going to the Father, “for the Father is greater than I,” which contradicts 10:30. The ruler of this world—Satan—is now coming in the context of the impending passion, but he has no power whatsoever over Jesus, who goes to the cross to prove to the world that he loves the Father and is totally obedient to his will (v. 30).

### **15:1-11 Abiding in Jesus, the true vine**

Jesus promised that he would always be present in the community. Now he relates how the members of this community will continue to be sustained and nourished with life and power. In describing the nature of the union of the disciples with Jesus and the Father (vv. 1-11), Jesus utilizes the metaphor of the vine, which was a well-known Old Testament symbol for Israel (Ps 80:8-19; Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21; Ezek 17:6-8; 19:10-14; Hos 10:1; Eccl 24:27). Since Jesus declares in an “I AM” statement that he is the true vine (v. 1), it is probable that the followers of Jesus are being depicted as the true Israel. The image of vine is similar to that of Body of Christ used in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Col 1:18; Eph 1:22-23, although these instances stress the element of interdependence and equality more than the image of the vine does.

In verses 1-11 the word “remain,” or as it is often translated, “abide” (*menein*) appears ten times, illustrating the mutual indwelling and continuous union with Jesus, not just at key moments in one’s life. Those who remain connected to the vine are sustained and nourished, while those who do not remain on the vine wither and die and are useless (vv. 4-6). In the metaphor of the vine, branches, and vine grower, it is clear that they refer to Jesus, his believers, and the Father, but the meaning of the pruning and burning is unclear. Jesus’ disciples have already been cleansed by his words (13:10), but the pruning can also refer to those with imperfect faith, such as those the author of the epistles rails against.

The branches are judged according to the fruit produced, which is similar to the means of discerning false prophets in Matthew 7:15-20; Luke 6:17-44; and 1 John. The fruit would be the good works done in obedience to the commandments of Jesus. By remaining in Jesus, his words remain in believers, and anything they ask will be done for them (v. 7). It is in this indwelling and the bearing of its fruit that God the Father is glorified (v. 8). To “remain” assumes fulfilling the love commandment of Jesus (vv. 12-14). Love is the golden thread that binds Jesus, his followers, and the Father (vv. 9-10), who is love itself (1 John 4:8, 16).

### **15:12-17 Love and the new relationship**

All this changes radically the relationship between believers and Jesus. No longer are they servants or slaves but friends (vv. 13-15). This friendship is epitomized by the personal experiential knowledge of the activity and purpose of Jesus, as well as cognizance of everything that Jesus has heard from the Father (vv. 14-15). Nothing is to be hidden; nor is there any sense of the vertical or hierarchical, which is also the model of John’s community. This is dependent on obedience to the commandments of Jesus (v. 14). It was Jesus who chose his followers, although chapter 1 depicts them as seeking him out. But now they are appointed to go and bear lasting fruit (20:21), receiving from the Father whatever they ask in Jesus’ name (v. 16). Repeating verse 12, they are commanded to love one another, for this is what makes the indwelling possible (v. 17).

### **15:17-27 The world’s hatred**

Since the disciples and Jesus abide in one another, the world will hate the disciples just as it hated Jesus (v. 18). Recalling 13:16, Jesus reminds the

disciples that they are not greater than the master, so they can expect the same treatment (v. 20). Those who reject Jesus have no excuse, for he has spoken his words to them and performed signs in their midst (vv. 21-24). Hatred of Jesus is equal to hatred of the Father (v. 23) and is the fulfillment of Psalms 35:19 and 69:4 (v. 25). These verses reflect the alienation and sense of being under siege that was felt by John's community. The Advocate (Spirit) that Jesus will send will continue his work and will give testimony through his followers, presumably in the form of good works and signs (v. 26).

### **16:1-3 Dubious favors for God**

Jesus continues in this vein by giving his disciples ample warning of the world's hostility (v. 1). Expulsion from the synagogue (cf. 9:22; 12:42) reflects the experience of the Johannine community after the Jewish self-definition at Jamnia following the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. Although the *birkath ha-minim* recited in synagogues toward the end of the first century contains a prayer for the destruction of the *minim* (heretics) and the Nazarenes (Christians), there is little documented evidence outside the New Testament of actual killing. The stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:58–8:1 is immediately linked with the zealous persecution of Paul (9:1-9), who admits to having been a violent persecutor of the church of God (Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9). He warns that there will be a time when those who kill them will think that they are offering worship to God (v. 2).

Killing out of a warped sense of devotion or piety has been an unhappy reality in all ages and in all religions, and our own age is certainly no different. The reason, according to Jesus, is that the perpetrators have never known him or the Father (15:21; v. 3). Their murderous hatred is proof of their unbelief, for those who truly know and love God are not captive to murderous impulses. Throughout the controversies Jesus has repeatedly accused his tormentors of plotting to kill him, and it is clear that his disciples can expect the same treatment.

### **16:4-20 The departure of Jesus**

The departure of Jesus has been mentioned in 13:36; 14:5; and 16:5, always accompanied by incomprehension on the part of the disciples. Jesus assures them that it is advantageous for them that he go away (vv. 5-7), for this is necessary for the Advocate to come (cf. 7:39). The Advocate or Spirit of truth (vv. 12-15) will act as an intermediary between Jesus and John's community, declaring all that Jesus has received from the Father. It will remind them of the words that

Jesus spoke during his ministry, and it is implied that in leading them to all truth, it will also declare things that have not yet been spoken.

But most of all, the Spirit of truth (cf. Qumran texts 1QS 3:19) will prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment, all three of which are aspects of the world's rejection of Jesus. For John, unbelief is synonymous with sin, while righteousness is the vindication of Jesus by his being raised from the dead and returning to the Father. The world judges incorrectly by refusing to recognize Jesus as being sent from the Father and by its inability to penetrate beyond external appearances.

Jesus toys with the phrase "a little while" (vv. 16-19) to refer to his impending death and the time before his reappearance after the resurrection, which causes puzzlement and consternation among the disciples. By way of explanation, the grief that they will feel upon his death is contrasted with the joy (15:11; 16:20, 22; 17:13) they will experience "on that day" (14:20; 16:23, 26) when they will see him again. Although most scholars take "on that day" to refer to the resurrection, a reference to a second coming is not excluded, for the traditional eschatology (cf. 21:22-23) and John's realized eschatology coexist in the same Gospel.

The alternating joy and sorrow on the part of the world and the disciples over the death of Jesus is a perfect example of the vast chasm that separates worldly and divine perceptions (v. 20). At that time they will have no more questions, for all will be clear, and whatever they ask the Father in Jesus' name will be given to them (vv. 23-26). The "complete . . . joy" signals the access to God that they will enjoy and the mutual indwelling that they will experience.

### **16:21-24 Messianic birth pangs**

The image of the woman giving birth in verses 20-22 has a long biblical tradition and is used to denote the travail of messianic struggle (Isa 26:16-19; 66:7-11; Mark 13:19, 24; Matt 24:9, 21, 29; Acts 14:22; 1 Cor 7:26; 10:11; 2 Cor 4:17; Rom 8:22; Rev 12; Mic 4:10). John uses the image of new birth twice (1:13 and 3:38) to signify the new stage in the soul's journey. Here it refers to the birth of the new age, which is accomplished in Jesus and the accompanying suffering and tribulation.

The disciples think that they now understand (vv. 29-30); they see that Jesus knows everything, so they now believe that he came from God. Jesus is not impressed, and in a parallel to his response at Peter's confident boast in 13:38, he informs them that they will desert him and leave him alone. Verse 33 acts as

an *inclusio* with verse 1, that is, creating a frame or bracket by placing similar material in both verses. Jesus has informed them beforehand of all the troubles they will have, but they should have courage because he has conquered the world, which is an anticipatory reference to his approaching death. As followers of Jesus encounter struggles, this should be kept in mind so that they do not lose heart.

Chapter 17, sometimes called a “prayer of ascent” or the “priestly prayer of Jesus,” brings together the elements introduced in the prologue and unfolded during the account of the ministry of Jesus. The scope of Jesus’ prayer encompasses the time before the foundation of the world, when he was in God’s presence, and the accomplishment of his earthly ministry. His prayer also stretches toward the future and those who will come to faith.

Compared with the Gospel of Luke, Jesus does not appear to pray as often, for John only depicts Jesus doing so here and at the tomb of Lazarus. But John’s Jesus enjoys an intimacy with God that is so close and immediate that prayer, which supposes a distance or absence, becomes secondary. Verses 1-26 are more in the form of a blessing than a personal prayer, for Jesus is mostly concerned with the disciples he is leaving behind, who have reached a stage of reception of his words and belief that he came from God. It is the prayer of one who is supremely confident, in complete control of his destiny, and aware that he has completed his mission satisfactorily.

### **17:1-8 Glorification**

The mutual glorification of the Father and the Son is the focus of verses 1-5. Aware that the hour has come, Jesus lifts his eyes heavenward, as in 11:41, and asks for God’s glory so that he may in turn glorify the Father. Although Jesus has been given authority over all people, he gives eternal life to those whom the Father has given him—in other words, those who believe that he has come from God (1:4, 9-13; 3:14-21, 31-36; 4:13-14; 5:24-25; 6:35; 7:37-38; 8:12; 10:27-29; 11:25-26; 12:47; 14:6-7). He is crystal clear in defining eternal life: to know the Father, who is the only true God, and the one sent by God, Jesus the Christ. A core element of John’s Gospel is the insistence that Jesus Christ is the only means of access to God (see 10:25-29; 14:6) and to eternal life. He asks again (v. 5) for the glory he had before the world began (1:1-3), thereby returning to his divine origins after the completion of his mission. The disciples have received and accepted all God’s words that Jesus passed on to them, as well as his divine origin (vv. 7-8).



### **17:9-19 Prayer for his disciples**

Jesus' concern for his disciples is the central focus of verses 9-19. He prays for their protection (vv. 9-10) rather than for the world. Since he is returning to the Father and in one sense already has departed this world, they will be his presence and instruments in the world (v. 11). He prays that they continue to be protected in the name of God which Jesus has received (vv. 11-12) and which he revealed (v. 26). Revealing God's name is better understood as disclosing the essence, nature, and quality of God rather than repetition of a proper name. The complete joy (v. 13) that the disciples share is the result of knowing God directly and continually (15:11; 1 John 1:4; 2 John 12) through the Spirit. The presence of unaffected joy authenticates spiritual and religious claims, which should cause all Christian communities to pause and reflect.

Jesus addresses the Father as "holy" (v. 11), which is the characteristic of God in the Old Testament and sets him apart (Isa 5:16; 6:3). Those who worship God are commanded to be holy as God is (Lev 11:44; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Pet 1:15-16). He therefore prays that since they are in the world, they be kept one as Jesus and the Father are (v. 11) in a unity of holiness. To this end, he prays that they be "consecrate[d]" (which can also be translated as "sanctified") in the truth, which is God's word (v. 17) embodied in Jesus (1:9, 17; 8:31-32). They must be protected in the divine name (v. 12) and from the Evil One (v. 15), who is the negative ruler of this world (12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

The disciples do not belong to the world; in fact, the world hates them because of the presence of the light within their community (v. 14) and because they have received God's words from Jesus (vv. 14-17). He therefore prays that they be consecrated or set apart in the truth that is God's word, for they are being sent into the world with the same message as Jesus (v. 18; 20:21). The glorification of Jesus is his death and resurrection, for it is in this that he reveals God and fulfills God's will. The disciples glorify Jesus when they continue his mission of divine revelation, and that indeed is their mission (v. 18; 20:21).

### **17:20-26 That they may be one**

The prayer in verses 20-26 is directed toward those who will be brought to faith by the witness of the disciples. Jesus' prayer for unity signifies far more than institutional solidarity; he prays that they may all be one, but it is a special sort of unity, a mysticism of love. Jesus shares the glory given to him by the Father with the disciples and invites them to experience God's love in the same way that he does (vv. 22-24). This perfection of unity and love is the palpable

presence of God that reveals God to the world and continues the mission of Jesus. It is this visible manifestation of God's love in the community and its members that both reveals God and draws others to faith. Jesus closes his prayer (vv. 25-26) by again insisting that the world does not know God, but he does. He has revealed the name of God, and the same love with which the Father loved the Son will be present among his followers.

## **THE PASSION NARRATIVE**

### ***John 18:1–19:42***

The long-predicted hour of Jesus has arrived (3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33) when he will be “lifted up” for the sake of all humanity. While the other Gospels portray the crucifixion as terrible and tragic, for John it is the glorification of Jesus. Jesus scarcely seems to suffer—he is not a helpless victim (10:18), for this is not Mark's man of sorrows. Although John's account of the passion of Jesus parallels the Synoptic accounts in many respects, there are some important variations. Comparing John's account with the others is interesting and enlightening, and a “Parallel Gospel” book is very useful for this purpose.

For instance, the trial before Pilate is structured and long, with Jesus interacting with Pilate in a manner very different from his laconic responses in Mark. Objections have been raised by some that the passion narratives, especially John's, have little basis in fact and are nothing more than an attempt to give historical expression to prophetic texts from the Old Testament. That represents an extreme position, for mainstream scholarship recognizes that while the passion narrative should not be considered a court record or a narration of brute facts, it does rest on a solid framework of tradition. It is a theological interpretation of the death of Jesus; the passion is therefore refracted through the prism of John's theological concerns.

This is a very important issue, as the Johannine passion narrative plays a prominent part in the spiritual and liturgical life of the Church. John uses strident language and negative imagery in his depiction of “the Jews,” and this has helped fuel hateful and sometimes violent behavior and attitudes toward Jewish people and their faith. We must remember that in John's narrative, the term “the Jews” denotes those who were actively opposed to Jesus. The narrative cannot be taken at face value: Pilate was not a benign, well-intentioned man led astray by a violent crowd, and any Jewish complicity is limited to a particular handful of individuals who desired Jesus' death.

### **18:1-12 The arrest**

Crossing the Kidron valley is associated with death (cf. 1 Kgs 2:37), made more so by the darkness and the presence of tombs. Gethsemane means “oil press”; John is alone in referring to it as a garden. The prayer for the cup passing from Jesus (but cf. 12:27) and its associated anguish over his impending death are lacking. Soon Judas arrives with a cohort of troops, along with the temple guards and the Pharisees. Since a cohort consisted of six hundred men, it is likely that it was a small detachment of soldiers. Interestingly, John alone reports that the Pharisees took an active role in the arrest. No kiss from Judas betrays Jesus in John’s story, for Jesus is majestic and in total control of the situation and has complete knowledge of the events that are going to unfold (v. 4).

When Jesus asks the arresting party whom they are seeking, they reply, “Jesus the Nazorean.” To this he replies, “I AM” (Exod 3:14), and the force of the divine name knocks them to the ground. This should be understood as a theological rather than a historical statement. Clearly Jesus is in full possession of his divine status even at the point of his arrest. In the scuffle with the sword, John identifies the attacker as Simon Peter and the victim as Malchus, slave of the high priest. In Matthew, Jesus rebukes them with the admonition that those who take up the sword will die by it (Matt 26:52), while in Luke he simply heals the slave’s severed ear. For John, Peter’s action interferes with the divine plan, and Jesus has to insist that he is to drink of the cup the Father has given him. Jesus tells his arresters to let the others go, fulfilling his own words (6:39; 10:28; 17:12) about not losing any of those given to him by the Father.

### **18:13-27 Interrogation before the high priest**

Jesus is taken to Annas, the high priest from A.D. 6 to 15 and father-in-law of Caiaphas, the current high priest. Reference is made to Caiaphas’s unwitting prophecy in 11:49-50. Mark depicts Jesus as being dragged before a nocturnal plenary session of the Sanhedrin, but the summary session before a handful of officials described in John is probably closer to the truth.

During the drama of Peter’s threefold denial, the scene shifts from the courtyard to the interrogation room, then back to the courtyard for the remainder of his denials. The identity of the “other disciple” in verses 15-16 who gains access to the proceedings because of his acquaintance with the high priest is unclear, but in all probability it is the Beloved Disciple, also not named in the Gospel. While Jesus is being interrogated, Peter undergoes one of his own interrogations (vv. 17-18). His reply to the maid’s question about whether he is a

disciple of Jesus is “I am not,” sharply contrasting with the “I AM” of Jesus in the garden.

Jesus was questioned about his disciples and his teaching, but not about any messianic claims or alleged threats against the temple. His reply is sharp and rather combative: he has taught openly, saying nothing in secret. Since he has openly proclaimed God’s word to the world, they have no excuse. He also invites the high priest to ask those who heard him, meaning his followers and disciples, who are now bearers of his words (vv. 20-21). His boldness earns him a blow and a rebuke from one of the temple guards (v. 22) for showing disrespect (Exod 22:7; Lev 19:14; 20:9; Isa 8:21).

Jesus is then transferred to Pilate for further questioning (v. 24), but no formal charges have been brought, nor is there any condemnation for blasphemy or any other charge, although he has been accused of this throughout the Gospel, beginning in 5:18. The scene shifts again to the courtyard, where Peter is asked twice about being a disciple of Jesus and being seen with him in the garden (vv. 25-27). Again he mirrors the “I AM” of Jesus with “I am not.” The last question was from a relative of Malchus, making Peter’s denial even more ridiculous and mendacious. As the cock crows, Jesus’ predictions of denial and flight in 13:38 and 16:32 come to mind.

### **18:28–19:15 The trial before Pilate**

In the dramatic trial before Pilate, two trials are taking place. The first is the apparent trial of Jesus, while on another level, “the Jews,” Pilate, and all humanity are on trial, being given the opportunity to choose either God’s kingdom as revealed in Jesus or the world, which is opposed to God. The structure of the trial is carefully crafted and highly symbolic. In seven brief scenes (18:29-32, 33-38a, 38b-40; 19:1-3, 4-7, 8-11), Pilate shuttles back and forth between the inside of the praetorium, where Jesus is being held, and the crowd in the outer courtyard. These symbolize respectively the spiritual realm that Jesus represents and the world that rejects his revelation. Pilate is caught between these two worlds, feeling the pull of both, but in the end he opts for the world of Caesar rather than that of God.

### **18:28-32 Before Pilate**

As they arrive at the praetorium, it is morning (v. 28), the beginning of the new day of redemption, and in sharp contrast to the “night” that fell when Judas departed the upper room to betray Jesus. With a touch of Johannine irony, the

Jewish authorities refuse to enter the praetorium, for Passover is approaching and they do not want to defile themselves. They are worried about committing sacrilege but are ignorantly preparing to perform the greatest sacrilege of all, the killing of the Lamb of God. Pilate asks them what the charges are (v. 29), but they answer evasively (v. 30), insisting that the fact that he is here is proof enough that he is a criminal.

Pilate is massively uninterested in judging the case and demands that they judge him themselves (v. 31), but they correctly point out that under Roman occupation they do not have the right to judge capital crimes. The stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:54–8:1 can be seen as an extra-judicial murder or mob violence rather than an execution. The Romans were indifferent to the variety of religious beliefs in their empire, and subject people were permitted to continue their worship unhindered. In Acts 18:12-17 the Roman proconsul Gallio deems religious questions outside his jurisdiction and tosses Paul’s case out of court. To the question “Why was Jesus put to death?” we might look to 11:47-53, where the Jewish authorities are fearful that Jesus and his movement will disrupt the delicate balance with the Roman authorities and invite harsh reprisals.

### **18:33-38a The kingdom of Jesus**

Entering the praetorium, Pilate begins a private interrogation of Jesus (vv. 33-38). He asks Jesus whether he is King of the Jews. This is the first mention of this charge, although there is a basis for it (1:49; 12:13), and it hints at the religious and political nature of the accusations against Jesus. His reply is a question (v. 34): Did you figure this out on your own, or did others tell you this? The contemptuous retort of Pilate places the onus for the charges back on the Jewish authorities, and he asks Jesus what he has done (v. 35).

By explaining that his rule or kingdom is not of this world, Jesus means that its origin, values, and methods are from God rather than the world (v. 36), evidenced by the refusal of the use of force and violence to defend himself. He is not referring to a place or calling for a turning away from the concerns of life in this world. Pilate’s uncomprehending conclusion that Jesus is indeed a king is met by refusal on the part of Jesus, and an insistence that his sole reason for coming into the world was to testify to the truth (v. 37), and anyone belonging to the truth listens to him—even Pilate himself if he so chooses. Pilate shows himself to be far from the truth with his famous query in verse 38: “What is truth?” The irony is that “truth” is literally staring him in the face!

### **18:38b-40 Barabbas or Jesus**

Pilate declares Jesus innocent (cf. Luke 23:4, 14, 22) and offers to release a prisoner in honor of the Passover (cf. Mark 15:6-14; Matt 27:15-23), asking the crowd if they want him to release the King of the Jews. There is no historical record of any such Passover custom. The crowd makes its choice: Barabbas (v. 40), who is a revolutionary, a man of violence representing the kingdom of the world. The crowd has made its first choice.

### **19:1-7 The scourging**

Pilate has Jesus scourged (v. 1), as in Matthew 27:26-31 and Mark 15:15-20, while Barabbas disappears from the scene. As the soldiers parody royal trappings and hail Jesus as King of the Jews, they are unwittingly doing obeisance to a real king (v. 3). In Luke's Gospel it is not until Jesus is before Herod Antipas (23:6-12) that he is dressed in royal garb. The Son of God is contrasted with the humanity of Jesus as Pilate proclaims, "Behold, the man!" Judging by external appearances, Pilate and the others do not see anything divine, but the Johannine claim of the incarnation is clear (v. 5).

Three times Pilate declares that he finds no evidence of wrongdoing in Jesus (18:38; 19:4, 6), as in Luke 23:4, 14, 22. This heightens the sense of guilt on the part of the "Jews," as John takes great pains to shift the bulk of the responsibility onto them. Pilate is portrayed as a tragic and vacillating figure who is the victim of circumstance. He was even venerated as a saint in the early Coptic church. We know from Philo and Josephus that Pilate was in fact a venal and ruthless individual, who ruled with an iron fist and was not reluctant to spill blood. The "Jews" declare that Jesus has to die for violating the law by making himself the Son of God (v. 7). This alludes to the punishment for blasphemy set forth in Leviticus 24:16 and repeated in the rabbinical tradition. Jesus' claim to a filial relationship with God represents the core of John's Gospel and almost resulted in stoning on numerous occasions.

### **19:8-12 Where are you from?**

But when Pilate hears the statement that Jesus ought to die (v. 8), it strikes fear into him, for "Son of God" could mean many things in the Greco-Roman world, including a divine or semi-divine being. Pilate does not want to run afoul of the gods and their many powers. Hastening back into the praetorium, he asks Jesus where he is from, probably indicating a desire to know if he is of human or divine origins (vv. 8-9). The readers of the Gospel, of course, are fully aware of

Jesus' origins, for this has been a point of contention throughout the Gospel.

Jesus refuses to answer, for Pilate has already had his chance to receive the revelation of God through Jesus and showed himself to be closed to that reality (18:37-38). Pilate impatiently reminds Jesus that he has absolute power of life and death over him (v. 10), and so Jesus would do well to answer his questions. But his earthly power is illusory, Jesus claims, for he can only do what is permitted by God (vv. 11-12). Similar views were expressed by John the Baptist in 3:27, reflecting the current of predetermination that runs throughout this Gospel. Jesus makes an ambiguous comment about the one who handed him over being guilty of the greater sin. This has traditionally been thought to refer to Judas, but Caiaphas and the Jewish authorities are also strong candidates.

### **19:13-16 Whose friend?**

Pilate tries all the harder to release Jesus, and the crowd resorts to a form of blackmail, claiming that if he does, then he is no friend of Caesar. Anyone making himself king opposes Caesar (v. 12). They are speaking the language of power, which the Romans understand and respect well. "Friend of Caesar" is an honorific title given by the emperor as a sign of special favor, and to lose that status can only mean that one is an enemy of Caesar, not a healthy thing to be. Jesus calls his followers friends, too, but Pilate chooses to be the friend of an earthly king, preferring human power and glory. The fear factor is decisive, and the possibility of lost prestige and security pushes him over the edge. He seats himself on the judge's bench and in a mocking (but ironically true) fashion presents Jesus to the crowd as a king (vv. 13-14). They make their choice of kingdoms by calling for the crucifixion of Jesus, at the time of the preparation day for the Passover, clearly underscoring the role Jesus plays as the Lamb of God.

When an incredulous Pilate asks if he should crucify their king, the chief priests (not the crowd) answer, "We have no king but Caesar!" These are shocking words, implying a preference for an earthly and pagan king to the king sent by God and can be interpreted as a definitive rejection of the kingdom of God. Although it calls to mind 1 Samuel 8:7, where the Israelites are said to have rejected God by demanding a king like the pagan nations, it is hard to envision the chief priests publicly repudiating their God and traditions in such a manner.

### **19:17-30 The crucifixion of Jesus**

John's theological hand is evident in his version of the crucifixion account. Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified (v. 16), but in Johannine fashion, Jesus carries his own cross—he is in command of his destiny—and Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21) does not make an appearance. As in the Synoptics, the two others are crucified on either side of him, but they do not revile him (v. 18), and they are not called bandits or thieves. The inscription placed on the cross in three languages—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—is most likely intended to convey a universal sense of God's revelation to the world through the crucified Jesus (vv. 19-22), for he has been “lifted up” and is drawing all people to himself (12:32). But the chief priests are outraged and protest vehemently to Pilate that it should not state that Jesus was the King of the Jews but merely a claimant to the title. Pilate stands his ground, and his adamant “What I have written, I have written” gives a definitive and unalterable sense to the crucifixion. Again Pilate is portrayed as at least ambiguous about his condemnation of Jesus, and here he appears to have the final word in the matter.

The soldiers cast lots for the garments of Jesus (vv. 23-25) in fulfillment of Psalm 22:19. John informs us that the garment was seamless, perhaps suggesting the garment of the high priest, which, according to Josephus, is seamless (*Ant.* 3:161). Jesus would then be a priestly mediatory figure between God and humanity, fitting well with John's theology. Jesus' relationship with the Father was expressed in terms of oneness, and Jesus prayed for the oneness and unity of his disciples (17:11, 22-24). This suggests that the seamless robe can also symbolize the community of disciples, an interpretation favored by the church fathers.

The Synoptic accounts merely relate that a group of women looked on from a distance, but here the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple stand at the foot of the cross, along with several women. The mother of Jesus, unnamed in the Gospel, appears at the beginning (2:1-11) and the end of the mission of Jesus. The Beloved Disciple plays a prominent role in the passion narratives (13:23; 21:24-25) and is claimed to be the source of the Gospel witness. His appearance at the foot of the cross underscores his special relationship to Jesus and his uncommon loyalty in the hour of his death; in fact, he is portrayed as the model disciple. His identity is illusive, and it is not even certain that he was one of the Twelve. The dying Jesus commends his mother to the care of the Beloved Disciple, asking that their relationship be that of mother and son (vv. 26-27). The community of disciples, the mother of Jesus, the Beloved Disciple, and all who come to faith are joined together in the new family of believers whom Jesus



leaves behind.

Fully aware and in command to the very end (v. 28), Jesus exclaims, “I thirst,” in order to fulfill Psalm 69:22. Common wine is given to him on a sprig of hyssop (v. 29), which is used to smear the blood over the lintels before Passover (Exod 12:21-23). After receiving the wine, he declares, “It is finished,” denoting that he has accomplished everything that the Father has sent him to do (17:4), and his mission is complete (v. 30). He has truly “loved them to the end” (13:1). After bowing his head, he hands over the spirit, signifying both his death and the release of the Spirit promised in 7:39 and 14:16-17. The absence of a cry of divine abandonment, darkness at noon, the rending of the temple veil, earthquakes, a loud cry at the moment of death, or a declaration by a centurion (Mark 15:33, 34, 37, 38, 39) is striking.

### **19:31-37 The piercing of the side of Jesus**

In John’s idiosyncratic chronology of the events of the passion, the death of Jesus occurs on the day of preparation. This is before the start of the sabbath and Passover, which in that year coincided, making it a particularly solemn occasion. An exposed corpse would be particularly defiling (Deut 21:23), so the “Jews” ask Pilate to authorize the coup de grâce in the form of the breaking of the legs, which causes suffocation, and the taking down of the bodies. This is done to the other two who were crucified with Jesus, but it was unnecessary in the case of Jesus, since he is already dead (vv. 32-33). A soldier pierces the side of Jesus and blood and water flow out (v. 34). It is seen as the fulfillment of Scripture (Exod 12:10, 46; Num 9:12; Ps 34:20-21), which prohibits broken bones in the lamb sacrificed for Passover, which is an amplification of John’s portrayal of Jesus as the Paschal Lamb. The piercing of the side is an expression of the messianic text Zechariah 12:9-13.

This incident, unique to John, is layered with meaning. In Christian tradition this has been seen as the release of the Spirit and divine life for the church. The blood and water have been associated with the Eucharist (cf. Mark 14:24) and baptism. The solemn witness offering testimony in verse 35 is probably none other than the Beloved Disciple himself. He is testifying to three things: it was Jesus on the cross; he was human; he really died. These things may seem self-evident to us, but all three have been denied then as well as today, as a visit to the religion section of any modern bookstore will show. Some groups denied that Jesus was really a human being; he just appeared to have a body. Others denied that Jesus died on the cross, claiming that someone died in his

place. John insists on the incarnation (1:14; 1 John 4:2-3) as well as the witness of blood and water (1 John 5:6-7).

### **19:38-42 The burial of Jesus**

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four Gospels, but John adds that he was a secret follower for fear of the Jews (v. 38). In John's eyes, this is a particularly egregious failing, and to drive the point home, Nicodemus is the next person to appear in the narrative. He came to Jesus by night in 3:2 and did not fare well in his encounter with him; in 7:50-52 he offers hesitant support of Jesus before his fellow Pharisees. John insists that public and unequivocal profession of belief in Jesus is necessary, ruling out any sort of fence-sitting. By their bold and public actions, both men seem to be moving toward full and explicit faith. Joseph has obtained the body of Jesus from Pilate, and Nicodemus brings one hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes. They bind the body of Jesus along with the spices according to custom. It is an unhurried and well-prepared burial. The other Gospels have Jesus placed hastily in a tomb, so that the women head for the tomb on Sunday morning to anoint the body with the spices. A new tomb in which no one has ever been buried is in a garden very close to the place of crucifixion, and that is where Jesus is laid.

### **20:1-10 The empty tomb**

Mary Magdalene is present in all four Gospels, but here she is alone, before sunrise. In Mark 16:1 and Luke 24:1 the women are heading for the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus with spices; in John, it has already been done (19:40). When Mary Magdalene saw that the stone has been removed, she runs to tell Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, assuming that someone has taken the body from the tomb, as was the case in Matthew 27:64; 28:13-15. Both disciples run to the tomb (vv. 3-5). The Beloved Disciple arrives first but, possibly out of deference, does not enter, although he looks in and sees the burial cloths. There is a bit of tension between the two disciples, and it is clear that in this Gospel the Beloved Disciple is the star and is highly esteemed and beloved by Jesus. But in this chapter and in chapter 21, Peter's leadership is recognized.

As Simon Peter enters the tomb (vv. 6-7), he sees the burial cloths, and the cloth covering the face of Jesus is carefully rolled up and placed to one side in a separate place. Such a detail likely illustrates that the resurrection is a very deliberate and definitive conquest of death, for we remember that in 11:44 Lazarus exited the tomb still bound in the burial cloths. Additionally, the Greek

grammatical construction points to God as the source of the action. When the Beloved Disciple enters the tomb, he sees and believes, implying that Peter has somehow failed to comprehend the significance of the burial cloths.

There is a strange statement (v. 9) that they did not yet understand the Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. The early Christian tradition claims that the resurrection was foretold in the Scriptures (Acts 2:24-27; 1 Cor 15:4), but it is not clear to which passages they refer. In John's Gospel many things in the life of Jesus and in Scripture are clarified only after the sending of the Spirit (2:27; 12:16). Obviously, the Beloved Disciple believes in Jesus and that he is somehow alive. But there were many theological currents in the first century concerning the afterlife, which is illustrated in Mark 9:10, as the disciples discuss what rising from the dead might mean.

### **20:11-18 Jesus and Mary Magdalene**

This resurrection encounter (vv. 11-18) between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is unique to John. Mary Magdalene remains alone outside the tomb weeping (v. 11). She looks into the tomb and sees two angels in white on either end of where the body had been (v. 12). They were not present when the two disciples were there; it is possible that the Mary story was a separate account joined to the race to the tomb by the evangelist. All the Gospels report figures in the tomb, but with variation in details.

The angels ask Mary a pointed question (v. 13): "Woman, why are you weeping?" Implied in the question is the assumption that if she really believed and understood the significance of what had transpired, she would not weep (16:20-22). She merely repeats her fears that the body has been stolen.

Jesus appears and asks her exactly the same question but adds, "Whom are you looking for?" recalling 1:38; 6:24, 26; 7:34, 36; 12:21; and 18:4. Still uncomprehending and unable to recognize Jesus, thinking him to be the gardener, she asks about the location of the body (v. 15). It is only when Jesus speaks her name (v. 16), recalling the Good Shepherd in 10:3-5, that she recognizes him with the exclamation "Rabbouni!" Jesus' admonition not to hold on to him has puzzled people for centuries (other translations say "Don't touch me," implying that she has not yet done so). After all, he invites Thomas to touch his wounds in 20:27. But it is clear that at this point the mission lacks one final step: ascension to the Father, and it is for this reason that he asks her to let go of him (v. 17). This is not like the raising of Lazarus, for Jesus does not just resume his life as it was three days ago. After his return to the Father, he will

appear to his disciples (vv. 19-31; 1 Cor 15:3-8; Acts 9:3-6). It is not a rebuke, and she is granted the singular honor, earning her recognition as the apostle to the apostles, of carrying an electrifying message to the others.

Through the Gospel the relationship of Jesus to God the Father has been exclusive (see 1:18). Those from below are incapable of knowing or comprehending God. But now, with the impending completion of the mission, that relationship has been radically altered, for he refers to “my Father and your Father, my God and your God,” implying that they are now his brothers and sisters. Those who believe in Jesus (and potentially all humanity) can experience the same relationship with God as Jesus does (14:18-24; 16:16-24; 17:6-19). Seeing Jesus is of supreme importance in post-resurrection faith, and it means far more than mere sense perception. It implies understanding and believing. Mary’s proclamation in verse 18, “I have seen the Lord,” speaks of a life-transforming experience.

### **20:19-23 The upper room**

The disciples have not been transformed, for they have not seen Jesus. They are behind locked doors for fear of the Jews (7:13; 9:22; 19:38) when Jesus stands in their midst, presumably without the use of the door (v. 19). He greets them with a traditional greeting of “Peace” (*Shalom*), but in view of the peace promised in 14:27 and 16:33, it is God’s peace that he brings. Showing them his hands and feet (v. 26) parallels Luke 24:36-43 and serves to confirm his humanity and identity, as in 19:34 and 1 John 4. Uttering the peace blessing again, he gives them the same mission that the Father gave him for the sake of the world (3:16; 17:18). They will be the instruments by which others come to saving faith, for as bearers of the Spirit, they will make God present to the world for generations to come.

The opening words of both the book of Genesis and John’s Gospel speak of a beginning, and as Jesus breathes the holy Spirit into the community of believers, it is clear that God is creating them anew. The Hebrew word *ruah* means “breath,” “wind,” or “spirit.” The Spirit was promised in 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-15, and it will provide the powers needed to continue Jesus’ ministry, as well as interpreting the meaning of his ministry to his followers. Matthew’s Jesus gives the power of the binding and loosing of sins to Peter (16:19) and the community (18:18). John confers this authority on the entire community of disciples, for it is the consequence of the divine Spirit dwelling within the community.

### **20:24-29 Doubting Thomas**

Thomas was not present when Jesus came, and when the transformed community exclaims, “We have seen the Lord!” he refuses to believe unless he can actually see and touch the nail marks and the wound in the side of Jesus (vv. 25-26). A week later, when Thomas was present, Jesus repeats his appearance and greeting of peace, then invites Thomas to place his finger within his wounds and to cease his lack of faith and believe. It is not clear whether Thomas actually does so, but he eloquently confesses faith in Jesus as Lord and God—a more exalted profession than anyone else in the Gospel made.

Thomas is known to history as “doubting Thomas,” but this obscures the fact that alone in the Gospel of John he is given a significant role (11:16; 14:5; 21:2), and in early Christian tradition he carried the gospel to India. He was of sufficient stature that some Christians even attached his name to a collection of sayings known to us as the Gospel of Thomas. In verse 29 Jesus seems to chide Thomas a bit for believing on the basis of proofs and declares blessed those who have not seen but believe, a statement clearly aimed at the second- or third-generation Christians in the time of the Gospel’s composition. Temporal proximity to Jesus is of no particular advantage; in fact, our own faith is in many ways a greater witness, since we have not been given the visual proofs available to the original disciples.

### **20:30-31 First ending**

The primitive form of the Gospel likely ended with verses 30-31, in which John declares that there were many other signs that Jesus performed that are not written in this book. The few presented in the book serve but one purpose: to bring others to faith (or to help those already believing to continue) that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, and through this belief receive life in his name.

We have seen how the original Gospel seems to end with 20:30-31, complete with the purpose of its composition. Chapter 21 is likely an epilogue, although some scholars maintain its unity with the entire Gospel. Several independent elements have been woven together to form the chapter. Unresolved issues are dealt with, most notably Peter’s estrangement from Jesus following his threefold denial as well as some tension between Peter and the Beloved Disciple and their respective supporters. Readers will of course recognize the story of the miraculous catch from the story of Jesus’ calling of the disciples in Luke 5:1-11, but this is probably a parallel tradition rather than a direct literary dependence.

## EPILOGUE: THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCE IN GALILEE

### *John 21:1-25*

#### **21:1-14 Appearance at the Sea of Tiberias**

The story opens on the Sea of Galilee (here called Tiberias, after the city). In Mark 14:28 and 16:7, Jesus has promised that they will see him in Galilee, so from the standpoint of coherence, this story fits better with Mark. All the appearances of the risen Christ have been in Jerusalem. Simon Peter and six other disciples have fished all night, catching nothing. At dawn Jesus stands on the shore, but the disciples fail to recognize him, in a manner similar to the appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and the appearance to Mary Magdalene (20:15). Addressing them as “Children,” Jesus quizzes them and then directs them where to put down their nets, resulting in a huge haul of fish.

It is no surprise that the Beloved Disciple is the first to recognize Jesus and exclaims, “It is the Lord!” Peter impetuously jumps into the water and arrives at the shore before the heavily laden boat. They discover that Jesus has prepared a fire, along with fish and bread. At the direction of Jesus, Peter drags the net to shore, and the narrator reports that it held 153 fish. This obsessive attention to detail has excited the curiosity of exegetes for two thousand years. Many have searched for symbolic or esoteric meaning. Augustine points out that the sum of the numbers from 1 to 17 equals 153, while for Jerome 153 equals the number of types of fish known to ancient natural science. The Hebrew numerological system for finding hidden meanings and truths within words (*gematria*) has yielded inconclusive results. Those wishing to follow the arguments can consult a detailed commentary.

The full meaning is perhaps inaccessible in our age. For us, the most likely and useful answer is that it is a symbol of universality and completeness and involves the quest to bring souls to God. In Mark 1:17 and Luke 5:10, Jesus promises to make the disciples “fishers of men,” and the metaphor was widely used in an eschatological sense to mean the ingathering at the end of time. In fact, verse 11 states that although there were so many fish, the net was not torn, implying a seamlessness and limitless capacity.

Jesus invites the disciples to have breakfast (vv. 12-13) and distributes bread and fish, suggesting both 6:1-15 and the eucharistic practices of the early community. It is supposedly the third post-resurrection appearance to the disciples (v. 14) but should be the fourth if Mary Magdalene is counted as a

disciple. We wonder why they returned to their former occupations after the appearance in the upper room and the gift of the Spirit, and indeed they act as if the risen Jesus is unfamiliar to them. This would seem to indicate an independent tradition that has been incorporated into the Gospel.

### **21:15-19 The rehabilitation of Peter**

Peter denied Jesus three times, as foretold in 13:38 (18:17, 25-27). After the breakfast Jesus puts Peter on the spot with a rigorous and uncomfortable examination. He addresses him formally as “Simon, son of John” rather than “Cephas,” for his fidelity and performance have not lived up to his appellation of Peter (meaning “rock”). Jesus asks him if he loves him “more than these.” This last phrase is ambiguous; it can mean “more than you love these other disciples” or “more than these others love me.” Most exegetes favor the latter meaning, for it would be more in keeping with the context of the story.

Peter’s painful grilling continues; three times he must respond affirmatively to the poignant question Jesus addresses to him, matching his threefold denial. His affirmations are met only with the command “Feed my lambs” and “tend my sheep.” It is clear that humble service is the leadership model in the Johannine community. The third time that Jesus fires the question at him, Peter is hurt and responds that Jesus knows everything, including the fact that he loves him, for Jesus is omniscient throughout the Gospel. Jesus then uses the occasion to tell Peter that his life will no longer be his own and that he will be led where he does not want to go, referring to Peter’s eventual martyrdom in Rome, the way in which he will glorify God, as did Jesus.

This didactic story draws on the Good Shepherd (10:1-6, 11-18) and the love commandments (13:14-15, 34; 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:12-14), all of which portray the full expression of love as laying down one’s life for others. Peter is now rehabilitated, and the story ends with Jesus uttering the invitation and command of discipleship found in Mark 1:17 and 2:17: “Come, follow me!”

### **21:20-23 Rivalry and misunderstanding**

Packed into verses 20-23 are two problems facing the community. The first is the rivalry between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Peter turns and sees the Beloved Disciple following them, and the narrator refers back to the Last Supper to remind the reader of who he is. Peter’s plaintive, very human question is “What about him?” Peter wants to know if the Beloved Disciple is going to suffer martyrdom too!

Jesus is rather brusque in his response, basically telling Peter that it's none of his business, and that if Jesus wants the Beloved Disciple to remain until his return, it is no concern of Peter's. He should worry about his own discipleship, and Jesus repeats the command (v. 22): "*You follow me!*" (emphasis added). But this gives rise to a misunderstanding that is soon widespread, namely, that the Beloved Disciple would not die. It is obvious that the recent death of the Beloved Disciple, whoever he might have been, has caused consternation within Johannine communities. The author of this story takes pains to set the record straight: Jesus did not say that the disciple would not die, only "What if I want him to remain until I come?"

Both Paul and Mark expected the imminent return of Jesus, the parousia, and their eschatology and ethics reflected that expectation (1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15; Mark 13). The passage of time and the delay of the return of Jesus generated theological tensions and difficulties of faith within early Christian communities (1 Thess 4:13-18; 2 Pet 3:3-10). In the Gospel of John two eschatologies are allowed to coexist—the traditional one oriented toward the future and the "realized eschatology" of John, depicting the presence of the end-time realities in the person of Jesus (5:24-27; 11:23-25; 14:22-24). This passage may reflect a Johannine eschatological reinterpretation more in harmony with the rest of the New Testament, necessitated by the delay of the parousia.

### **21:24-25 Second and final ending**

The final ending refers to the many other things that Jesus did and, in a possible allusion to the other Gospels, speculates that the whole world would not be sufficient to contain the books that would be required. But we wish that the author had not been so reticent.



# THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Dennis Hamm, S.J.

## INTRODUCTION

*Welcome to a sequel.* If the Acts of the Apostles were a contemporary film rather than an ancient document, they might call it “The Gospel of Luke: Part Two,” for this book of the New Testament is clearly a sequel to the Third Gospel. The easiest way to recognize that fact is to read the first four verses of Luke’s Gospel, where the author addresses one Theophilus (likely a new convert and possibly the sponsor of the publication—the one who paid the copyists) and then to flip forward to the opening phrase of Acts: “In the first book, Theophilus . . .” That should be enough to indicate that we are dealing with a two-volume work. Those who study and write about Luke’s work are so conscious that his contribution to the New Testament canon—that is, the collection of books accepted by the church as inspired by God—is a two-volume project, deserving to be treated as a single masterpiece, that they commonly refer to it simply as Luke-Acts, as we shall do in this commentary.

This obvious fact of the unity of Luke-Acts has long escaped most readers because the conventional ordering of printed editions of the New Testament separates Luke’s Gospel from its sequel by placing the Gospel of John between them. Those who chose that sequence had a perfectly good reason: the arrangement keeps the four canonical stories of Jesus together as a bundle. That way, Acts makes an appropriate bridge from the stories about Jesus to the letters of Paul. But this arrangement also has a downside: it has accidentally distracted readers from recognizing the continuity between the two parts of Luke’s work.

During the last third of the twentieth century, biblical scholars have focused less on the study of discrete segments of texts and more on the form and meaning of entire documents. That focus has produced a fresh appreciation of the integrity and artistry of the work now commonly called Luke-Acts.

*How does Luke himself understand his project?* Luke expresses his intentions regarding the whole of Luke-Acts in the four-verse introduction at the head of his Gospel.

<sup>1</sup>Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup>just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, <sup>3</sup>I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

Notice that the subject of his work is “the events that have been fulfilled among us.” The phrase “events fulfilled” suggests that those events were not simply happenings but truly fulfillments of the Scriptures of Israel. The “us” in question is the Christian community of Luke’s own time, a group far enough removed in time (at least by forty or fifty years) from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that they needed the testimony of eyewitnesses and preachers of the word to learn about those events. And yet the “us” was in such continuity with that first generation of Christians (the eyewitnesses) that those events could be understood as fulfilled among *us*. In other words, Luke’s audience could still think of the past events as having been fulfilled among *them*. This also applies to subsequent readers, including us.

Did Luke think that such “fulfillment” events were still occurring in his own time? Yes. Other parts of Luke-Acts indicate this awareness quite clearly. Consider Jesus’ final words at the close of Luke’s Gospel: “Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, *and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem*” (Luke 24:46-47, emphasis added). Notice that what is said to fulfill the Scriptures here is not only the death and resurrection of the Messiah but also the preaching of repentance in the name of Jesus to all the nations, which is precisely what Acts is all about. So “the events that have been fulfilled among us” include not only the story of Jesus (told in the Third Gospel) but also the story of the church (the subject of Acts) as it continues to unfold in Luke’s own generation. By the extension implied in his vision, our generation is included as well. This awareness of the end-time fulfillment occurring in the time of the church comes through strongly in an assertion in Peter’s speech in Acts 3:24: “Moreover, all the prophets who spoke, from Samuel and those afterwards, also announced these days.”

*Are there other clues to the unity of Luke-Acts?* There are many. Take, for example, the words that Gabriel speaks to Mary at the annunciation.

“He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever . . .” (Luke 1:32-33).

It is instructive to see what happens to those predictions throughout the remainder of Luke-Acts. In the world of first-century Judaism, the word about Jesus’ inheriting David’s throne meant becoming the Messiah, the end-time political and religious leader of a restored people of Israel. When does Luke show Jesus taking up that role? Certainly not in the Gospel. Nowhere in Luke’s narrative of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection does Jesus become king in that conventional sense. Indeed, talk of kingship occurs only ironically—in the accusations of the Sanhedrin, in the mockery of the leaders and soldiers under the cross, and in the inscription on the cross: “This is the king of the Jews.” But the implication of these ironic references is that Jesus has failed to inherit the throne of David in the conventional sense. His kingship turns out to be far grander than that.

The reader has to begin reading the second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, to learn Luke’s understanding of how Jesus inherits David’s throne. In Peter’s speech at Pentecost, we hear Peter recite a psalm of David, Psalm 16, in which the speaker of the prayer expresses the hope that his flesh will not “see corruption.” Peter then asserts that these words of David were not spoken about himself but about the Messiah. Psalm 16, Peter says, must be interpreted in the light of 2 Samuel 7:12 and Psalm 132:11 in a way that points only to Jesus. Jesus now reigns over end-time Israel, not from an earthly throne in Jerusalem but as risen Lord of the Christian community. That is just one example of the careful continuity between the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. This commentary will highlight many more such links between the first and second parts of Luke’s two-volume work.

*Why did Luke’s readers need a sequel?* These preliminary observations may begin to suggest some of the reasons why Luke added a sequel to his new edition of the story of Jesus.

A church increasingly composed of non-Jews (Gentiles) needed help in understanding how Gentiles could claim the heritage of Israel. Luke tells the story of the church to demonstrate that their experience is the fruition of “the light to the nations” (Isa 49:6) that the People of God was always meant to be.

People living after the generation of the original eyewitnesses needed a way of understanding how the life of Jesus still had relevance in their own lives.

Luke shows how the life of Christians, individually and communally, is always some kind of replay of the life of Jesus. Thus Stephen's death parallels Jesus' death, and the travels and trials of Paul mirror the travels and trials of Jesus.

As a community spreading throughout the Roman Empire, the church needed an account of itself that demonstrated honorable roots (origins in the ancient people of Israel) and posed no political threat to Roman law and order. And so Luke stresses biblical fulfillment and underscores the innocence of Jesus and his followers in the courts of Roman officials.

A growing church needed models for interacting with the worlds it was encountering. And so Luke told its early history not simply as reminiscences of "the way we were" but in the form of episodes that could model "the way we are." Indeed, that is why the Acts of the Apostles has been of permanent value to the church. While we can never succeed in simply replicating the early days of the church, we can always find reminders of what has been permanently important to the life of the church in Luke's portrayal of those early days.

*What are we to make of all those short speeches?* A good third of the content of the Acts of the Apostles consists of brief speeches. Often readers have taken these to be something like "tapes" of the apostolic preaching. Intense study of the Greek-writing historians of the first century has, however, led scholars to another conclusion. One of the tools of history writing in the Mediterranean world of those days was the composition of speeches put on the lips of key figures to interpret the meaning of the events narrated. In other words, even when Hellenistic (Greek) historians had verbatim records of what an important person said on a particular occasion, they would consider it part of good history writing to use the benefit of hindsight, along with the sources at their disposal, and compose a speech that captured the essential truth of what was happening. Most Lukan scholars judge that the speeches in Acts represent that kind of history writing, that is, Luke, drawing upon the tradition handed down from the apostles, composes speeches and puts them on the lips of Peter, Paul, and Stephen to explain to his readers the meaning of the history he is telling.

To those of us who thought we were hearing in those speeches the very words of Peter and Paul, this way of understanding the speeches was, at first, disappointing. But in the end, taking Luke to be writing speeches in the manner of his peer historians makes better sense of the material. For each of those speeches makes more sense as addressed to Luke's readers rather than as addressed to the audience within the plot line of the narrative. Indeed, the speeches build on one another and presume an audience that has read the Third

Gospel and the rest of the Acts of the Apostles.

What we have in those cameo speeches, then, is not a set of tapes that we have to sort out for ourselves (like editors working with Richard Nixon's White House tapes); rather, what we have are Luke's authoritative interpretations of the early history of the church. Because of their content, they also give us examples of the early church's use of Scripture in proclaiming the good news. At the end of the day, this is a more satisfying and instructive way of reading those speeches. This commentary aims to make that apparent.

*Outline.* Many commentators have observed that Jesus' words to the disciples before his ascension contain a kind of outline of Acts: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That observation is illustrated in the following outline:

- I. The Risen Christ and the Restoration of Israel in Jerusalem (1:1–8:3).
- II. The Mission in Judea and Samaria (8:4– 9:43).
- III. The Inauguration of the Gentile Mission (10:1–15:35).
- IV. The Mission of Paul to the Ends of the Earth (15:36–28:31).

This way of outlining the major movements of Luke's history also reflects one of the main texts from the Scriptures that he uses to interpret what is going on in the early history of the church:

For now the LORD has spoken  
    who formed me as his servant from the womb,  
That Jacob may be brought back to him  
    and Israel gathered to him;  
And I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD,  
    and my God is now my strength!  
It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant,  
    to raise up the tribes of Jacob,  
and restore the survivors of Israel;  
I will make you a light to the nations,  
    that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. (Isa 49:5-6)

Notice that this prophecy about Servant/Israel entails two stages: first, the restoration of Israel (the twelve tribes of Jacob); second, becoming a "light to the nations." In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke shows how this prophecy is fulfilled.

Isaiah's first stage, the end-time restoration of Israel, unfolds in the first two movements in Acts—first in the formation of the Jerusalem community out of Jews from all nations (1:1–8:3), then in their outreach to Jews in the surrounding area and to Samaritans (8:4–9:43).

Isaiah’s second stage, becoming a “light to the nations,” unfolds in two further movements—first in the inauguration of the mission to the Gentiles (10:1–15:35), then in Paul’s mission to “the ends of the earth” (15:36–28:31).

This commentary will highlight the two continuities sketched in this introduction: (1) the continuity between the story of Jesus and the story of the church, and (2) the continuity between the Christian story as a whole and the longer story of Israel’s life with God, as told in the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures. The importance of this approach was underscored by the recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible” (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002; available at <http://www.libreriaeditricevaticana.com>).

Although the format of this commentary does not allow for footnotes, the author’s dependence on prior commentators will be obvious to those familiar with Lukan scholarship. Readers who wish to pursue their study of Luke-Acts more deeply should consult the following: Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992); James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1996); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998); and Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

Now let us begin to read Luke’s sequel.

## COMMENTARY

### THE RISEN CHRIST AND THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL IN JERUSALEM

#### *Acts 1:1–8:3*

Luke shows how Jesus’ mission to initiate the end-time restoration of Israel finds expression in the emergent, Spirit-filled Christian community in Jerusalem.

#### **1:1-5 Introduction: “As I was saying, Theophilus . . .”**

Luke introduces this sequel to his Gospel by addressing Theophilus, as he did in the prologue to his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4), indicating that this is a continuation of the same project described there. Literally, the Greek of verse 1 says, “I dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach,” implying that Acts will treat what Jesus *continues* to do and teach through the apostolic church. And the

phrase “through the holy Spirit” more naturally modifies “chosen”—that is, “after giving instructions to the apostles whom he had chosen through the holy Spirit.” For Luke, alone among the Synoptic writers, notes that Jesus chose the Twelve after spending the night in prayer (Luke 6:12-13), which for Luke often precedes a special empowerment by the Spirit (see Luke 3:21, leading to 4:18; Acts 1:14, leading to 2:1-4; and Acts 4:23-31).

As in the Gospel, the centerpiece of Jesus’ teaching remains the kingdom of God. Jesus’ reference to “the promise of the Father” alludes to at least three passages in the Third Gospel: (1) Luke 11:13: “If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?”; (2) Luke 12:32: “Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom”; (3) Luke 24:49: “And [behold] I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost will also signal a further manifestation of the kingdom of God already inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus (see Luke 11:20 and 17:21).

Linking this blessing with John the Baptist’s prophecy about being “baptiz[ed in] the holy Spirit” (Luke 3:16) also ties this promise to Ezekiel’s promise of a cleansing restoration of the people of Israel that will accompany the gift of the divine Spirit (Ezek 36:24-27).

### **1:6-12 The ascension of Jesus**

Since the disciples are Jews who have identified Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah, it is reasonable for them to ask if Jesus will now restore the kingdom to Israel (v. 6). After all, he has been speaking to them for forty days about the kingdom of God, which, in the common expectation of the day, is supposed to be a restoration of the nation to what it was when David reigned a millennium before. Jesus does not deny the appropriateness of the question; he simply refuses to reveal to them the divinely decreed schedule (v. 7). Jesus also reinterprets their implied notion of the kingdom; it is not going to be a matter of nationalism but a new kind of unity empowered by the holy Spirit, as foreshadowed by the new “family” portrayed in Luke 8:1-21.

In this, Jesus echoes what he had said to them on Easter Sunday (Luke 24:49). When he tells them that the Spirit’s power will enable them to be his witnesses from Jerusalem “to the ends of the earth” (v. 8), he alludes to Isaiah 49:6, where the Lord tells his Servant that he will not only restore the tribes of

Jacob but will also be a light to the nations, “that my salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.”

Although the traditional word for the withdrawal of Jesus’ physical presence from the apostles is “the ascension,” it might be more accurate to describe Luke’s description of this event as an “assumption,” since the author portrays it as an act of the Father. To describe this departure, Luke draws upon the biblical traditions about the assumptions of Enoch (Gen 5:23-24; Sir 49:14b) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:9-11; Sir 48:9). To interpret the event, he adds what have been called “apocalyptic stage props”—the movement upward into the heavens, a cloud as vehicle, and the interpreting angels.

This is Luke’s second account of the ascension. The first account, given at the end of Luke’s Gospel (24:50-51), sets the event on Easter Sunday and describes Jesus in details that recall the description of the high priest Simon II in Sirach 50:1-24. Like Simon, Jesus’ presence occasions worship (Sir 50:17, 22); he raises his hands and pronounces a blessing (Sir 50:20), and this is followed by references to the community’s blessing God and rejoicing in the temple (Sir 50:22-23). In so doing, Jesus is acting like the temple priest at the end of the daily Whole-Offering (also called the Tamid, or “regular,” service; Exod 29:38-42; Num 2:1-10). And within the Gospel narrative, Jesus is doing what the priest Zechariah was unable to do at the end of the Tamid service, whose incense ritual is the scenario briefly portrayed at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel. By alluding in this manner to Sirach 50, Luke was celebrating Jesus the way Ben Sira celebrated Simon II as the climax of his Praise of the Ancestors (Sirach 44–50). For Luke, it is Jesus, not Simon II, who is the climax of Israel’s history; and so Luke chooses to end his first volume by portraying Jesus’ departure on Easter Sunday with those overtones.

Why, then, does Luke take the liberty to narrate this event so differently as he begins his second volume? Some scholars suggest that in Acts Luke has expanded the time frame of Luke 24 to the round (and biblically symbolic) number forty, in order to associate the ascension closely with the outpouring of the Spirit on the fiftieth day, Pentecost (the Jewish feast of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai). The apocalyptic stage props serve four purposes: (1) to recall the transfiguration (Luke 9:18-36, another mountain episode, when the disciples could not pray, as now they can); (2) to look forward to the outpouring of the Spirit and the mission that follows; (3) to recount the departure of Jesus in a way that recalls 2 Kings 2:9-12 (another narrative about the transmission of spirit for prophetic succession); and (4) to point toward the final coming (described



already in Luke 21:27 as coming “in a cloud,” alluding to the cloud imagery of Daniel 7:13, but in the singular, to prepare for Acts 1:9). Thus Luke is able to speak of one reality, the final departure of Jesus from his assembled followers, from two interpretive points of view. Luke 24 alludes to the ascension as a fitting ending of the story of Jesus; Acts 1 narrates the same event as the beginning of the story of the mission of the Church, initiated by the risen Lord and empowered by the gift of the Spirit.

### **1:13-26 The community gathers to restore “the Twelve” by electing Matthias**

The apostles (minus Judas Iscariot) whom Luke had carefully called “the eleven” at Luke 24:33 gather with the “women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (v. 14). This group, numbered at 120 in verse 15 (notice the multiple of 12), comprises the nucleus of the church that will become the heart of restored Israel in chapter 2.

“The women” no doubt included Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the many other women who had accompanied Jesus and the Twelve and had “provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8:3). They are the ones “who had come from Galilee with him” (Luke 23:55) and, coming to anoint the body of Jesus in the tomb, discovered it empty and became the first witnesses to the resurrection (Luke 24:10, 22-23).

His “brothers” are the very ones who, together with Jesus’ mother, were last seen in Luke 8:19-21, standing at the edge of a crowd around Jesus when he said, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it” (v. 21). Whatever the ambiguity of their status then, now they are at the center of the believing community. Like Jesus after the water immersion by John and before his special anointing by the Spirit (Luke 3:21), the community is immersed in prayer.

Jesus’ prayer that Simon Peter, even after denying Jesus, will turn back and strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:32) begins to be fulfilled, as Peter now asserts his leadership (Acts 1:15).

The first agenda item to be addressed by the community is the replacement of Judas Iscariot, who had been “numbered” among the core group (v. 17). Because of the symbolic meaning of Jesus’ choice of twelve, indicating the restoration of the twelve tribes of the people of God, “the eleven” (Luke 24:33) must again become the Twelve.

The importance of the number twelve becomes clear when one recalls the

words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “And I confer a kingdom on you, just as my Father has conferred one on me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29-30). Whatever Matthew’s parallel saying may mean in the context of his Gospel (Matt 19:28), for Luke this is a reference to the leadership of the Twelve in the Jerusalem church after Pentecost. “Judging” here has the sense it has in the book of Judges, which features twelve charismatic leaders who led the tribes of Israel before the time of the monarchy. The reconstituted Twelve will similarly “judge” (that is, exert Spirit-filled leadership among) the reconstituted people of Israel after Pentecost.

The way the words of Peter (1:16-20) and the prayer of the community (1:24-25) speak of Judas’s death is full of irony. Abandoning a community that will soon express its unity and detachment from material possessions by selling fields, with no one calling anything his own, Judas invested his blood money in a field (“turned away . . . to his own place,” v. 25) and died there in a horrible, isolated death. Whereas Matthew’s account of Judas’s death (Matt 27:5) parallels the suicide-by-hanging of David’s betrayer Ahithophel (2 Sam 17:23), Luke’s version reflects the punitive death-by-falling that was Antiochus IV’s end (2 Macc 9:12-14).

The community makes sure that Judas’s replacement will be a qualified witness to the resurrection by choosing two candidates who were present with Jesus from the baptism of John through the ascension. Then, having done their human best, they put the final choice out of their hands, leaving it up to God through the device of casting lots. Thus Matthias is chosen to restore the Twelve.

## **2:1-13 The coming of the Spirit**

*Pentēcostēs* (literally “fiftieth”) is the Greek name for the Israelite feast of Weeks (*Shavu'ot* in Hebrew). The second of the three classical pilgrim feasts of Israel—Unleavened Bread/Passover, Weeks, and Booths (see Exod 23:14-17; 34:22; Deut 16:16)—the feast of Weeks was called “Fiftieth” in Greek because it occurred seven weeks, or fifty days, after the feast of Unleavened Bread/Passover. Originally an agricultural feast celebrating the end of the grain harvest, Pentecost eventually came to be associated with the giving of the Law at Sinai.

Luke narrates the Pentecost events in words and images that evoke the revelation at Mount Sinai. The reconstituted Twelve (among the 120) are gathered like the twelve tribes at Sinai. The sounds from heaven, the filling of

the *whole* house (like the shaking of the *whole* mountain in Exodus 19:18), and the fire recall the theophany (appearance of God) at Sinai. The tongues of fire symbolize the reality that the powerful presence of God (like fire) will find expression in human words, the prophetic ministry of the disciples. The appearance of fire also corresponds to John the Baptist's prediction that Jesus would baptize "with the holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16). In the fuller sweep of the narrative, the parallel between Jesus and Moses is evident in that Jesus ascends with a cloud (1:9) and then mediates the gift of the prophetic word of God to the people (2:4, 11, 18, 33). Thus Luke underscores the fact that on the feast of the giving of the Law (the privileged communication of God's word) comes the end-time gift of the holy Spirit to empower a fresh expression of the divine word in the ministry of the apostles.

The list of nations from which the Jewish pilgrims and converts come symbolizes the future implications of what is happening here. By highlighting this inclusive gathering, Luke proclaims that this is in fact the fulfillment of the expected end-time ingathering of Israel. The Pentecostal gift is destined for Jews first, but then also for the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), "those far off" (2:39; see Isa 57:19).

When Luke says that they "were *confused* because each one heard them speaking in his own language" (v. 6, emphasis added), he appears to be alluding to the story of the tower of Babel (in its Septuagint version, that is, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament). Whereas Genesis 11 tells of a sinful people who wish to make a name for themselves and are scattered in confusion and lose their ability to communicate (literally "to *hear* one another"), Acts 2 tells of a people of many languages who gather, are "confused" by a new ability to "hear," and are empowered to become a new community as they repent of their sins and call upon the name of the Lord. The likelihood of the allusion becomes even stronger when one notes that the name Babel is rendered *Sygchysis* ("Confusion") in the Septuagint.

## **2:14-36 Peter explains: the Spirit of God is restoring end-time Israel, and the crucified Jesus is its risen Messiah and Lord!**

In this speech of Peter to the festival crowd, Luke employs a kind of biblical interpretation that the Dead Sea Scrolls have taught us to call a *peshet*. The word *peshet* is simply Aramaic for "interpretation." But in the hands of the Essenes, an ascetical community that lived at Qumran, a *peshet* meant understanding a biblical passage as fulfilled in the present or recent history of

their own community. Luke now has Peter explain the significance of the Pentecost events in a series of such *peshers*.

After a deft and humorous remark about the enthusiastic behavior of the community (they are not drunk; it's only nine in the morning, v. 15), Peter quotes Joel 3:1-5, joining it with a crucial phrase from the Greek version of Isaiah 2:2 ("in the last days"). He says, in effect, that what has been happening in Jerusalem is the fulfillment of these end-time prophecies. Whereas Israel had experienced a special infusion of God's spirit on an occasional king or prophet, now "in the last days" the gift of the prophetic spirit has been made available in a surprisingly inclusive way, transcending gender ("your sons and daughters," "my servants and my handmaids") and age ("young," "old," v. 17).

In true *peshet* fashion, Peter proceeds to apply specific phrases to recent and current events. He interprets the phrase "wonders . . . and signs" of verse 19 as the wondrous deeds God had done through Jesus. As his story continues to unfold, it will become clear that Joel's reference to those "who call on the name of the Lord" will be applied to those who call upon the name of the Lord *Jesus* in Christian faith (see 9:14, 21; 22:16). And so the quotation from Joel 3, fortified by Isaiah 2:2, interprets *what time it is*: it is the inauguration of the long-awaited end-time, begun by God in Jesus and continued by God through the church.

But this outpouring of the Spirit on the community of believers is more than a sign of the end times; it is also a sign of the resurrection and enthronement of Jesus. To make this point, Luke (through Peter) enlists the last third of Psalm 16, which contains the clause ". . . you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, / nor will you suffer your holy one to undergo corruption" (1970 version). With the traditional understanding that all the psalms come from David, Peter argues that since David himself died and therefore *his* flesh obviously "saw corruption," the words must apply to someone else. Add to this the prophecy of Psalm 132:11 that God would set one of David's descendants on his throne, and these texts turn out to apply to the Messiah *in his resurrection*. It is in this sense, as risen king of restored Israel, that Jesus can be called "the Anointed One" ("Messiah" in Hebrew, "Christ" in Greek).

Then, to show how the risen Jesus is entitled also to the name "Lord" (used in the quotation from Joel 3 in Acts 2:21), Peter enlists the first verse of Psalm 110: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand / till I make your enemies your footstool' " (1970 version). The final verse of the speech (2:36) summarizes the whole speech succinctly.

## **2:37-41 The response to the proclamation**

When the people ask Peter what they should do, he invites them to repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (which, in the light of the preceding speech, means belief in the resurrection of Jesus). And when Peter promises that they will receive the “gift of the holy Spirit,” we now understand that the events of Acts 2 are the fulfillment of John the Baptist’s promise that one mightier than he would baptize “in the holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16; see also Acts 1:5). Mission to the Gentiles is already glimpsed when Peter joins “you and . . . your children” with “and to all *those far off*” (Isaiah’s phrase for Gentiles in Isaiah 57:19, emphasis added). Jewish and Gentile Christians alike will qualify as those “. . . whom the Lord shall call” (Joel 3:5).

## **2:42-47 The first Christian community**

Although the portrait of the *koinōnia*, or communal life, of the Jerusalem Christian community (vv. 42-47) has often been used to illustrate the ideals of vowed religious life, Luke clearly means it to portray the Christian community of Jerusalem as restored Israel. Each of the details is powerfully suggestive, describing who they are and what they are about.

The “teaching of the apostles” to which they devote themselves no doubt refers to the teaching of Jesus and the kind of biblical interpretation regarding Jesus just displayed in Peter’s Pentecost speech. Since “the breaking of the bread” (v. 42) refers to the practice of the Lord’s Supper, “the prayers” are likely the traditional prayers of Jewish life, such as the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-9; note the reference to the Christians regularly gathering in the temple area in verse 46, presumably for prayer, as in 3:1). That the apostles are said to perform “wonders and signs” (v. 43) reinforces the continuity between their ministry and that of Jesus, just described as commended by God with “wonders and signs” in verse 22. Their sense of mutual service (see Luke 22:25-27) leads them spontaneously to share their possessions, even to sell property to meet one another’s needs (v. 45). That they continue to meet in the temple area is consistent with the description, at the end of Luke’s Gospel, that “they were continually [or regularly] in the temple praising God” (Luke 24:53). The Jewish Christians’ allegiance to Jesus as Lord and Messiah has not meant severance from the life of the temple.

Finally, notice that verse 47b describes this Christian communal life as “being saved”—an explication of a phrase from Joel quoted in verse 21 (“everyone *shall be saved* who calls on the name of the Lord”; emphasis added).

The awe (*phobos*, literally “fear”) that comes upon everyone is reminiscent of the fear that God sent upon the nations as they witnessed the progress of the Exodus and Conquest (Exod 15:16; 23:27; Deut 2:25; 11:25; 32:25; Josh 2:9). This awe is a continuation of the people’s response to the new Exodus already begun in the story of Jesus (see Luke 1:12, 65; 2:9; 5:26; 7:16; 8:37; 21:26).

This cameo picture of the life of the Jerusalem Christian community reflects the fulfillment of the jubilee theme struck in the quotation of Isaiah 61:2 at Luke 4:19.

### **3:1-26 The healing of the man born lame and Peter’s explanation**

Having referred to “many wonders and signs worked through the apostles” (2:43), Luke now describes in detail one such sign—the healing of the lame man at the temple gate. As in the case of the Pentecost events, he also provides a speech that interprets the significance of that sign.

Consistent with the statements that the disciples, after the resurrection, were regularly in the temple (Luke 24:53) and that they continued to meet in the temple precincts (Acts 2:46), Luke shows Peter and John going up to the temple “at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer,” that is, at the time of the regular afternoon Tamid service (see Luke 1:10 and Acts 10:30), what we call 3 P.M.

Why Luke foregrounds this particular healing becomes evident when we attend to the details. What unfolds here interrupts routine. The friends of the beggar carry the immobile man and prop him up at the gate, a daily drill for them. And Peter and John are entering the temple precincts for their customary participation in the mid-afternoon liturgy (see Luke 24:53). When the beggar, apparently without looking, begs for alms (*eleēmosynē*), Peter commands him to look at them.

Gaining his attention, he commands him to walk, using language that contrasts the power of silver and gold with the power of the name of Jesus. Something astoundingly new breaks the routine of daily begging.

In the Greek Bible (the Septuagint, whose conventional sign is LXX), *eleēmosynē* sometimes means “alms,” but more often it means “the mercy of God” (as in LXX Isa 1:27 and LXX Ps 23:5). The original readers of Luke’s Greek would have been aware of a kind of pun here: the beggar was expecting *eleēmosynē* in the sense of mere alms; what he receives is a surprising *eleēmosynē*, the mercy of God in the form of liberation from lameness.

Luke emphasizes the fact that the man not only stands and walks—he *leaps*, a detail mentioned *twice* in verse 8. This stress on leaping recalls the only other

place where the Bible mentions the lame leaping, Isaiah 35:6: “Then will the lame leap like a stag.” Now it becomes clear why Luke chooses precisely this healing as the one to highlight in the context of his description of the birth of the church. Isaiah 35:5-6 is a prophetic description of the restoration of Israel, now understood as fulfilled in the Jerusalem messianic community.

Just as the Fourth Gospel, where faith in Jesus is the deepest kind of seeing and thus we are *all* born blind in that sense, highlights the healing of a man born *blind*, so Luke highlights this healing of a man born *lame*.

What the healing account itself began, with its allusion to Isaiah 35 in the language of leaping, the speech continues in its further interpretation of the healing, using still more references to the Scriptures.

First, who did it? When the crowds attribute the healing to the apostles, Peter announces that this was the work of “the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob,” who has “glorified his servant Jesus.” Since this way of referring to God echoes the call of Moses in Exodus 3:6, Peter may be implying that this healing is a sign that God is working a new Exodus through the long-awaited prophet-like-Moses, who is Jesus (recall the “wonders and signs” language of 2:19, 22).

This identification of Jesus is further underscored by the *peshet* citation of Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19 at verses 22-23. Regarding the person who fails to respond to (“hear”) God’s words spoken by that prophet, Luke replaces Deuteronomy’s vague warning (“I myself will make him answer for it”) by substituting Leviticus’s stiffer sanction for failing to participate in the liturgy of the Day of Atonement (Lev 23:29): “[that person] shall be cut off from his people.” Notice that, as Luke understands it, Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah do not divorce themselves from the people of Israel; rather, they constitute the true Israel, and those who fail to accept Jesus are, in effect, excommunicated.

This healing is also a sign of the end times: “*All* the prophets who spoke, from Samuel and those afterwards, also announced *these days*” (v. 24, emphasis added). Further, this healing is a sign that what is unfolding here in Jerusalem is a fulfillment of God’s ancient promise to Abraham: “In your offspring all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (v. 25, alluding to Gen 22:18; and see 12:3; 26:4). In the final verse of the speech, Luke makes a clever play on the words “raise up” that were just heard in the quotation from Deuteronomy 18:15: God has indeed “raised up” his servant Jesus, not simply in the sense of commissioning him but also in the new sense of resurrection from the dead. Now the risen Lord is working through the likes of Peter and John, offering new

opportunities for conversion to the life of the Spirit.

#### **4:1-22 The temple authorities confront the apostles on the question of authority**

The spectacle of Jesus' followers teaching crowds in the temple precincts ("Solomon's Portico," 3:11) alarms the temple authorities. Not only are these Galileans usurping their teaching authority with the people, they are proclaiming in Jesus "the resurrection of the dead," which, for the Sadducees, was one of the false doctrines of the Pharisees. The Sadducees held as true only what could be found in a strict reading of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), and they found no teaching about immortality or resurrection in those five scrolls (see Luke 20:27-40).

When the rulers and elders gather to meet as the Sanhedrin, they raise the same question they had earlier raised with Jesus after he had driven out the sellers and continued teaching daily in the temple area (Luke 20:1-8), namely, the question of authority. This time their question is about the power that healed the lame man: "By what power or by what name have you done this?" (v. 7). It is the same issue raised by the healing and addressed by Peter in the previous speech (3:12-13). And the answer is the same here. The healing was an act of God done in the name of Jesus; the healing showed that the Sanhedrin's judgment (Jesus was an offender deserving death) has been overruled by the "higher court" of God, as confirmed by the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter's empowerment by the holy Spirit fulfills Jesus' promise to his disciples in Luke 12:11-12. To drive home that this victory of God's power and authority is greater than any earthly authority, Peter cites a favorite psalm used by the church to celebrate God's action in the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Luke 20:17 and 1 Pet 2:7). Paraphrasing Psalm 118:22, Peter says to the assembly, "He is 'the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.' " In the context of Psalm 118, the rejected stone refers to Israel, cast aside by imperial power yet rescued by God, who will use it as a cornerstone. This verse serves wonderfully as a Christian *peshet* because it is not only an apt celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but it also evokes the image of the end-time temple interpreted as the Christian community.

What is more, the theme of the psalm—that God's power to *save* is greater than imperial power—provides the background for Peter's wordplay on the theme of healing/saving. The Greek word for "heal" and "save" in verses 9 and 12 is *sōzō*, which can mean any aspect of the whole range of rescuing, from



physical healing to eschatological salvation. In verse 9 it denotes the physical healing of the paralytic, whereas in verse 12 it apparently refers to ultimate salvation. Thus the physical cure of the man born lame becomes not only a sign of the restoration of Israel but also of the full salvation of all who believe: “There is no *salvation* through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be *saved*” (v. 12, emphasis added).

Although that verse is sometimes applied to the uniqueness of Jesus within the context of religious pluralism, a different context may be operating here. For an audience familiar with the claim of Roman emperors to the title of *sōtēr* (“Savior”), the mention of *sōtēria* (“salvation”) suggests a contrast between the imperial power that controls the temple officials and the divine power working through Jesus. As in Psalm 118, true power and authority come not from worldly empire but from God’s power, here exercised in the name of the risen Lord Jesus.

When the Sanhedrin orders the apostles “never again to speak to anyone in this name” (v. 17), Peter and John say, “Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges.” It is a clear assertion that these religious officials have lost whatever religious authority they had. The behavior of the Sanhedrin has shown that these men are more interested in preserving their own control than in serving the authority of God. That the healing of the beggar at the temple gate is “a remarkable sign” they readily admit, but they choose to ignore its significance. Luke underscores the public nature of this event in the closing statement in the episode: “For the man on whom this sign of healing had been done was over forty years old” (and therefore well known to frequenters of the Temple Mount).

#### **4:23-31 The prayer of the community and God’s response**

Luke portrays Peter and John returning and reporting to “their own” (Luke could mean anything from the Twelve, to the 120 of Acts 1:15, to the 5000 “men” [*andres*] mentioned at 4:4) what the chief priests and elders had told them. What follows is either (a) a miracle of choral speaking, in which this large group improvises a *peshet* interpretation in unison or (b) a prayer-speech that historian Luke composes (in *peshet* style) to convey how the early community understood persecution and responded to it in their prayer and action. The latter seems more likely.

This episode presents us with one of the most striking examples of *peshet*

interpretation in the entire New Testament. Luke introduces it by having the group invoke God as creator (v. 24b: “Sovereign Lord, maker of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them”). Then they quote the first two verses of Psalm 2. The community then proceeds to apply the references to persons and actions of the initial verses in Psalm 2 to the actors and happenings of their recent experience in Jerusalem. “The Gentiles” are of course the Romans. “The peoples”—in the context of the psalm, a parallel expression for the Gentiles—now becomes “the peoples of Israel” (note that Luke retains the plural, “peoples,” to echo the wording of the psalm). As for “the kings of the earth,” Herod Antipas was the king before whom Jesus was arraigned (see Luke 23:6-12), and Pilate was the representative of the “king” of the Roman Empire. The “rulers” are the Sanhedrin leaders (see vv. 5 and 8) who had also just forbidden them to speak any more about Jesus. And they had indeed “gathered in this city against your holy servant Jesus whom God had *anointed*” (“christed” catches the overtones of the Greek).

When we hear “And now, Lord, take note of their threats” (v. 29), knowing the thrust of the rest of Psalm 2, we might expect something like “shatter them like an earthen dish” (Ps 2:9b). Instead, we hear quite the opposite: “Enable your servants to speak your word with all boldness, as you stretch forth [your] hand to heal, and signs and wonders are done through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (vv. 29-30). In response to the official crucifixion of Jesus and the present resistance of the rulers, they pray for empowerment to continue the mission of Jesus in word and work, especially preaching and healing. The divine response to their prayer (v. 31) is the “mini-Pentecost” that follows.

#### **4:32–5:11 Life in the Christian community**

Acts 4:32-35 provides another cameo picture of the Jerusalem Christian community. With Acts 2:42-47, it makes a frame around the intervening episodes, which exemplify how God has worked through the leadership of the apostles (Peter and John) to continue Jesus’ preaching and healing ministry. The description of the community as being “of one heart and mind” and holding everything in common embodies the Greek ideal of friendship. And the statement that “there was no needy person among them” alludes to the Hebrew ideal of covenant justice expressed in Deuteronomy 15:4. The jubilee note struck here echoes the jubilee theme of the passage from Isaiah 61 that Jesus read at his debut in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:18-19). This spontaneous “faith sharing” of material goods to meet the needs of all is mediated through the

leadership, a fact that is signified by their laying the proceeds of real estate sales “at the feet of the apostles” (v. 37).

To show that even from the beginning it was a struggle to live out the ideals of Christian community life, Luke now presents examples. First he offers a good example in Joseph Barnabas, who did it right (4:36-37). Then comes a dramatic account of a bad example, the deceptive behavior of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11).

The reference to Barnabas introduces one who will emerge as a key player in the Jerusalem Christian community and its mission. (So important does this coworker of Paul become that the second-century *Epistle of Barnabas* was attributed to him.)

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira lies not so much in possessiveness as in their deception. As Peter himself grants, the property was theirs to keep or sell as they wished. But pretending that they were donating the whole proceeds, when in fact they were holding back part—this was nothing less than lying to the holy Spirit! Ironically, Luke notes that Sapphira falls dead “at the feet” of Peter as punishment for deceptively laying “at the feet of the apostles” only part of the property proceeds from the sale of their property. What is done to the community is done to the Spirit of God. The whole episode echoes another famous holding back, that of Achan, who, after the battle of Jericho, kept for himself some of the banned goods (Josh 7).

### **5:12-16 Another summary**

The Jesus group continues to assemble in the temple precincts (see 3:11). And the “signs and wonders” that God had done through Jesus (2:22), for the continuation of which they had prayed (4:30), continue to happen through the apostles. As contact with the mere tassel of Jesus’ garment was enough to occasion healing in his ministry (Luke 8:43-44), now people seek even Peter’s passing shadow as a medium of healing and deliverance from evil spirits.

### **5:17-42 Testing the mission: the work of God or human beings?**

With divine help, the apostles move from prison to preaching. Strikingly, when the angel of the Lord opens the prison gates for them, he instructs them to go and take their stand in the temple and tell the people all about “this life.” Like their Master, who entered the temple not simply to expel the vendors but also to take his stand there and teach the people daily (Luke 19:45–21:38; and see Luke 2:46, where the twelve-year-old Jesus teaches in the temple), the apostles, too,

continue the mission in what remains for them their sacred center, the temple area. Like Jesus, they *occupy* the temple precincts as the right place to do God's will by teaching the people (5:21, 42; see Luke 20:1).

This miraculous "jail break" strikes the theme of the unhindered word that will be reprised in the great escape of Acts 12. Indeed, the final word of the book is *akōlytōs* ("without hindrance"), describing Paul's preaching the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ even while under house arrest (28:31).

When they are accused of disobeying orders, Peter and the apostles repeat what Peter and John had said once before to the Sanhedrin, namely, that when divine and human orders collide, they must obey God rather than human beings (v. 29; see 4:19-20). To justify this response, they cite the ruling of a "higher court." Drawing upon what will become a traditional Christian application of Scripture, they announce that in the resurrection God has overruled the curse of crucifixion (death by "hanging . . . on a tree"; see Deut 21:23 and Gal 3:13) by exalting Jesus to his "right hand" (Ps 110:1). And the purpose of this is to renew the people of God, Israel.

Then comes the famous intervention of Rabbi Gamaliel, whom Paul will name as his mentor in Acts 22:3. Citing the short-lived movements of other would-be messiahs—Theudas and Judas the Galilean—Gamaliel argues that obedience to false prophets comes to nothing; so let (divinely guided) history show whether this Jesus movement is of God or not. The implication is that Jesus will be shown to be another false prophet. The Sanhedrin chooses to listen to a man, Gamaliel, rather than to the evidence of God demonstrated in the signs and wonders done through the apostles. At the same time, Gamaliel's wait-and-see approach exemplifies the kind of openness that led to others of the house of Israel eventually accepting Jesus as their Messiah.

### **Acts 6:1-7 Crisis and solution: choosing the Seven**

No sooner had the Jerusalem church dealt with challenges from the outside than it had to deal with an internal conflict—a quarrel between "Hellenists" and "Hebrews" regarding an alleged neglect of the widows among the Hellenists. The "Hellenists" are best understood as Greek-speaking Jews, probably people who grew up in the Diaspora (Jewish communities scattered outside Palestine beginning after the Babylonian Exile) and later immigrated to Judea. "Hebrews," then, would be indigenous, Aramaic-speaking Jews. We have evidence, even as far back as the Maccabees (ca. 170 B.C.), that there had long been tension between the Jews who had taken on the language and even some of the customs

of the Hellenistic world, on the one hand, and the more traditional Jews who preferred to speak Aramaic and avoid Hellenistic ways, on the other. This passage lets us know that the infant Christian community of Jerusalem included Jews from both subgroups and that becoming Christian did not automatically remove the “liberal” or “conservative” baggage that they brought with them.

Luke informs us that the community had set up a daily dole (of food, presumably) to take care of the needy among them, especially widows. But the widows of the Greek-speaking group were somehow being neglected. Luke does not mention the cause of the neglect. (Was it a combination of scarcity and prejudice—the [“Hebrew”] Twelve favoring their own kind? Or were they too busy to oversee the distribution properly?) Whatever the source of the problem, the Twelve apply a familiar practical solution: they increase the staff. Too busy with the service (*diakonia*) of the word to tie up their time with serving at table, they call the entire community together (here called “disciples” for the first time in Acts) and charge them to select seven good men to carry out this other *diakonia*. That the seven chosen all have Greek names suggests a kind of affirmative action on the part of the community: they choose members of the Greek-speaking group, thereby assuring that the neglect of the Hellenists’ widows would be remedied.

Although the word for the service (of both word and table) is *diakonia*, the Seven are not called *diakono*i (from which comes the English word “deacons”). Moreover, the service performed by Martha (Luke 10:40), the Twelve (Acts 1:12, 25), and Peter and Silas (12:25) is also termed *diakonia*, indicating that the term has not yet acquired its technical sense. Still, although Luke is probably not describing the creation of the office of deacon here, this episode points toward the later three-tier structure of bishop-priests-deacons reflected in the writing of Ignatius of Antioch. For that reason, this passage has traditionally been associated with the church office of deacon.

This freeing up of the Twelve leads to a continuing rapid growth of the church, even attracting some of the temple priests to the fold.

### **6:8-15 Stephen accused**

Curiously, after Stephen has been commissioned as one of the Seven to “serve at table,” thereby freeing the apostles for the service of the word, Luke proceeds to show Stephen engaged in precisely that apostolic work. Like the Twelve (2:43; 4:30; 5:12) and like Jesus before them (2:22), he is filled with power to do “wonders and signs” (6:8). What Luke describes is more a matter of

prophetic succession than delegation: Jesus to the Twelve, then the Twelve to the Seven, exemplified by Stephen. Luke will indicate in Stephen's speech that the line of succession reaches back to Moses and the patriarchs, even as it reaches forward to the church of Luke's day (and ours). The same Spirit that empowered Jesus and the Twelve to preach and heal empowers Stephen to do the same.

As in the case of Jesus and the Twelve, the exercise of that prophetic ministry meets opposition, arrest, and a hasty "trial." Whereas Luke had omitted any mention of false witnesses in his very brief account of the Sanhedrin's investigation of Jesus (Luke 22:66-71), as he also omits in his presentation of the crucifixion Mark's taunt of the head-wagging passers-by about destroying and building the temple, he does introduce here some false witness against Stephen. Like the witnesses at the trial of Jesus in Mark and Matthew, they accuse their adversary of threatening the holy place (the temple). They also make him out to be an enemy of the Law of Moses. The discourse that follows in the next chapter will do much more than simply rebut those charges. It will show how the Law and the temple reach fulfillment in Christian life and worship.

### **7:1-53 Stephen addresses the Sanhedrin**

In Luke's Gospel the risen Jesus spoke to his disciples about the fulfillment of things written about him in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms (Luke 24:27, 44). Our author has already shown us how the events of Jesus' life, especially his death and resurrection (Luke 24:46), fulfill the Law of Moses (the Torah, or first five books of the Bible). Peter's speech in Acts 3:22 gave one example: Jesus is the prophet-like-Moses whom God would "raise up," alluding to Deuteronomy 18:15.

Now, in the first half of Stephen's speech, the longest speech in Acts (more than twice as long as Peter's Pentecost speech), we hear Torah narrative applied to Jesus at length. Without explicitly mentioning the name of Jesus Messiah—"the righteous one" at verse 52 being as close as he comes—Stephen retells the stories of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses in ways that point to Jesus' death and resurrection and to the post-Easter church.

Just as the canticles of Mary and Zechariah celebrated the conception of Jesus and the birth of John the Baptist as leading to the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham (Luke 2:55 and 73), Stephen tells of God's promise to Abraham that he would give the land to his descendents through a process that would entail rescue from slavery "in a land not their own" (v. 6) to freedom to

“worship me in this place” (v. 7). In that last phrase Luke alludes to God’s promise to *Moses* regarding worship at *Sinai* (Exod 3:12) and makes *this place* refer to *Jerusalem*. The remainder of Acts will portray true worship centered on the risen Jesus (recall that the disciples had worshiped the risen Lord on Easter Sunday near Bethany, Luke 24:52).

The brief account of the Joseph story then serves to illustrate how God begins to fulfill the promises to Abraham by rescuing his descendants from famine by means of a person who was first rejected and later emerges as their savior. The brother they had sold to slave traders eventually rose to become a prime minister whose grain reserve program saved their lives.

This pattern of God working through a rejected-one-become-savior is elaborated more fully in the rendition of the story of Moses that follows. And here Luke chooses words even more carefully to highlight the parallels between Moses and Jesus. The young Moses was “powerful in his words and deeds” (v. 22; see Luke 24:19 regarding Jesus). Like Jesus, Moses was misunderstood by his kin (v. 25). As Moses was asked, “Who appointed you ruler and judge over us?” (v. 27), so too was Jesus (Luke 12:14). Luke then becomes more richly specific in verses 35-36: “This Moses whom they had rejected . . . God sent as [both] ruler and deliverer. . . . This man led them out, performing *wonders and signs* in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the desert for forty years” (emphasis added). Note how Acts uses the phrase “wonders and signs,” first found in the quotation of Joel in Acts 2:19, both for what God did through Jesus (Acts 2:22) and for what God now does through the apostles (2:43; 4:30).

If readers have not grasped the connection with Jesus by this time, our author makes it crystal-clear with the reference to Deuteronomy 18:15 at verse 37: “God will raise up for you, from among your own kinsfolk, a prophet like me.” That this applies to Jesus was already established in Peter’s speech (Acts 3:22).

Thus far Stephen has dealt with the charge that he speaks against the Law; indeed, he has shown how the message about Jesus fulfills the thrust of the narratives about the ancestors and Moses. Now the speech takes up the matter of the temple, which this discourse takes to be really a question of what makes for true worship. If God promised Abraham that Israel would come to “worship . . . in this place” (v. 7), how has that promise been fulfilled? Stephen says that the people have been disobedient in the matter of worship from the beginning. First there was the idolatry of the golden calf (vv. 39-41). Then God gave them over to worship of the gods of the nations, as exemplified in the Greek version of

Amos 5:25, which Luke applies to the whole period before their exile in Babylon by changing Amos's reference to exile beyond Damascus to exile beyond Babylon. The speech makes the case that the move beyond the divinely mandated portable tent of testimony (the desert tabernacle, the place of the divine presence) to the fixed and solid temple built by Solomon was misunderstood by some in Israel as a way of magically confining God to that space. That misunderstanding was a step in the direction of idolatry and an attempt to box God, who "does not *dwell* in houses made by human hands," as illustrated by the quotation from Isaiah 66:1-2 (emphasis added).

By this time in the speech, Stephen has moved from a story about "our ancestors" (v. 39) to one about "*your* ancestors" (v. 52, emphasis added). His climactic word to those who have accused him of speaking against the Law is to accuse them of not observing it themselves.

### **7:54-60 The martyrdom of Stephen**

If the charges brought against Stephen had suggested a parallel with the synoptic tradition of the trial of Jesus, the death of Stephen clearly and powerfully mirrors the death of Jesus—and also responds to the question of true worship. When Stephen announces a vision of the heavens opening and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (v. 56), his adversaries take him outside of the city to kill him, just as they did to his Master. And just as Jesus commended his spirit to the Father, Stephen can pray, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59; see Luke 23:46). As Jesus prayed to God to forgive his crucifiers, so Stephen prays to *Jesus*, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (v. 60).

Two themes shine through this narrative: (1) the follower of Jesus relives the story of Jesus, sometimes quite literally; (2) Stephen answers the question about true worship with his prayer to Jesus as Lord and with the giving up of his life.

### **8:1-3 Saul (Paul) spearheads the persecution of the church**

Saul, first mentioned as minding the cloaks of Stephen's stoners at 7:58, is said to approve this extra-judicial execution (8:1), which triggers a persecution of the church in Jerusalem. Thus begins a scattering of "Jews for Jesus" throughout Judea and Samaria. The note that the apostles were exempt from the persecution suggests that it was the Hellenists who are scattered.

## **THE MISSION IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA**



### **Acts 8:4–9:43**

In the remainder of chapter 8 and all of chapter 9, Luke presents Philip evangelizing the margins of Israel among the Samaritans and with the Ethiopian eunuch. Then comes the conversion/ call of Saul on the road to Damascus and, finally, Peter's work among his fellow Jews, just before his dramatic experience with Cornelius's household draws him into mission to the Gentiles. In germ, these two chapters describe the major transitions announced in Acts 1:8: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Philip, Saul (Paul), and Peter take the last three steps.

#### **8:4-25 Philip the evangelist versus Simon the magician**

We saw that Stephen was a mouthpiece for Lukan Christology (the doctrines of the person and works of Christ) and also an example of the imitation of Christ. Now another member of the Seven, Philip, enters the scene as another kind of example. The first episode featuring Philip demonstrates how the Christian mission extends beyond Judea into the realm of the "heretical" (from the Jewish point of view) Samaritans and how that mission trumps the pagan magic typified by Simon Magus.

To describe the outreach of the mission beyond Jerusalem to the margins of the people of Israel, Luke five times uses his favorite word for that —*euangelizomai*, from which we get our word "evangelize." Luke found it in his Greek Bible, especially in Isaiah (40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1), where the prophet speaks of announcing the coming saving power of God. Luke employs the word to describe the preaching of angels (Luke 1:19; 2:10), of John the Baptist (3:18), of Jesus (4:18 [Isa 61:1]; 4:43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1), of the apostles (Acts 5:42); and in the present episode, the word describes the mission of the whole dispersed church (8:4), of Philip (vv. 12, 35, 40), and of Peter and John (v. 25). It is all a matter of telling what God is doing.

After describing the preaching and healing of Philip in words that recall the work of Jesus and the apostles (8:7), Luke speaks of the conversion of one Simon. Though he had gained an enthusiastic following as a magician before Philip's arrival, even he is converted by Philip's evangelizing (vv. 9-13). (Our word "simony," denoting the purchase or sale of spiritual things, derives from Simon Magus, alluding to his misguided attempt to buy the power to mediate the holy Spirit [vv. 18-19].)

Curiously, only when the apostles Peter and John come down from Jerusalem to pray for and lay hands on the Samaritan converts do they receive

the holy Spirit (vv. 14-17). Luke here distinguishes between baptism “in the name of the Lord Jesus” and this infusion of the Spirit. A similar distinction will be made later—but in reversed order (Spirit baptism, then baptism in the name of Jesus)—in the conversion of Cornelius and his household (10:44-49).

Though some Christian groups have turned this narrative distinction into a doctrine of two baptisms (water baptism and Spirit baptism), Luke, followed by the Catholic tradition, presents as normative Peter’s description of baptism and reception of the holy Spirit as one unified event (2:38). Where Luke narratively separates Spirit and baptism, he seems to be making a special point in each case. Here the point is to underscore the privileged role the apostles have in affirming the mission to the Samaritans through their mediation of the Spirit.

### **8:26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch**

In this episode Philip is drawn, by both an angel of the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord, even further toward the margins of the house of Israel. The fact that the next candidate for conversion and baptism is a eunuch has important prophetic resonances. For example, Isaiah 56:3-5, part of a vision of the restoration of Israel that Jesus quoted in his takeover of the temple (Luke 19:46), speaks of eunuchs finding a home and an imperishable name in the coming restoration. Since Luke will treat the later conversion of the centurion and his family as the breakthrough to the Gentiles, our author would have us understand the eunuch as a convert to Judaism. Yet his ethnicity as an Ethiopian is important to Luke’s theme of the universality of the church’s mission.

The text that the eunuch is reading aloud (v. 28) is Isaiah 53:7-8, from the famous fourth Servant Song, which Luke quotes only here in his two volumes. It is important to note that this is the Septuagint version, whose wording here differs significantly from the Hebrew. The wording of the Old Greek is peculiarly open to being understood as applicable to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The rendering of Luke Timothy Johnson, in his *Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), illustrates this well: “As a sheep led to the slaughter, and as silent as a lamb before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his lowliness his judgment was taken away. Who will recite his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” The application of this text to the childless Jesus would have a special appeal for the eunuch. Jesus’ “generation” after he was “taken away” in resurrection is his growing band of post-Easter disciples, now including this eunuch.

Though he went to Jerusalem “to worship” (v. 27), as a eunuch he was

explicitly prevented from entering beyond the Court of the Gentiles (see Deuteronomy 23:2, where eunuchs are banned from “the community of the Lord”). How different here, where his reception of the gospel of Jesus leads him to ask, “What is to prevent my being baptized?” Thus the one banned will indeed become a member of the community of the Lord.

Along with illustrating the spread of the word (1:8), this episode demonstrates the process of interpreting the Scriptures that Luke surely had in mind when he spoke of Jesus explaining to the disciples at Emmaus what referred to him in all the Scriptures “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” (Luke 24:27).

### **9:1-19 The conversion and commissioning of Saul**

Although this key episode in the history of the church is traditionally called the “conversion” of Paul, it is not a conversion in the sense of changing from one religion to another, for Saul/Paul does not cease to be a Jew; he moves from being a Jew who persecutes the growing “Jews for Jesus” group to being a Jew for Jesus himself.

Is this a conversion in another sense, namely, turning from an immoral life to a moral one? Even in his persecution of the church, Paul is zealously pursuing what he understands to be the will of God. Yet Luke describes Saul as “breathing murderous threats,” which is at odds with the commandment against murder. And Luke’s description of the martyrdom of Stephen (7:54–8:1) showed Saul minding the cloaks of those performing the “extra-legal” stoning and “consenting to this execution.”

Further, the change from persecutor to promoter is surely some kind of transformation and reorientation. This has led some to call what happens to Paul a prophetic commissioning, for he is stopped in his tracks to be sent on a mission. Maybe it is best to say that this is both a conversion and a commissioning.

Luke describes the event as a theophany. It parallels the encounter of Moses with the divine Presence in Exodus 3. Like Moses, Saul is startled with a manifestation of brightness, hears his name called twice, hears the voice identify itself, and receives a commission.

The revelation that he receives, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” is a striking summation of a major theme of Paul’s letters: the identification of the risen Lord with his church, which Paul elaborates in his treatment of the Christian community as the body of Christ, especially in Romans and 1

Corinthians.

When Paul addresses the voice in the vision as *Kyrie*, it most likely means “Lord” in the full sense of the appellation. The identification of that Lord as Jesus, then, parallels Stephen’s calling Jesus “Lord” (7:59). That this title recurs twelve more times in this chapter suggests that Luke would have us understand this beginning of the mission to the Gentiles as a special manifestation of the lordship of the risen Jesus. For references to this experience in Paul’s own words, see 1 Corinthians 9:1 (“Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”); 2 Cor 4:4:6; Gal 1:12.

To this paradox of the enemy of the Christian movement becoming its greatest promoter, Luke adds another: when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing (v. 8). Though he became temporarily blind, he really did have, in a deeper sense, an “eye-opening” experience. The cure from that physical blindness that accompanies his baptism underscores his spiritual enlightenment. Luke will elaborate on this imagery in the later retellings of this episode in chapters 22 and 26.

Notice that our author has four different and suggestive ways of naming the growing church in this passage: “the disciples of the Lord” (v. 1); “the Way” (v. 2); “all who call upon your name” (v. 14, echoing Joel 2:32 quoted in Acts 2:21; and see Romans 10:13); and “the holy ones” (v. 13, a Jewish term for Israel set apart for the Lord’s service, here appropriated by Christian Jews, as Paul will do in his letters).

### **9:19b-31 Saul preaches in Damascus and visits Jerusalem**

The adversary turned promoter begins his apostolic life right there in Damascus by preaching in the local synagogues that Jesus is the long-awaited Christ (Greek for the Hebrew term *Messiah*, or “Anointed One”). When Luke says that Saul proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God, he probably means this title in the same sense, that is, as Messiah (see Psalm 2:7). Later theology will apply it in the full sense of divinity, as in John 1:1, 18.

How Saul “will have to suffer” for the name of Jesus (v. 16) is soon demonstrated in the plot by the Jews of Damascus against his life (v. 23) and then in the similar efforts of the Jerusalemite Hellenists (v. 29). In Jerusalem, it takes Barnabas’s testimony to render him credible and acceptable to the local disciples. As in the case of Philip (8:14-17), the mission of the one whom later tradition will call “the Apostle” needs the seal of approval from the Jerusalem leadership. This Jerusalem sojourn is possibly the visit to which Paul refers, with

a different emphasis, in Galatians 1:18-20.

In contrast to the cloak-and-dagger escapades that characterized Paul's debut as an apostle, the one-line summary at verse 31 describes the growth of the church throughout the entire area as peaceful and abundant.

### **9:32-43 Peter heals at Lydda and Joppa**

Just how that growth mentioned in the summary of verse 31 occurred is illustrated by two episodes from Peter's healing ministry. Visiting a Christian community ("the holy ones") in the plains town of Lydda, he heals a long-term paralytic named Aeneas. The sight of old Aeneas healed moves "all the inhabitants" to "turn to the Lord" (now shorthand for coming to Christian faith). Another exemplary disciple, Tabitha, falls sick and dies, apparently prematurely. Her resuscitation at Peter's command occasions the conversion of many in Joppa.

Commentators have noticed that the language Luke uses to describe these healings is reminiscent of the Deuteronomic historian's description of the wonder-working of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:31-37). This further underscores Luke's presentation of the disciples as prophetic successors of Jesus, just as he is the prophet-like-Moses. They are not, however, successors in the sense of replacing Jesus; their ministry is an expression of the risen Lord Jesus working through them.

## **THE INAUGURATION OF THE GENTILE MISSION**

### ***Acts 10:1–15:35***

Although Luke knows of others who brought the gospel to Gentiles (see the reference to Cypriot and Cyrenean Christians who evangelized Greeks in Antioch at 11:20), he chooses to focus on the experience of Peter, who was divinely led in this direction in dramatic ways. The accounts of Herod Agrippa's persecution of Christians, followed by his own punitive death, then the first mission of Paul (Acts 13–14), all lead naturally to the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), which resolves an important policy question raised by this unexpected success among the nations.

### **10:1-33 Visions and revisions: the mission of Peter to Cornelius**

To describe the change that Peter undergoes in chapter 10 as a "conversion" might seem strange to our way of thinking, but Luke clearly sees this transformation of Peter as parallel to Paul's "conversion" in importance. Paul

changed from seeing the Jesus movement as a threat to the will of God to seeing it as the very fulfillment of God's plan. Similarly, Peter is moved from perceiving the messianic movement as a Jews-only affair to understanding it as God's blessing for Gentiles as well. Although this vision is implied in Peter's second speech (see 3:25), it takes the divine interventions portrayed in the present chapter to enable Peter to see the practical consequences of the promise to Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing for "all the nations of the earth" (Gen 18:18; 22:18). Thus, as in the case of Paul's transformation, Luke will tell the story of Peter's change three times. In both transformations, the initiative is not human but divine.

Cornelius is a "God fear[er]." This is not a formal social classification but a description of a Gentile who, without formally joining the people of Israel (entailing circumcision for males), has taken on Jewish beliefs and pious practices such as almsgiving and prayer at the hour of temple worship.

Luke underscores the fact that the actions of both Cornelius and Peter are divinely prompted by linking their actions to interlocking visions. The angel of God makes it clear to Cornelius that the intervention is a response to his prayer and tells him to send for Peter at Simon the tanner's place. Peter's vision confronts him (three times!) with a powerful puzzlement: shown a sheet full of clean and unclean animals, he is instructed to kill and eat. In effect, this is a command to ignore a primary Jewish identity marker. (It also evokes the cosmic covenant God made with Noah in Genesis 9, where Noah and family, representing all humanity, were given "every creature that is alive" to eat, Gen 9:3.)

When the messengers from Cornelius, presumably Gentiles, arrive at Simon's place with the account of their master's visions, Peter's readiness to offer them hospitality indicates that he has begun to learn the lesson of the animal vision: if all animals are clean, the major social barrier between Gentile and Jew has been eliminated. Peter himself states at verse 28 that he has learned this lesson.

Several elements suggest that, though he is only a "God-fear[er]" (a Gentile worshiper of YHWH, but not a full-fledged convert), Cornelius's piety has achieved a kind of temple intimacy with God. The angelic vision happens "about three o'clock" (vv. 3 and 30; literally "the ninth hour," the time of the afternoon sacrifice, in the spirit of Psalm 141:2, Judith 9:1, and Daniel 9:21). His prayers and almsgiving have reached God "as a memorial offering before God" (v. 4; and see v. 31), and he can refer to his own "non-kosher" home as "here in the

presence of God” (v. 33, a phrase whose Old Testament connotation is the temple presence of God, as in Leviticus 4:4, 18, 24). Sacred space now extends to wherever people respond to the will of God.

### **10:34-48 Peter evangelizes Cornelius and his household**

Peter’s speech to the household of Cornelius is a rich résumé of Lukan theology. God shows no partiality, but whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to God (*dektos*, “acceptable,” or “accepted,” like a valid temple sacrifice). This principle does not address the contemporary question of religious pluralism but rather the first-century question of who is a candidate for God’s messianic blessing. The reference is to persons like Cornelius and company: no matter what their ethnic identity, as long as they are receptive to God’s revelation through the people Israel and do what is right, they are acceptable to God.

Peter can speak of the whole life of Jesus as God proclaiming “peace through Jesus Christ” (v. 36, alluding to Isa 52:7). When he refers to “how God *anointed* Jesus of Nazareth with . . . Spirit and power” (v. 38, emphasis added), he is rooting Jesus’ title of “Christ” in the prophetic anointing for mission interpreted by Isaiah 61:1 at Luke 4:18. Fittingly for this context, he calls Jesus “Lord of *all*” and “the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead” (emphasis added).

The action of the Spirit is said to interrupt Peter’s speech, but in fact Luke has communicated fully to his readers. The *shalom* (“peace”) that God has proclaimed to Israel through Jesus is meant for all. And God presently demonstrates that thesis by way of the endowment of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius’s receptive household. Pointedly, Luke notes that “the circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the *gift of the holy Spirit* should have been *poured out* on the Gentiles also, for they could hear them *speaking in tongues* and glorifying God” (v. 45, emphasis added). The language is carefully chosen to recall the Pentecostal outpouring of the holy Spirit in chapter 2 (see 2:17, 18, 33, 38). That the gift of the Spirit should precede baptism in the name of Jesus demonstrates, again, that the mission to the Gentiles is God’s will. It also shows that circumcision is not required for entry into the messianic people of God.

Christian tradition will honor another person, Paul, as the Apostle to the Gentiles par excellence (indeed, Paul identifies himself that way in Galatians 2:7), but Luke has made it clear that that mission was authenticated by no less a

person than the chief of the apostles, Peter. And Peter was simply responding to the initiative of God.

In the broader framework of the narrative in Acts, Peter's journey from Jewish Joppa to Roman Caesarea (10:23-24) is a miniature of the word journey from Jerusalem to Rome.

### **11:1-18 Peter explains God's actions to the Jerusalem authorities**

As Simon Peter needed three similar visions to begin to fathom God's intentions regarding Jewish-Christian relations to the Gentiles, so Luke himself deems it necessary that this turn to the Gentiles be told three times. As in the case of Saul's conversion/call, our author first narrates the events directly (Acts 10) and then provides two interpretations of those events in subsequent speeches (chs. 11 and 15).

Since Peter's acceptance of Gentile hospitality is a violation of Jewish law, and his extension of the messianic renewal to the Gentiles was done without authorization from the Jerusalem church authorities, the apostles rightly demand an explanation. The recital of Peter's rooftop visions of the menagerie in the linen sheet, the embassy from Cornelius's house, the visit, the account of Cornelius's vision—all this is familiar enough to us who have read chapter 11. But what follows presents five fresh elements of interpretation.

First, the experience of Cornelius's household in their response in faith to the preaching of Peter is described as being "saved" (v. 14; compare with Acts 2:47). Second, Peter equates their experience of the holy Spirit with the apostles' own experience on Pentecost, pointedly referred to as "the beginning" (v. 15). Third, these endowments of the Spirit are, for the first time, described as what John the Baptist and Jesus meant by being "baptized with the holy Spirit" (v. 16; see Luke 3:16 for John's word and Acts 1:5 for Jesus'). Fourth, Peter refers to the Pentecost experience as the moment when he and the rest of the Twelve "came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 17); this implies that their initial discipleship during Jesus' earthly ministry had not yet constituted full Christian faith. Full Christian faith requires acceptance of Jesus as risen Lord and the gift of the holy Spirit. Finally, the Jerusalem leaders view the Cornelius episode not simply as a singular episode but as a paradigm of what God wills: "God has then granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles too" (v. 18).

### **11:19-30 The Antioch mission**

Although Luke has highlighted Peter's encounter with Cornelius as the



paradigmatic and authoritative breakthrough, this passage makes it clear that the word has been reaching the Gentiles through other agents as well. In the wake of the persecution that followed the martyrdom of Stephen, Jerusalem messianists (Christians) brought the word to Greek-speaking Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene, and these in turn evangelized Greeks (Gentiles) up in Antioch of Syria.

As in the case of Peter and Cornelius, this out-reach to Gentiles in Antioch is ratified by Jerusalem authorization: the elders send Barnabas, who in turn enlists the help of Saul of Tarsus. When Luke says Barnabas “encouraged” the people to remain faithful (v. 23), he may be hinting at the meaning of his nickname (Barnabas = “son of consolation”), which he said the apostles applied to this Levite from Cyprus (see 4:36).

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he refers to himself as “entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter to the circumcised” (Gal 2:7). If this seems to be at odds with Luke’s portrayal of Peter’s evangelization of the household of Cornelius, it should be noted that Paul nowhere claims to be the *first* missionary to the Gentiles. And Luke does give us significant episodes about Peter’s evangelizing the circumcised (Acts 2–5; 9:32-43). Nor do we hear of Peter spending much more time among the uncircumcised.

Having described the developments of a mixed (Jewish-Gentile) church in Antioch, which is emerging as an entity distinct enough to warrant a special name, *hoi Christianoi* (“Christians,” the first use of the name), Luke illustrates their solidarity with the Jewish-Christian brothers and sisters in Judea. Responding to Agabus’s prophecy about imminent widespread famine, the Antiochenes send relief to the Jerusalem elders.

### **12:1-25 Great reversals: Peter’s escape and Herod’s death**

This book called the Acts of the Apostles turns out to be mainly about the acts of *two* apostles, Peter and Paul. Up to this point, Peter has dominated the stage. In the present chapter, Luke rounds off the story of Peter before taking up in earnest the missions of Paul.

Using as his centerpiece a favorite genre of Hellenistic entertainment, the “great escape” story, Luke vividly illustrates divine power at work through accounts of vivid reversals and transitions.

First there is the transition from James to James. The third of four Herods mentioned in Luke-Acts, Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, has James of Zebedee, one of the Twelve, killed by the sword. No motive is given. Before the chapter closes (v. 17), it is clear that the key Jerusalem leader is not

one of the Twelve but another James, the brother of the Lord. To underscore the fact that the followers of Jesus relive his story (recall especially the martyrdom of Stephen in chapters 6 and 7), Luke notes that this persecution by Herod occurs during Passover time.

Divine power and justice are displayed in the dramatic reversal experienced by Herod. The chapter begins with the king's arrogant and violent exercise of power in arbitrary persecution, execution, and arrest; it ends with Herod's being hailed as a god, only to suffer an ignominious death. Notice that this idolatry occurs in the secular capital, Caesarea (Maritima), and the idolaters are a pagan embassy from Tyre and Sidon. This is one of a series of examples in Acts showing how Gentiles can be idolatrous in their theism. And Tyre was famous for its propensity to treat a man as a god (see Ezek 28).

Another subtle transition that Luke signals here is the growing division between the minority group called "the church" (vv. 1 and 5) and the Jewish majority. At the end of his Gospel and the beginning of Acts, Luke was careful to stress that the first Christians were, and remained, practicing Jews. Then, describing the plot of the Jewish community in Damascus against Paul, Luke could state simply, "the Jews conspired to kill him" (9:23). Now here in chapter 12 Luke can refer to Agrippa's persecution of the church as "pleasing to the Jews" (v. 3), and Peter can speak of his rescue "from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people had been expecting" (v. 11). While Jews will continue to join the growing church, the hostility between this minority and the majority begins to deepen.

These transitions and reversals frame the marvelous escape of Peter. Luke's interest in paralleling God's work in the mission of Jesus and the church with the divine liberating action of the Exodus continues here. As in Exodus (3:2; 4:24 LXX; 14:19; 23:20, 23; 32:34), an angel of the Lord is instrumental in leading the action (vv. 7-11, 15, 23). The biblical word for smiting (*patassō*) is used playfully here to point up the contrast between the gentle smiting that the angel uses to awaken Peter (v. 7) and the fatal smiting of Herod at the end (v. 23), reminiscent of the smiting of Sennacherib's troops by the angel of the Lord in 2 Kings 19. As in the story of God's dealings with Israel in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the same divine power continues to bring both liberation and reprisal. Luke's dwelling with such zest on these events fits well the spirit of a book whose final word, describing Paul's unstoppable preaching while under house arrest, is *akōlytōs* ("unhindered").

The return of Barnabas and Saul to Antioch after completing their "relief

mission” (*diakonia*) to the poor of Jerusalem (v. 25) completes the excursion begun at 11:30. This is likely the visit to which Paul refers in Galatians 2:1-10, when “the pillars” (James, Cephas, and John) urged Paul to continue being “mindful of the poor.”

### **Acts 13:1-3 From five leaders, two missionaries: the sending of Barnabas and Saul**

Having rounded off the story of Peter’s leadership of the early church, Luke now picks up the story of Paul, which will dominate the remainder of the book. Indeed, this second half of the history could well be called “The Acts of Paul.” An illustrious quintet of church prophets and teachers—including one Simeon called *the black* (Niger), an African (Lucius from Cyrene), and a childhood companion of Herod Antipas—are pictured here fasting and praying. Barnabas and Saul are chosen by the holy Spirit (in prophecy, presumably) and sent off to do what the Spirit calls “the work.” The work, of course, is what the quotation from Habakkuk at verse 41 calls what God is doing and something that the scoffers will never believe.

### **13:4-13 Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark evangelize Cyprus**

This first outreach of the person that Christian tradition will call “the Apostle to the Gentiles” is a reprise of elements that characterized the first outreach of Philip to the Samaritans and then that of Peter to the Gentile household of Cornelius. As Philip met, in the person of Simon Magus, the power of evil present in the pagan world of magic and overcame that power with the Spirit of God, here the three Antiochene missionaries encounter that same dark power in the person of a magician who happens to be an apostate Jew, Elymas bar-Jesus. Note that the Apostle, first introduced with his Jewish name, Saul, at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58), is now called by his Latin name, Paul (v. 9; possibly a nickname, since *paulus* means “little”), probably because his mission will mainly address Gentiles from now on.

Paul taunts the magician, accusing him of reversing the plan of God, “twisting the straight paths of [the] Lord” (compare Luke 3:5, quoting Isaiah 40:3-5, “winding roads shall be made straight”). And Elymas’s punishment of blindness parallels Paul’s temporary fate when he was stopped in his tracks bent on resisting the plan of God in the community of the Way in Damascus (see Acts 9:6-11, where Paul, temporarily blinded, is sent to Straight Street!). Luke says that they evangelize the island from stem to stern (from Salamis in the east to

Paphos in the west), but he details only the conversion of the island's governor, Sergius Paulus, Paul's first Gentile disciple. Sergius is for Paul what Cornelius was for Peter.

### **13:14-52 Paul preaches in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch**

Although the name Galatia does not appear during this first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas's ministry in Antioch of Pisidia (to be distinguished from Antioch of Syria, some three hundred miles to the east), and then in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, takes them into the southern part of that Roman province. Since we have no evidence that Paul evangelized farther north in Galatia, these are likely the "churches of Galatia" that Paul addressed in his famous letter by that name (Gal 1:2 and see 1 Cor 16:1).

As Peter began his post-Easter apostolic career with a speech proclaiming the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 2), Paul now does the same. Like Peter, Paul first addresses his message to his fellow Jews and to Gentile "God fear[ers]." As in the case of Peter's Pentecost speech, we can detect the hand of historian Luke employing the *peshet* technique, that is, using ancient texts to interpret recent events in the life of the community in the light of Easter faith.

The scene is reminiscent of Jesus' speech in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30). The local Jewish community is gathered for readings from Scripture followed by interpretive preaching. In broad strokes Paul rehearses the familiar highlights of God's special relationship with Israel: the exodus from Egypt, the desert period, the conquest, and the kingship (Saul and David). Then he "fast forwards" to the coming of Jesus as savior of Israel, heralded by John. The phrase "according to his promise" (v. 23), in this context referring to Jesus as descendant of David, seems to have Nathan's prophecy to David especially in view (2 Sam 7:12-14).

The second half of the speech, concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus and the mission of the church, draws even more heavily on biblical references to interpret the Christian experience.

As we have come to expect from Luke, blame for the death of Jesus is assigned to both Jewish and Roman leaders. Yet the death is interpreted as the fulfillment of "the oracles of the prophets" and "all that was written about him" (vv. 27, 29). Earlier parts of Luke-Acts have taught us some of the Scripture passages to which such statements refer—for example, Isaiah 53:7-8 (Acts 8:32-33); Psalm 31:6 (Luke 23:46); and the stories of Joseph and Moses in the Torah

exemplifying the pattern of the rejected leader who becomes a savior (Acts 7:9-38).

When it comes to the resurrection, the Old Testament references become more abundant and explicit. Reference to “raising up” the son of David (v. 33), also to be known as Son of God, gives new meaning to 2 Samuel 7:12-14 (“I will raise up your heir after you. . . . I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me”). The quotation of Psalm 2:7 in verse 33 (“You are my son; this day I have begotten you”) interprets the resurrection as a moment of accession to the throne as king of Israel. Thus the same verse that we first heard at the scene by the Jordan (“You are my beloved Son,” Luke 3:22), referring there to divine sonship and introducing a genealogy extending back to “Adam, son of God,” here takes on a further dimension—the messianic one.

The quotation of Isaiah 55:3 (“I shall give you the benefits assured to David”) becomes even more meaningful when we discover that the immediate context of that verse in Isaiah includes reference to an everlasting covenant (v. 2) and a mission to the Gentiles (v. 4). As in Luke 24:46-47, all three realities—the death and resurrection of the Messiah and the mission of the church—are grounded in Scripture. The use of Psalm 16:7 (“You will not suffer your holy one to see corruption”), fulfilled not in David but in the resurrection of Jesus, echoes the interpretation that Peter made at the heart of his Pentecost speech (Acts 2:25-31).

The language about justification through faith in verses 38-39 shows Paul using language that is characteristic of his letters, especially Romans and Galatians.

Although this speech gets a positive response and “many” in that synagogue congregation follow Paul and Barnabas, when “almost the whole city” (v. 44) turns out, no doubt including a majority of Gentiles, the (unpersuaded) Jews begin to contradict Paul. This prompts a final invocation of Scripture, announcing both continuity and novelty. The passage from Isaiah that Simeon alluded to in his canticle at the presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:29-32) Paul quotes in full (v. 47): “I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6b). What Simeon applied to Jesus, Paul now applies to himself and Barnabas as exponents of the Christian mission. Indeed, Paul had just declared, “. . . through him [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you” (v. 38). That is, the risen Lord Jesus is now working through the likes of Paul and Barnabas. The novelty is that Jewish rejection of the good news triggers a turn to the Gentiles (v. 46).

With painful irony Luke shows that what was originally understood as the Jewish mission to be a “light to the Gentiles” now leaves many Jews behind. That Paul and Barnabas can later return to Pisidian Antioch to strengthen the disciples there and appoint elders (14:21-23) indicates that they left behind a community of believers (presumably composed of the Jews and converted Gentiles mentioned in 13:43) when they first left this town.

Does the strong language of Paul in verses 46-47 mean that God has abandoned the chosen people because of their unbelief? That interpretation has been the first step of Christian anti-Semitism. Luke’s point is rather that which is reflected in Paul’s own letters: the gospel is meant for Jews first, then Gentiles (see Rom 1:16; 9:24; 10:12). Another purpose is to present a paradigm of early Christian mission experience: the message will be accepted by some Jews and Gentiles and rejected by others, but God will use this rejection as an occasion for the advance of the mission (which is also Paul’s interpretation in Romans 11). Paul will continue to address Jews first as his mode of operating, for example, in Iconium (14:1), Thessalonica (17:1), Beroea (17:10), Athens (17:17), Corinth (18:4), and Ephesus (18:19).

In shaking the dust off their feet (v. 51), Paul and Barnabas act on the advice Jesus gave to the Twelve (Luke 9:5) and the Seventy-two (Luke 10:10-11). And the rejoicing of the disciples in the midst of rejection and persecution acts out the fourth Beatitude of the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:23).

### **14:1-28 Paul and Barnabas, from Antioch to Antioch**

Before zooming in on the marvelous details of the healing of the lame man at Lystra, Luke sketches the experiences of Paul and Barnabas in Iconium to highlight what is characteristic of their mission. (Uniquely in Acts, they are called “apostles,” at verse 4 and again at verse 14, probably more to acknowledge their being on a mission [13:2] than to indicate special status.) Here they draw a positive response from “a great number of Jews and Greeks [Gentiles].” As in the work of the Twelve in Jerusalem, the Lord confirms the word through signs and wonders. As in Pisidian Antioch, the response of the larger population is divided and evokes persecution from Gentiles and Jews alike.

When we come to the dramatic events at Lystra, there can be no doubt that Luke has chosen to foreground this healing by highlighting parallels with the healing done through Peter and John in Acts 3. As in the case of that first major healing in the life of the Jerusalem church, here we have a healing of a man born

lame sitting outside a temple, done with a verbal command, and resulting not only in standing and walking but even in leaping. Both healings are interpreted as a sign of the salvation that comes through faith (3:16; 14:9). Thus the first Gentile healing matches the first Jewish healing. The work of the second great leader (Paul) is inaugurated by a healing that parallels the dramatic healing of the first great leader of the Church (Peter). And the responses are similar. As Peter and John had to deflect the adulation of the crowd in the Jerusalem Temple, so Paul and Barnabas, taken by the pagans for Zeus and Hermes, are compelled to dodge the blasphemy of having sacrifice offered to them!

The brief speech attributed to both Barnabas and Paul invokes a strategy of evangelization that has typified missionary work at its best. Instead of moving directly to the fulfillment of messianic expectations (nonexistent for the pagans of Lystra), the apostles proclaim the “living God,” the creator revealed in the good gifts of nature that they celebrate in their own sacrifices—the rains and the fruitful seasons. This acknowledgment of God as creator and sustainer of all life is, of course, at the heart of Jewish monotheism; now Christianity makes it a necessary foundation of its proclamation of the gospel. Appreciation of Jesus requires knowledge and acceptance of God the creator.

The would-be stoners from Iconium, joined by adversaries from Pisidian Antioch, finally catch up with the apostles in Lystra (v. 19) and manage to carry out their intentions on Paul, leaving him for dead. Supported by the disciples, he is able to return to town and to continue his mission the next day. It is a sign of their courage that they are able to act in the spirit of the motto expressed in verse 22 and circle back through the very towns from which their persecutors came. In Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch they find Christian communities large and stable enough to require the appointment of elders (presbyters) for their governance. Luke has no trouble portraying a church that is at once charismatic and prophetic, and, at the same time, requiring the structure of appointed officers (recall the conjunction of teachers and prophets among the five named at 13:1 and the appointment of *diakonoi* in chapter 6; and see the discussion of 20:17 and 28 regarding *episcopoi*, *presbyteroi*, and *diakonoi*).

We sense a kind of symmetry in the narrative as the apostles return to the community that commissioned them in Syrian Antioch. This first mission commenced at the beginning of chapter 13 with mention of offices (prophets and teachers), prayer and fasting, and designation of chosen persons for “the work” with a laying on of hands and a send-off. Now that mission comes to a close with mention of officers (elders) appointed and commissioned with prayer and

fasting and a reference to “the work” Paul and Barnabas have now accomplished (14:22-26). Luke has been careful to show that this first mission was not so much what Paul and Barnabas had done but “what God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (v. 27).

### **15:1-35 The “Council” of Jerusalem. The early church resolves its first big crisis: must Gentile converts become Jews?**

This account of the early church responding to and resolving its first major crisis displays at its best Luke’s genius as a historian. If you have ever been a part of a leadership committee, recall a time when that group met to resolve a major policy issue. No doubt that process entailed more than one meeting, and those meetings took hours before all sides of the issue were voiced. Full resolution and implementation likely required more hours of meeting, debate, and work.

By analogy with that contemporary experience, consider what the fledgling church was facing at this point and how Luke describes its response. Becoming disciples of Jesus as the Christ had been largely a Jewish matter. It was natural, then, for the Jewish Christians to expect Gentile converts to do what Gentile converts had always done, namely, undergo circumcision (for males) and keep the full 613 laws of Moses. Obviously, those who had specialized in teaching and living the Torah, like the converts who belonged to the party of the Pharisees, would be inclined to see it this way. Others, however, such as Paul and Barnabas, who were more broadly experienced in what God had been doing among the Gentiles, were convinced that a Gentile should not have to become a Jew to become a Christian.

Remarkably, Luke manages to present the resolution of this crisis in a passage that takes only five minutes to read! In thirty-five verses, our author cuts to the essence of the matter and, in the telling of it, provides a paradigm of ecclesial decision-making that has subsequently characterized the church at its best.

Verses 1-2 present the “state of the question”: visitors from the Jerusalem headquarters challenge the lenient practice of the Antioch community (not requiring circumcision of male Gentile converts), and Paul and Barnabas promptly oppose the Jerusalem people. (Although Luke does not mention Peter at this point, this confrontation could well be the altercation that Paul himself describes, for another purpose than Luke’s, in Galatians 2:11-14. This is one way of reconciling the accounts of Acts 15 and Galatians 2.)



Recognizing that this is an issue that needs to be resolved at a higher level, the local church sends Paul, Barnabas, and some other representatives to Jerusalem. Their trip up to Jerusalem (“up” because topographically one always goes *up* to Jerusalem even when the trip is a north-south journey) is punctuated by their regaling the disciples with stories of the conversion of the Gentiles. Though the Antiochene party is graciously received, the Pharisee Christians firmly restate their position: Gentile converts must get circumcised and observe the Mosaic Law.

Since the Antioch delegation is meeting with “the apostles and presbyters [elders],” this is not a plenary session of the whole church but a leadership meeting. As any recorder of minutes will recognize, the phrase “after much debate had taken place” saves Luke an enormous amount of ink and parchment. Then Luke has Peter get up and retell what we who have read Acts 10 and 11 recognize as the story of Cornelius and his household. This time the words of Peter highlight new dimensions of that experience. He says that God purified their hearts by faith, alluding to Ezekiel 36:25-26. He argues that God’s endowment of the holy Spirit upon those Gentiles shows that salvation comes by “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (v. 11). The argument against the Jerusalem policy is clinched with Paul and Barnabas describing the “signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them,” which we readers recognize as a reference to the events narrated in Acts 13–14.

The clincher comes, surprisingly, from the mouth of James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, that is, the one we would most expect to support the “conservative” policy of circumcising Gentile converts. His argument turns out to be a *peshet*, that is, an application of Scripture to current events, such as we have met in the speeches of Peter and the one of Paul in Pisidian Antioch. James finds confirmation of the position represented by Paul and Barnabas in the Greek version of Amos 9:11-12.

As in the case of the other *peshets*, the interpretation here requires the Greek version (Septuagint) of the prophet. This part of Amos 9 is about the restoration of Israel. But where the Hebrew text has *edom* (Edom), the Septuagint translator has read *'adam* (humanity), so that a statement about the conquest of a remnant of Edom becomes one about “the rest of humanity” seeking the Lord. How does James (or Luke) find in this passage from the Greek Bible an affirmation of an unhindered mission to the Gentiles? It reflects the same two-stage mission that the early community found in Isaiah 49:5-6, namely, (1) restoration of the tribes of Israel (“the fallen hut of David”) and (2)

the reception of the Gentiles (“the rest of humanity”).

James’s solution is to acknowledge that the mission to the Gentiles is God’s will but also to maintain some continuity with the past by insisting that they should require from Gentile converts what Israel had always required of resident aliens, as spelled out in Leviticus 17–18. As a sign that they are joining a community with Israelite roots, Gentile converts should follow the usual rules for resident aliens and “abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage” (v. 29). (Alternatively, a convincing case can also be made that the issue here was not so much menu as venue, that the four items of the apostolic decree referred simply to the behavior involved in participating in pagan temple feasts, and that Gentile believers were hereby warned to make a clean break from such places.)

Notice that Luke’s crisp account of what must have been a more extended process provides a paradigm for problem solving and decision-making in the church. It comes down to three movements:

1. Conduct a full hearing of the community’s experience of what they understand God to be doing among them (here, the accounts of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas).

2. Try to understand that experience against the faith-community’s tradition as currently understood (here, James’s citation of Greek Amos 9).

3. Make a practical policy decision that affirms the values evoked in steps 1 and 2 (here, the decision to free Gentile converts from unnecessary obligations, but requiring them at least to keep the Levitical rules for resident aliens—or, on the alternative interpretation, to cease frequenting pagan temple feasts).

This very human problem-solving process is something that the community can boldly describe with the words “It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us . . .” (v. 28).

## **THE MISSION OF PAUL TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH**

### ***Acts 15:36–28:31***

The travels described in Acts 16–20 cover two more distinct journeys, the second and third missionary journeys of Paul (and companions). And each journey has a distinct geographical center of gravity: as the first addressed communities in southern Galatia, the second concentrates on major cities in Macedonia and Achaia, and the third centers in, and radiates from, the great Ephesus.

Like the first journey described in chapters 13–14, the second and third also

begin and return to Syrian Antioch and include one major speech by Paul—the only address to a Gentile audience (in Athens, 17:22-31) and the farewell address at Miletus to the Ephesian elders (20:18-35). Yet because these two journeys are separated by what is only a brief return to Syrian Antioch (18:22), it may be helpful (and even more faithful to Luke’s narrative) to think of the activities recounted in these five chapters as the Aegean mission. Together, these travels form a whole, moving from what Paul himself refers to as “the beginning of the gospel” at Philippi (Phil 4:15) to Paul’s “last will and testament” addressed to the Ephesian elders at Miletus (Act 20:17-38). The remainder of the book (Acts 21–28) is a distinct segment devoted to journeys related to Paul’s Jewish and Roman imprisonment and “trials” (really hearings) in Jerusalem and Caesarea Maritima, and finally house arrest in Rome.

### **15:36-41 Paul and Barnabas separate**

Luke’s delicate treatment of the interplay between the human intentions and divine will continues to unfold dramatically. What will eventually become Paul’s greatest missionary expansion begins simply with the intention of revisiting and strengthening the churches he had founded in the first mission (Acts 13–14). That God can work with the results of human frailty is implied in Luke’s notice that Paul and Barnabas had a “disagreement” (whose depth is suggested by the Greek word here, *paroxysmos*, v. 38, from which the English “paroxysm” derives) about whether Mark, who had deserted the previous mission at Pamphylia, should be allowed to accompany them. Thus the breakup of the first team leads to the formation of a powerful new team—Paul and Silas. First introduced in verses 22-32 as a leader in the Jerusalem community and a prophet, Silas is usually taken to be the same person as the Silvanus mentioned in the New Testament epistles.

### **16:1-5 Timothy joins Paul and Silas**

This brief passage shows Paul’s nuanced approach to Jewish/Gentile relations in the Christian mission. Even as he continues to promulgate the apostolic decree of the Council of Jerusalem (15:23-29), which frees Gentile converts from having to become Jews, he can still insist that Timothy undergo adult circumcision. Apparently Timothy was raised Jewish by his mother (named Eunice, we learn in 2 Timothy 1:5) but had never been circumcised (prevented by his Greek father?). That Paul convinced him to get circumcised, even though he was now a Christian, suggests that Paul still considered mission

to Jews important enough to take this surprising step to make Timothy more acceptable to his fellow Jews.

### **16:6-10 The call to Macedonia**

The movement of this team of three into fresh mission territory presents again the delicate interface of the divine and human in their decision-making. As they move westward, they are prevented from moving south by the holy Spirit and from moving north by “the Spirit of Jesus.” When Paul receives a dream vision of a Macedonian calling for help, that call still requires ratification by human decision (v. 10).

### **A note on the “we” passages**

The introduction of the first person plural (“we”) in verse 10 signals the first of the famous four “we” sections in Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1–28:16). To account for this phenomenon, commentators have noted that the first person plural was sometimes used in ancient travel narratives as a literary device to evoke immediacy. However, this does not appear to be the case with Acts, a work of history. The abruptness of the shifts from third-person narrative to first-person (and back again) is more easily accounted for as deriving from the actual involvement of the author (or his sources). Moreover, ancient historians were eager to indicate their presence at the events they described when they had grounds to make such a claim. We have no evidence of their making such claims groundlessly.

### **16:11-15 The conversion of Lydia and her household**

Seeking a Jewish house of prayer, Paul, Silas, Timothy (and Luke, if we understand “we” historically) encounter a group of women gathered by the riverside. With marvelous economy of words, Luke describes one Lydia. She is a businesswoman, a dealer in the luxury item of purple cloth, a God fearer, and wealthy enough to be mistress of a household. Such is her openness and response to Paul’s sharing of the word that Luke describes it in language reminiscent of the conversion of the Emmaus pair in Luke 24:31-32: “The Lord opened her heart.” Conversion and baptism lead immediately to generous hospitality. Since the missionaries later return to “Lydia’s house” (v. 40) after their release from prison, she may well have emerged as the leader of the first house church of Philippi (and thus the first in what will later be known as Europe).

### **16:16-40 Further adventures in Philippi: deliverance, imprisonment, and**

### **further deliverance**

On his way to the house of prayer, Paul encounters some unsolicited and annoying advertising. A slave girl with a mantic spirit goes around shouting what is in fact the truth: “These people are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation” (v. 17). Though true enough in a Christian context, the ambiguous language would have been heard by pagans as announcing Paul and Silas as promoting a new cure in the name of the god that they promote as the top god of the pagan pantheon. When Paul puts a stop to this with a command in the name of Jesus and the woman is delivered of the oracular spirit, her exploiters, distressed by the loss of business, bring the missionaries before the Roman magistrates. The charge: illegal (anti-imperial) proselytizing.

The twosome are stripped, beaten, and imprisoned. During the night an earthquake opens the jail doors and unchains the prisoners. When the jailer finds the missionaries freed but still present, he responds to these portents by falling on his knees and asking, “What must I do to be saved?” And they say, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you and your household will be saved.” As in the case of Lydia, openness leads to conversion of a household, hospitality, and baptism.

When the Roman authorities realize their mistake and try to dismiss Paul and friends discreetly, Paul confronts the police. He and his men are Roman citizens, and he insists that their beating and imprisonment without trial are a miscarriage of justice that ought to be reversed, not secretly but officially. This elicits a sheepish apology from the magistrates, who come to apologize and to ask them to leave town. This they do, but not without stopping at Lydia’s place to encourage the budding Philippian community.

### **17:1-15 From Thessalonica to Beroea, with mixed reviews**

Although Luke treats Paul’s mission in Thessalonica (some hundred miles west of Philippi) as a brief, three-week encounter, the community he founded there was significant enough to receive the earliest letter we have from the Apostle’s hand, 1 Thessalonians.

The events here are described in language that resonates with the Third Gospel. When Luke notes that Paul joined the local synagogue community according to “his usual custom,” he could be referring to Paul’s usual missionary strategy. He could as well mean that Paul attended synagogue as his Jewish practice, much as Jesus attended the Nazareth synagogue “according to his custom” (Luke 4:16). His teaching in that house of prayer and study is summarized in words that reflect the message of Jesus to the disciples on Easter

Sunday (“The Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead,” v. 3; see Luke 24:26, 46-47). And when those in the Jewish community who find Paul’s message a threat drag to the magistrates some of the small Christian community growing in Jason’s place, their accusations echo those leveled against Jesus: “They all act in opposition to the decrees of Caesar and claim instead that there is another king, Jesus” (v. 7; see Luke 23:2).

Some sixty miles to the southwest, Paul and Silas find a much more receptive synagogue in Beroea, where people engage the missionaries in biblical study, not just on the Sabbath but “daily” (v. 11). But the zealous Thessalonian adversaries soon arrive to stir up the crowds against them, much as the pre-Christian Paul (Saul) traveled distances to block the spread of what he had determined was a dangerous Jewish heresy, “the Way” (Acts 9:2).

### **17:16-34 Paul in Athens**

In this episode Luke presents Paul giving the only fully developed speech to a Gentile audience. He describes that audience with care when he highlights the Stoics and Epicureans in verse 18 (both named only here in the New Testament). The mere mention of the names evokes stereotyped philosophical positions regarding humanity, nature, and the gods. Stoics perceived reality as a unified, organic cosmos in which the divinity inhered pantheistically as a kind of “law.” Humanity was part of that cosmos and found happiness by harmonizing with that essentially benevolent law of the cosmos.

Epicureans, on the other hand, had a more mechanistic notion of the world, in which the divine was conceived in a “deistic” way at best (the divinity causing the cosmos but remaining uninvolved with it). Epicureans expected mere dissolution after death and, meanwhile, sought happiness by prudently doing what was most sensibly pleasant. It makes sense, then, for Luke to describe the crowd reactions as divided. On the one hand, there were those who heckled Paul, dismissing him as a “seed-pecker,” a reaction that fits the Epicureans, who would have found Paul’s teaching radically incompatible with their own. On the other hand, there were those who were initially confused (thinking Paul to be speaking of new gods, *Iēsous* and *Anastasis* [“Resurrection,” mis-heard as the name of the divine consort of *Iēsous*?]) yet remained open to the preacher and wanted to hear more. And this reaction fits the Stoics, who would have found some tantalizing convergences with their worldview and lifestyle and would have been drawn to further inquiry.

The notion that the deity is not captured in sanctuaries and does not need

human worship (see 7:48) would have been congenial to Stoics and Epicureans alike. But against Stoic pantheism, Paul asserts the biblical notion of a transcendent creator who *made* everything and, moreover, sustains everything. Paul reminds them of the common origin of the human family (“made from one”—compatible with the biblical account of origin from Adam and also the fresh beginning with Noah). Echoing his brief proclamation to the Lycaonians at Lystra, Paul remodels LXX Isaiah 42:5 and calls them to contemplate the earth with its seasons as a habitat for humanity and a revelation of the Creator’s care.

Where he might have cited Scripture for a synagogue audience, here Paul enlists instead an ancient Stoic poet from his region, Aratus (“for we too are his offspring”), and he also quotes a sixth-century B.C. author, Epimenides of Knossos: “In him we live and move and have our being.” Thus Luke appropriates Hellenistic language to assert against Stoic pantheism what we might call a biblical panentheism. Against the Stoic notion of endless cycles of cosmic rebirth and death, he announces the biblical doomsday. Against the coldness of Epicurean “deism,” he asserts the biblical notion of God’s intimate involvement with creatures. If Luke has said in verse 24 that human handicraft cannot *house* God, in verse 29 he argues that human skill and wit cannot *image* the divinity. The unexpressed element of the argument is the biblical idea that the only adequate image of the living God is living human beings, who are images of the King of the universe insofar as they are stewards of the earth.

If Jesus is going to be the ultimate judge of the human family, it would follow that the criteria are what we have heard him teach in the Third Gospel, especially in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49).

Commentators have noted that Paul is portrayed using this philosophical “natural theology” approach just this once in Acts. And in his first letter to the Corinthians, he makes a point of not coming to them with the wisdom of philosophers but simply with the “foolishness” of a crucified Messiah. Was the approach of Paul in Athens simply a failed strategy, never to be repeated? It would seem, rather, that the church has seen in this episode a model of how Jerusalem can speak to Athens. Thomas Aquinas, for example, used the philosophical categories of a rediscovered Aristotle to speak to his European culture. And theology has always been an effort to recast the givens of revelation in the language of one’s own time and place. One can even see in this brief masterpiece hints of the basis for the interreligious dialogue that challenges us today.

## 18:1-17 Paul in Corinth

Because the New Testament contains two of the letters that Paul later wrote to the Christian community in Corinth, we know more about this community than any of the other churches that Paul founded. The correspondence that we call 1 and 2 Corinthians gives us a privileged window on the texture and tensions of this vibrant community in the middle fifties of the first century. In the first half of Acts 18, Luke, apparently working from sources other than Paul's letters, sketches the beginnings of that fascinating church. Some of the strokes of that sketch provide precious contact with historical data; other strokes limn Luke's inspired interpretation of those events, showing what God is doing through human failures and successes in that busy crossroads of the ancient world.

Acts 18 offers two important links with secular history. The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that the emperor Claudius expelled members of the Jewish community of Rome because of an "uproar" caused by one "Chrestus" in A.D. 49. Scholars have taken that to be a garbled reference to *Christos*. It would seem to refer to a stir caused by Jewish Christians from Jerusalem preaching Jesus as the Messiah. Priscilla and Aquila, then, seem to be part of that group expelled from Rome. They are "Jews for Jesus" who host Christian meetings at their house (1 Cor 16:19), as they will later do in Rome, when Nero allows Jews to return five years later (see Rom 16:5). This enterprising couple takes in as houseguest Paul, their fellow tentmaker and messianic missionary. An inscription found at Delphi dates the proconsul of Achaia, Gallio, to A.D. 51–52, thus providing another link to secular history.

But it is sacred history that most interests Luke. He shows that the whim of an emperor and the adjudication of a proconsul can play into the divine project. Aquila and Prisca (Priscilla) become two of Paul's principal coworkers, and their hospitality enables the Apostle to settle into what was (next to his twenty-seven-month stay in Ephesus; see 19:10) his second most extended sojourn in a single town, lasting some eighteen months.

Paul's extended sessions at the local Jewish house of study, with Gentile God-fearers as well as Jews in attendance, issue in the usual mixed results. Most Jews reject the novelty of a crucified craftsman proclaimed as the Messiah and "the Lord." But there are notable exceptions: Crispus, the synagogue leader, and one Titus Justus, the God-fearer who owned the house next door to the synagogue. Paul's work is affirmed by a night vision of Jesus assuring him in language that recalls the divine promise of support to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah ("I am with you").



Tellingly, the mixed Christian community is called the Lord's "people" (*laos*, the biblical word for the people of the covenant; source of our word "laity"). When Paul's Jewish adversaries bring him before the bench of the proconsul Gallio, he unwittingly affirms that "covenantal people-hood" of the Christians by dismissing their charges against Paul as a matter of Jewish doctrine, titles, and law (v. 15).

### **18:18-28 Further mission notes and the integration of Apollos**

Luke's intent in the remainder of chapter 18 seems mainly to give a summary of activity occurring between Paul's work in Corinth and his work in another major urban center, Ephesus (to be treated in Acts 19). The résumé highlights features that are key to Luke's interpretation. (1) Paul continues to operate as a Jew (see the reference to the Nazirite haircut, v. 18; for background, see Num 6:1-21). (2) He continues his mission to fellow Jews (he dialogues with the Ephesian synagogue congregation). (3) He stays in touch with church officials at the Jerusalem headquarters (v. 22). (4) The Christian mission continues in an orderly way. For example, Paul revisits and affirms communities established in Phrygia and Galatia. And when Apollos, a skilled rhetorician from the Hellenistic Christian/Jewish community of Alexandria, arrives in Ephesus and begins to preach the "Way of the Lord" with enthusiasm, but incompletely, Paul's co-workers, Priscilla and Aquila, explain the Way to him more fully. Apollos's move from Ephesus to Achaia is done with the recommendation of the Ephesian Christians.

(The power of Apollos's ministry was such that some of those he trains will form a kind of "I had the great Apollos as my personal trainer" faction, and Paul will have to address this issue in 1 Corinthians 1–3. See especially 1 Corinthians 3:6: "I planted, Apollos watered, but *God* caused the growth," emphasis added).

### **19:1-40 Paul in Ephesus: the Way of the Lord Jesus versus magic and idolatry; evangelizing from the Asian capital (19:1-12)**

Paul's encounter with twelve Ephesian "disciples" who had not received the holy Spirit provides an instructive parallel with the previous episode—Priscilla and Aquila's instruction of Apollos. Both involve the instruction of disciples who are somehow incomplete. Apollos's incompleteness was subtle: although he had been instructed in the Way of the Lord (vv. 25-26; see 9:2; 14:16; 16:17) and taught accurately about Jesus and was ardent in spirit, he knew only the baptism of John, was not described as filled with the Spirit, and needed to be

taught *more* accurately about the Way. Similarly, these twelve Ephesians, who seem to have missed the training of Aquila, Priscilla, and the reformed Apollos, also knew only John's baptism and had not even heard that there was a holy Spirit.

As in the case of the conversion of Cornelius's household (10:44-46), a "mini-Pentecost" follows. These two descriptions of "regularizing" disciples tell us two interesting things about the emergent church: (a) that the influence of John the Baptist was more powerful than we usually give him credit for, and (b) unity of belief and practice within the church had been a struggle from the beginning.

The summary description in verses 8-12 portrays the shape of the next twenty-seven months of Paul's evangelization. Despite past rejections, his serious effort to bring the Good News to his fellow Jews first continues with a three-month colloquium in the Ephesian synagogue. That this effort was not entirely without success is hinted at in the reference to the *disciples* whom Paul took with him after a nasty confrontation compelled him to change his venue to the hall of Tyrannus.

During the next two years Ephesus becomes a mission center from which the whole province of Asia is evangelized, "Jews and Greeks alike." The description of healings occasioned even by cloth or aprons touched to Paul's skin demonstrates that the healing ministry begun in Jesus (Luke 8:44-47, the woman with the flow of blood) and continued through Peter (Acts 5:15-16) persists in the Apostle to the Gentiles. See Paul's own reference to his work as "what Christ has accomplished through me to lead the Gentiles to obedience by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders . . ." (Rom 15:18-19; see also 2 Cor 12:12).

### **19:13-20 The power of Jesus' name versus demons and magic**

The power of the risen Lord Jesus over the competing powers of this world is now illustrated by two vivid and entertaining anecdotes regarding demons, magic, and idolatry.

When the seven sons of the high priest Sceva attempt to deliver a man from demonic oppression by using Jesus' name in a magical way, they themselves are rebuked, overpowered, and sent packing, naked and wounded. The spiritual power of the name of the Lord Jesus, properly used, is dramatized by the immense commercial value of books burned by those converted from their magical practices (v. 19).

### **19:21-40 A confused assembly confronted**

The Way of the Lord Jesus continues to have practical consequences. The silversmiths of Ephesus riot when their livelihood (selling silver models of the world-famous temple of the goddess Artemis) appears to be threatened by the Christian preaching against idolatry. (Archaeology helps us to picture the structures involved here. One of the “seven wonders of the ancient world,” the temple of Artemis, the Artemision, was four times the size of the Parthenon, with 127 sixty-foot pillars. The dimensions alone help us understand why silver models of the place were such hot items in the religious tourism trade. And the “theater” was not like your local movie house but a magnificent amphitheater carved into a mountainside, 495 feet in diameter.) Two important points emerge from Luke’s account of this disruption. First, the intervention of the town clerk models the way for Roman officials to work out tensions with Christians: (“let the matter be settled in the lawful assembly,” v. 39).

Second, some of Luke’s word choices hint that he is making a subtle contrast between pagan chaos and Christian order. Describing the riot, Luke says that the city was filled with *synchysis* (“confusion”—v. 29). Used only once in the New Testament, this is a deftly chosen word, for it is the word used in the Septuagint at Genesis 11:9 (the sole occurrence in the Greek version of the Torah) to translate the name “Babel.” And Luke has already used the verbal form of the word to describe the Pentecost experience as a reversal of Babel’s confusion (Acts 2:6), Pentecost being the occasion when people are confused by their ability to understand!

The contrast is further enhanced by Luke’s using *ekklēsia* to describe the confused assembly in verses 32, 39, and 41. Apart from Acts 7:38, where the word refers to the assembly of the Hebrews at Sinai, *ekklēsia* elsewhere in Acts always means the community of the church. Only in this passage is the word used for a non-ecclesial assembly. For the original readers of Acts, this word choice could only have pointed up the contrast between the two kinds of “assembly”—the confused riot of the silversmiths versus the orderly growth of the church (vv. 10-17, 20). The final two occurrences of *ekklēsia* in Acts turn up in the very next chapter, in verses 17 and 28, where they describe the Ephesian church as an assembly driven by motives quite other than idolatry, greed, and anxiety.

### **20:1-16 Journeying toward Jerusalem (and the resuscitation of “Lucky”)**

In a note between the episodes of the triumph over the exorcists and the riot

of the silversmiths (19:21), Luke had already referred to Paul's decision to travel to Jerusalem (and then move on to Rome). Although Paul later (24:17) refers to the purpose of this journey as the bringing of alms to Jerusalem (the collection referred to in his letters to Corinth and Rome—for instance, Romans 15:25-28), there is no mention of the collection here in chapter 20. Perhaps the delivery of the Jerusalem relief fund was not the public-relations success Paul had hoped for.

After a farewell tour of churches in Macedonia and three months in "Greece" (Achaia, centering, no doubt, around unnamed Corinth), Paul, intending to join what was apparently a pilgrim group of Jews sailing for Syria, learns of a plot against him and decides to take a more indirect route, looping back around the Aegean basin. The seven names listed (plus the author or his source, since the second "we" section begins in verse 5) comprise a delegation representing most of the sectors of Paul's mission. This delegation fits the notion that this is indeed the "Jerusalem relief fund" trip (see Rom 15:25-27).

The colorful anecdote about the resuscitation of Eutychus (aptly named "Lucky," the meaning of his name in Greek) may well be included here simply for its entertainment value and its parallel with the account of Peter's raising of Tabitha (9:36-43). But given Luke's careful choice of words and phrases—"on the first day of the week" (v. 1; see Luke 24:1); "upstairs room" (v. 8; see 1:13; 9:37, 39); "break[ing] bread" (vv. 7, 11; see Luke 22:19; 24:30; Acts 2:46); a fallen youth taken up "dead" (v. 9) and revived by Paul imitating the gestures of Elijah and Elisha and taken away as a *pais zōnta* ("living lad"), it is hard to dismiss the possibility that the author intends the reader to reflect on the story's symbolic resonances, especially when one notices that the event sits between references to Passover ("the feast of Unleavened Bread," v. 6) and Pentecost (v. 16). For the Christian practice of the breaking of the bread on the first day of the week (Sunday) is always a celebration of death and restoration to new life, precisely as these things are interpreted in the light of the Jewish feasts of Passover and Pentecost.

As for the detailed itinerary surrounding this anecdote, the listing of places could simply be explained as evidence of an eyewitness's passion for detail. It could also reflect Luke's intention to show how Jesus' heroic follower Paul imitates his master even in his making an extended final journey to Jerusalem, where he too will be interrogated by Jewish and Gentile officials.

## **20:17-38 Paul's testament to the Ephesian elders**

Paul makes a point of bypassing Ephesus (to avoid those plotting against him?), but he is eager to summon the elders of that community to Miletus, some forty miles to the south, so that he can bid them farewell. What follows is the only speech in Acts that Paul addresses to a Christian audience.

The speech follows the conventions of other biblical testaments, touching on the topics of a review of the speaker's life, commissioning of successors, encouragement and warnings regarding the future, farewell and blessing. Like other classic farewell addresses, it serves both to present the speaker as a model for the readers/auditors and also to address the historical aftermath of the speaker and interpret what is going forward historically.

In the context of Luke-Acts, the speech is a privileged moment in Paul's own imitation of Christ. Like Jesus, he makes his own "passion prediction" on the way to Jerusalem. And his farewell address to the Ephesian elders has much in common with Jesus' own farewell address to the apostles at the Last Supper (Luke 22:25-38). Like Jesus at the supper, Paul characterizes authority in the messianic community as one of humble service, focuses on the kingdom, encourages his listeners to care for those left in their charge (Jesus: "Strengthen your brothers"; Paul: "Help the weak"), and warns of future challenges. That Paul can serve as model to the extent that he himself has imitated Jesus is suggested by explicit reference to Jesus in the beatitude that climaxes the speech: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (v. 35).

Several things about the language of this speech are worth noting. Along with Luke's calling the group "presbyters" (*presbyteroi*, or "elders," v. 17), the usual term in Acts for leaders other than the apostles in the churches, Paul calls them "overseers" (v. 28, translating *episkopoi*, the word rendered "bishops" in later Christian writings). This reflects the apparent equivalence of those terms as found, for example, in Titus 1:5-7. In the ordinary Greek of the day, *episkopos* meant "superintendent" or "guardian" in any of a variety of social settings. In first-century Christian writings it serves as a Hellenistic equivalent of the more Judean term "elder," which Luke uses for both Jewish and Christian leaders throughout Luke-Acts. In the second century these terms will be used to designate distinct roles in the evolving three-tier hierarchical structure of a single local bishop (*episkopos*), directing a number of elders (*presbyteroi*, from which the English words "priest" and "presbyterate" derive), supported by a further group of *diakono*i, or deacons.

One remarkable verse (v. 28) deserves special attention: "Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you

overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood.” This translation, which renders straightforwardly what scholars generally agree is the best reading of the Greek text, raises the question of what it can mean to speak of God’s blood. An early response to this problem was the introduction of the variant reading “church of the Lord” for “church of God,” which was open to the understanding that “his blood” referred to the blood of the Lord Jesus. But the more difficult reading, “church of God,” does appear to be the more authentic one. A possible solution of this crux is to translate the final phrase, “the blood of his Own” (referring to the Son, Jesus). In any case, with the references to “holy Spirit,” “God,” and “blood,” we have in this verse a rare New Testament adumbration of the later, more developed doctrine of the Trinity. Using phrases that catch important aspects of Paul’s theology as it is expressed in the Pauline letters (conversion to God, faith in the Lord Jesus, the power of the Spirit to form community, the gospel of God’s grace, the plan of God, the importance of perseverance), this speech is a fitting conclusion to Luke’s narrative of Paul’s intra-Christian ministry.

### **21:1-14 Paul and the delegation continue the journey to Jerusalem**

After departing from Ephesus, Paul and companions continue the journey to Jerusalem. This stage of the journey comprises the third “we” section in Acts (vv. 1-18), implying the author’s presence during this part of the journey. The summary gives us a glimpse of how people got about the Mediterranean in those days: they hung around a port until they found a cargo ship going in the general direction of their intended destination.

The fact that Paul and his entourage find communities of Christians in Tyre and Ptolemais indicates that the evangelization of Phoenicia, to which Luke referred in 11:19, took root and flourished. Indeed, the intensity of communion with the disciples at Ptolemais is enough to warrant the same kind of prayerful seaside send-off they received at Ephesus (20:36-38).

These episodes illustrate that hearing and following the Spirit are not a simple matter. Although the Tyrian Christians keep telling Paul “through the Spirit” not to embark for Jerusalem, he continues. Obviously, he feels they have mis-interpreted the Spirit in this case. And when Agabus, who prophesied accurately the famine during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28), acts out symbolically what he perceives to be the Spirit’s message regarding Paul’s fate in Jerusalem, he gets it only partly right: Paul will indeed be bound in Jerusalem, but by Romans, not by Jews. Faced with Paul’s determination to go to Jerusalem

even if it means death, it is the companions, not Paul, who imitate Jesus' struggle in facing the prospect of death (Luke 22:39-42), first with resistance, then acceptance.

### **21:15-26 Paul has his Jewish fidelity challenged**

When Paul and company arrive in Jerusalem, James and a plenary session of the Jerusalem elders hear Paul's report about what God has been doing through his ministry among the Gentiles. The Jerusalem Christian authorities are happy enough with that good news, but they inform Paul that the success among the Gentiles has raised concerns among the "many thousands" (v. 20) of Jewish Christians in the area who have gotten the idea that he is urging all the Jews in the Diaspora to abandon the Mosaic practices. Although nothing we have read in Acts supports this charge, Paul's own letter to the Romans shows that the notion that he was denigrating the Mosaic Law was prevalent enough to warrant the full-scale defense that he makes in that major letter.

James's strategy for damage control in this regard—having Paul accompany four men to the temple and sponsor the ceremonies fulfilling their nazirite vows (see Num 6:3-20 for the nazirite ritual)—seems promising. Twentieth-century digs to the south of the Temple Mount have revealed the *mikvaot* (immersion baths), where pilgrims ritually purified themselves before climbing the stairs leading up into the temple precincts. The public nature of this purification, along with Paul's sponsoring of the sacrifices (twelve animals, three apiece for four men) would offer a clear rebuttal to the accusations that Paul was discouraging observance of the Torah.

The reference in verse 25 to the policy regarding Gentile converts expressed in the apostolic decree of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:23-29) strikes an odd note here. Paul, after all, played a major part in that meeting and, indeed, helped promulgate its policy regarding Gentile converts (16:4). But the notice serves to remind the reader that the present issue, Paul's attitude toward Jewish observance of the Torah, is something other than what is expected of Gentile Christians.

Given Paul's own language about "[dying] to the law" (Gal 2:19), some commentators find Luke's portrayal here of Paul's "compromise" implausible. Yet it can be argued that Paul is acting in a way wholly consistent with the policy he articulates in 1 Corinthians 9:19-21: "Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became

like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law—though I am not outside God’s law but within the law of Christ—to win over those outside the law.”

Sadly, in the end the strategy fails, for in the events that follow, nothing indicates that Paul’s Jerusalem relief fund was accepted, and no one in the Jerusalem Christian community comes to his rescue in the confrontation that continues to unfold. The Jerusalem church, so robustly present in the early chapters of Acts and now grown to “many thousands,” disappears from view during the final seven chapters.

### **21:27-36 Romans rescue Paul from an attempted lynching**

In addition to the local members of the sect of the Nazarene, other Jews, pilgrims from the province of Asia, mount an attack against Paul. Having recognized their fellow provincial, the Gentile Trophimus, some had jumped to the conclusion that Paul had taken this man into the court of Israel on the Temple Mount, thereby breaching the barrier separating Gentiles from the space reserved for Israelites. Signs posted on the balustrade forbade Gentiles to pass this point on pain of death. The rioting crowd falls upon Paul, haul him out of the sacred space, and try to kill him on the spot.

At this point the cohort commander intervenes with centurions and soldiers, who bring him to “the compound,” a reference to the Antonia fortress, the military headquarters and barracks contiguous with the northwest corner of the temple platform. The shout of the crowd—“Away with him!”—echoes the cry at the trial of Jesus before Pilate (Luke 23:18).

### **21:37-40 Paul identifies himself**

When Paul identifies himself as a Jew and a Roman citizen to the cohort commander, the latter is relieved that he is not “the Egyptian”—the last rabble-rouser the Romans had to deal with. The reference fits Josephus’s account of an “Egyptian false prophet” who, a few years earlier, had led thirty thousand (Josephus’s number) to the Mount of Olives to wait for Jerusalem to fall like Jericho in the days of Joshua. Paul and his purpose are something else entirely, as his ensuing speech will reveal. Having spoken to the commander in Greek, the *lingua franca* of that part of the empire, he now proceeds to address the crowd in what Luke calls “Hebrew”—almost certainly a reference to Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jesus and the common language of Judea.



## 22:1-21 Paul's first defense speech

Paul's exchange with the cohort commander had raised questions of ethnicity and status. Paul is a Jew, not "the Egyptian." He speaks Greek as well as Aramaic. And he is a Roman citizen. Now as he begins his speech, he makes it clear that he speaks as a Jew to Jews ("My brothers and fathers"). The clause "what I am about to say in my defense" renders the word *apologia*, the classical term for a legal defense, thereby setting the agenda for the final seven chapters of Acts. Facing a crowd driven by the zeal for the Mosaic Law—who are attacking Paul because they think he has violated that Law—he makes the perfect move to win their good will. He displays his Jewish pedigree, citing his Jewish upbringing, his training in the Law, even describing his own past persecution of "this Way" as stemming from precisely the "zeal . . . for God" that they are presently demonstrating in their persecution of him.

Just as Luke repeated twice the story of Peter's first mission to Gentiles in his encounter with Cornelius's household (in Acts 10, 11, and 15), so he retells the story of Paul's conversion/commission here, for the second in what will be another series of three accounts. No clumsy redundancy, these repetitions are the author's way of underscoring the importance of these pivotal events. As in the case of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, each re-telling comes with variations and developments that fit the immediate context and help the reader fathom the significance more deeply.

In this version of Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus, the brightness is enhanced: at the most brilliant time of day, *noon*, Paul experiences a brightness that outshines the noontime sunlight! His visual impairment is not called blindness here but is simply ascribed to the brightness of the light. Whereas in the account of Acts 9 the companions heard the voice but see no one, here they see the light but hear no voice.

These are not the discrepancies of a negligent author but variations of an artist in full control of his material. Saying that "the Lord" answered Paul enhances the nature of the vision as a theophany, that is, a manifestation of God. (It is not impossible that Luke's emphasis on blindness in the midst of brightness is prompted by his perception that Paul here experiences the noontime blindness that Deuteronomy 28:28 promises Israel if it does not hearken to the voice of the Lord.)

The Jewishness of Ananias is enhanced. He is a "devout observer of the law" (v. 12). And he announces that their ancestral God has designated Paul to witness (what he had seen and heard) "before *all*" (emphasis added) about "the

Righteous One,” an eminently Jewish title for Jesus, denoting fidelity to the covenant and echoing Luke’s unique version of the confession of the centurion under the cross (Luke 23:47: “This man was *dikaios*” [“innocent,” “righteous”]). Here there is less emphasis on the physical cure from blindness; restored vision simply follows upon Ananias’s word.

If Paul’s adversaries are challenging his mission to Gentiles, the final part of the speech claims that the outreach to the nations was far from the action of an apostate. Like the great prophet Isaiah, Paul “saw the Lord” in the temple, protested his unworthiness, and received his mandate there, at the liturgical heart of Israel (v. 18; see Isa 6:1). In response, the crowd repeats the rejection of 21:36.

### **22:22-29 Paul imprisoned**

Just as the tribune was caught in a false assumption about Paul earlier (that he was “the Egyptian,” 21:38), now he is caught in another mistake about the Apostle’s identity—assuming that this Jew is not a Roman citizen. Wrong again. This vivid drama, with Paul stretched out for interrogation under the lash and then rescued at the last minute, is more than good storytelling. It also demonstrates for Luke’s readership that Paul, as a Roman citizen, is eminently qualified to mediate the gospel to the Roman world as well as to the Diaspora.

### **22:30–23:11 The investigation continues: Paul before the Sanhedrin**

Having learned of Paul’s Roman citizenship, the commander (Claudius Lysias, we learn in verse 26) tries a gentler mode of getting to the facts of the charges against Paul. He orders the chief priests and the full Sanhedrin to convene for a hearing. Notice that these people are not necessarily gathered as adversaries of Paul; they comprise the official Jewish body that the commander now looks to in order to discover whether Paul is a danger to Roman law and order. Thus we are not yet dealing with a trial; Lysias is still conducting a Roman investigation to see if Paul has done something that warrants a Roman trial.

Paul’s declaration that he has always conducted himself with a clear conscience before God surely applies to his whole life and supports the notion that his experience on the road to Damascus is better understood as a prophetic call rather than a conversion, at least in the moral or religious sense.

The exchange between Paul and the high priest Ananias is loaded with irony. Paul comes across as a better exponent of the Law than does its official

guardian. His assertion that he did not realize Ananias was the high priest implies that the latter's behavior, punishing an unconvicted person, was hardly the deportment expected of a person in that office.

Before any formal inquest begins, Paul asserts that he is a Pharisee (v. 6) and makes a simple proclamation of the gospel: "I am on trial for the hope in the resurrection of the dead." Commentators note Paul's shrewdness in playing the afterlife card, a key point of division between the two parties. As Jesus' controversy with the Sadducees in Luke 20:27-40 demonstrated, Sadducees denied the resurrection. And as Luke notes here in a rare aside, neither did they believe in postmortem survival as "angel" or "spirit." For the Sadducees, if you could not find it in the Torah, it didn't count. This, of course, splits the Sanhedrin, with the Pharisees refusing to condemn Brother Paul.

But more is going on here than clever forensic strategy. By the time of Luke's writing of Acts, the high priest Ananias has indeed been "struck," assassinated in A.D. 66, according to Josephus. The Sadducees have ceased to exist as authorities, having lost their power base with the destruction of the temple by the Romans in A.D. 70. This leaves the Pharisees, the current leaders of formative Judaism, as the most important figures for Luke's readers. They emerge in this episode not so much as defenders of Paul but rather as men acting in bad will. Though they accept "the resurrection of the dead" as a hope, they resist Paul's testimony that the hoped-for resurrection has already begun concretely in Jesus of Nazareth.

It is this, rather than Paul's legal guilt or innocence, that will remain the issue for the remainder of the book. It is really the gospel that is on trial. In the context of the narrative, Paul's focus on the resurrection makes it clear to the Roman tribune (the most important auditor of this hearing) that the charges against Paul are Jewish matters, nothing of concern to imperial governance.

### **23:12-35 A plot to assassinate Paul and a Roman rescue**

A group of more than forty of Paul's co-religion-ists make a pact not to eat or drink until they have killed him. Luke offers no motive for such fanaticism. One can only surmise that these men exhibit the kind of rebellious zealotry that will come to expression some ten years later in the Zealot revolt against Rome in A.D. 67-70. They may have perceived in Paul's messianic mission to the Gentiles (and his rumored "watering down" of Jewish practices) a vitiation of Judean nationalism.

Tipped off by Paul's nephew regarding the plot to ambush his prisoner (v.

16), Lysias moves to place him in the protective custody of an armed cavalry, who are to escort him safely to the governor Felix (in office A.D. 52–59, the sixth prefect after Pontius Pilate).

Luke gives us the gist of the report Lysias sends to Felix. Given that our author has already provided his version of the events reported in the message, Luke no doubt expects the reader to smile at the way this Roman official tweaks the truth to put the best possible face on his conduct. We know from 21:27-40 that Lysias first quelled the riot, arrested Paul, and eventually ordered him interrogated under the lash. Only *then*, when Paul announced his citizenship, did the tribune first learn of it. As Lysias tells it in his report, his action with Paul was from the beginning a bold rescue of a known Roman citizen. In his favor, his present “protective custody” action has in fact become such a rescue.

We may wonder why Felix, when he learns that Paul is from Cilicia, does not send him there for trial. In fact, Syria-Cilicia is a double province at this time (Vespasian will split it later), and Felix governs the area in which the charges have been brought against the accused. So he is responsible for the trial.

#### **24:1-27 Paul is heard before Felix, in public and privately**

Finally, with the arrival from Jerusalem of Ananias and some elders with their attorney, Paul faces a formal trial before the procurator Felix. After paying unctuous compliments to the governor, Tertullus, the prosecuting attorney, levels a set of broad and, as we readers know, unfounded charges against Paul: (a) he sows dissension among Jews all over the world [empire] (*oikoumenē*) and (b) he tried to profane the temple. Tertullus even tries to dignify with the term “arrest” (v. 6) what we know to have been an attempt at mob lynching.

As in his speech on the Antonia barracks steps to the crowd of would-be lynchers (Acts 22), Paul answers these false charges by rehearsing the facts that establish his exemplary and eminently traditional Jewish behavior. Far from desecrating the temple, he went there to worship their ancestral God. He is still a Torah-keeping Jew who worships the God he has always served in good conscience, except that now it is according to “the Way” that his adversaries dismiss as a “sect.” Their charges are hearsay and therefore without merit. The original plaintiffs were the “Jews from . . . Asia” (21:27), but they are not present to testify. And the only thing that the present plaintiffs have witnessed was his proclamation that he is on trial “for the resurrection of the dead” (v. 21; see 23:6).

Paul’s claim to have come “to bring alms for my nation and offerings” (v.

17) is the sole reference in Acts to his transmission of the Jerusalem relief fund (see Rom 15:25-26) as the main motive for his presence in Jerusalem. By calling the collection “alms for my nation” and linking it with his sponsoring of sacrifices for the nazirites fulfilling their vows, he casts those actions in language that associates them with the essence of Jewish piety. Felix’s knowledge that Paul, as bearer of these funds, controls a substantial amount of money may well be what generated the governor’s hope for a bribe (v. 26).

Since Felix is informed about “the Way” (through his Jewish wife Drusilla?), and since he has perhaps decided that the Way is no threat to Roman social order, he postpones judgment, pending further (unnecessary) consultation with Lysias. Felix allows two years to elapse without coming to judgment. Like most of the leaders in Luke-Acts, Jewish or Roman, Felix wants chiefly to look after his own interests. (Regarding Felix’s administration, the Roman historian Tacitus observes, “He exercised the power of a king with the spirit of the slave.”)

### **25:1-12 Paul appeals to Caesar and comes before Agrippa**

This chapter of Acts functions mainly as a transition. Luke is setting the scene for Paul’s climactic speech before Agrippa in chapter 26. As he does so, he strengthens two themes important to his history: (a) the controversy regarding Paul and the Christian Way is a thoroughly Jewish matter, and (b) the legal structure and personnel of the Roman Empire are functioning at this time as instruments of divine Providence.

When Jewish leaders present their (now two-year-old) case against Paul and request that he be sent to them in Jerusalem (to be ambushed and killed along the way), Festus asserts his imperial authority. If they have charges to bring against a man in Roman custody, let them do it on the procurator’s turf, before his tribunal in Caesarea (v. 5). Luke reflects Paul’s adversaries’ charges in Paul’s response: he has done nothing against the Torah or against the temple *or against Caesar*. “Against Caesar” is a new note, paralleling the charges of the Sanhedrin against Jesus before Pilate (Luke 23:2). When Festus offers Paul the option of facing a formal trial before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, he appeals to Caesar. This allows Festus to unburden himself of this case, and he decides to send Paul to Rome.

### **25:13-27 Paul before Agrippa**

Enter King Agrippa and his twice-widowed sister Bernice. Agrippa—Herod

Agrippa II—is the fourth Herod to appear in Luke’s work. Herod the Great, the famous builder of Caesarea and Masada and spectacular renovator of the second temple, reigned at the time of the infancies of John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 1:5). Herod the Tetrarch (Antipas), son of Herod the Great, ruled Galilee and Perea during the rest of Jesus’ life. Herod Agrippa I (ruled A.D. 41–44), grandson of Herod the Great, appeared (and died) in Acts 12. Now we meet the great-grandson, Herod Agrippa II (who ruled after A.D. 50). We learn nothing new in Festus’s report to Agrippa, but the way the report is expressed is telling. Festus characterizes the elders’ charges as entirely a Jewish affair—“some issues . . . about their own religion”—much as Gallio spoke when he dismissed the Corinthian Jews’ quarrel with Paul in Acts 18:15 and as Lysias wrote in his report to Felix (23:29). There is a nice irony in the title used for the emperor in v. 26. The Greek word that our New American Bible version translates (accurately, in this context) as “our sovereign” is *ho kyrios* (literally, “the lord”). Given that the last instance of that word was a title for the risen Jesus (23:11) and the next instance, a few verses later, again refers to Jesus (26:15), the use of the title here (for Nero!) highlights the irony that the true lord of this history is not the emperor but Jesus—an irony that the book of Revelation will exploit richly.

When Festus invites Agrippa to interrogate Paul, it is not as a formal trial but rather as a hearing in the service of the Roman process; Festus hopes the Jewish king will come up with something substantive to report to Rome. This move also gives Luke the opportunity to underscore another parallel between the experience of the Apostle and his Master: as Procurator Pilate sent Jesus to the then current Jewish king (Herod Antipas) for a kind of hearing, so Procurator Festus presents Paul to another Jewish king. In Jesus’ case, of course, Pilate was attempting to shunt the accused off to another jurisdiction. Festus, however, does not intend to let his charge slip out of Roman custody.

Verses 23-27 set the stage for Paul’s final extended apologia in chapter 26. Luke packs the audience hall with an entourage that includes “cohort commanders and the prominent men of the city” (v. 23). Thus Paul will be addressing, along with Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice, powerful members of Caesarea’s Gentile community.

### **26:1-23 The inquest before Governor Festus and King Agrippa**

The speech that Paul gives to these powerful representatives of the Jewish and Gentile communities is, like the speeches in Acts 2, 3, 13, and 17, one of

Luke's theological masterpieces. Much of what we denote by the post-biblical terms "ecclesiology" (theology of church), "Chris-tology" (how Jesus is the Messiah), and "soteriology" (theory of salvation) Luke communicates through this speech.

First, Luke highlights Paul speaking as an expert Jew (a Pharisee, and therefore one highly trained in Israelite tradition) to a well-informed Jewish leader (Agrippa was completing the project of his great-grandfather, the renovation of the Second Temple). Moreover, Paul had demonstrated his zeal for his people's tradition in his efforts against what he had at first perceived as a threat to those traditions, the Way of the Jesus people. To top it off, the centerpiece of his teaching and preaching is the essence of Jewish hope—resurrection from the dead. The unmentioned novelty, of course, is that Paul and the rest of the people of the Way have been announcing that the expected end-time general resurrection has been stunningly anticipated by the resurrection of a single person, Jesus of Nazareth (see the reference to "the first to rise from the dead" at verse 23).

Paul then recounts for the second time the experience on the road to Damascus, making it the third time for us readers (who first heard of it in the original narrative of Acts 9 and then in the speech of Acts 22). The variations in the details and language in this third telling are far more than an effort at literary variety. The language about light, darkness, and seeing participates in a consistent symbolic theme carrying powerful implications.

This time the light from the sky *is brighter than the noonday sun*, flattening *everyone* to the ground. And the language about blindness—which was quite literally physical in the Acts 9 account, then muted in the Acts 22 version—is not even applied to Paul here. That imagery now describes the experience of Gentile converts. Here the emphasis is on the fact that Paul will witness to what he *has seen* and that he is being missioned to *open the eyes of the Gentiles* so that *they may turn from darkness to light*. Thus what Paul first experienced literally in his physical blindness in the first account becomes a metaphor for the Christian mission to the nations in this third account. This metaphor is developed further at the climax of the speech: Paul is saying "nothing different from what the prophets and Moses foretold, that the Messiah must suffer and that, as the first to rise from the dead, he would *proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles*" (vv. 22-23, emphasis added).

And how, precisely, does Luke understand that the risen Messiah "proclaims light" after the resurrection? The whole of Luke-Acts answers that

question, especially in its use of quotations of Isaiah. At Luke 2:30-32, during the presentation in the temple, when Simeon takes the child Jesus into his arms and sings his famous *Nunc Dimittis*, he draws upon Isaiah's imagery of vision and light: "for my eyes have seen your salvation [LXX Isa 40:5] / which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, / a light for revelation to the Gentiles [Isa 42:6; 49:6], / and glory for your people Israel."

At his debut in Nazareth, Jesus employs LXX Isaiah 61:1-2 to characterize his mission, and the center of that quotation is "He has sent me to proclaim . . . recovery of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18). Jesus does indeed give sight to the blind in the physical cure of the blind in his pre-Easter activity (Luke 7:21; 18:35-43), but it takes the post-Easter activity of the church in Acts to fulfill the promise of the Servant functioning as a light to the Gentiles. Luke makes that quite explicit when, at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, he has Paul and Barnabas (both!) say, "We now turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth' " (Acts 13:46-47; see Isa 49:6). Strikingly, language describing the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah, earlier applied to Jesus by Simeon, is now applied to the post-Easter continuation of Jesus' mission by his followers. Thus when we hear the reference to the risen Christ proclaiming "light to the Gentiles" at the climax of Paul's speech in Acts 26, we know that what Paul and the rest of the church are doing is not only in continuity with Jesus' mission but their work is somehow the work of the risen Lord himself.

This was the import of Paul's vision on the road to Damascus ("Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"—v. 14b). The risen Lord is identified with the believing community, and through them he opens the eyes of the nations and brings them from darkness to light. At the end of the book, Luke will have Paul use Isaiah 6:9-10 ("They have closed their eyes, / so that they may not see with their eyes") to characterize those of Israel who, like Saul before his conversion, fail to respond to the mission.

Whereas Festus responds to the defense simply with amazement ("You are mad, Paul") and Agrippa with cynicism, Festus, Bernice, and the rest comment that Paul is doing nothing that deserves death or imprisonment (v. 31). Thus, like Jesus (see Luke 23:4, 14, and 22), Paul is declared innocent three times by Roman officials and a Jewish king (Lysias, 23:29; Festus, 25:25; and Agrippa, 26:31-32). And also like (and with) Jesus, he is fulfilling Servant Israel's vocation to be a light to the nations.



## **27:1-44 To Rome: storm, shipwreck, and survival**

As he nears the end of his history, Luke gives us a whopping good sea adventure. Some recent commentators have wondered why Luke, who can be so sparse in his treatment of such momentous events as, for example, the early spread of the Christian mission into the Hellenistic world (11:20-21), decides at this point to spend so much parchment on the details of Paul's voyage to Rome. Some scholars, subscribing to the theory that the "we" sections are a literary convention and noting resonances with other ancient accounts of shipwreck, have suggested that Luke has imaginatively embellished some minimal facts available to him regarding Paul's voyage. Others, noting the abundance of nautical technical terms, posit that Luke took over an available voyage account and applied it to Paul.

It is, however, simpler and more reasonable to presume that Luke is sparse when his sources are sparse and that he willingly shares details when he has access to them, especially when he was an eyewitness to the events he describes. The first-person plural of this final "we" section (27:1– 28:16) supports such an interpretation. Moreover, we have no evidence of the "we" form used as a literary convention in ancient history writing by authors who are not describing their own experience.

That Paul himself was richly experienced in sea travel and its dangers is clear from his remark in 2 Corinthians 11:25: "Three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep . . ." And the tradition that Luke was a close companion of Paul is firm (Phlm 24; Col 4:14; and 2 Tim 4:11). There is no reason to presume that he was inexperienced in sea travel or lacked the vocabulary to describe it. Of course, master storyteller that he is, he knows he has a "good yarn" here. He tells it with relish and in a way that serves his history of what God has accomplished in and through these events, which could be called the passion and vindication of the Apostle Paul.

As a Roman citizen, Paul, accompanied by his faithful companion Aristarchus (see 19:29; 20:4; Col 4:10; and Phlm 24) and the narrator (presumably Luke), is placed under the protective custody of a centurion, one Julius. There being no commercial passenger ships in antiquity, Julius books passage on a ship returning to the Aegean area. The "philanthropic" (*philanthropos*) Julius allows Paul to visit friends, probably Christians, during a stop at Sidon. Because of the late fall weather, the ship hugs the coast, passing behind the shelter of Cyprus. At Myra they transfer to an Alexandrian grain ship headed for Italy. When they put in at Fair Havens, in the mid-south side of the

island of Crete, Paul advises wintering there, since continuing now would entail loss of cargo and lives—reasonable advice that will turn out, in the end, to be only partly accurate.

When the voyage continues and a hurricane wind (a “northeaster”) forces them dangerously off course, Paul provides quite a different sort of message. A dream vision enables him to urge courage and to predict (more accurately than his earlier commonsense prediction) safety to all aboard. The God he belongs to and serves would save them. It is significant that he says “God” rather than “the Lord Jesus” here; it is language that a pagan audience would more easily understand, and Luke is emphasizing that it is the maker of heaven and earth who is managing what is going forward in the midst of this chaos of nature.

Speaking of Luke’s use of language, one cannot help noting that the description of Paul, acting in the manner of the host presiding at a Jewish meal (taking bread, thanking God, breaking the bread), evokes the language of the Last Supper and Christian Eucharist. Most commentators rightly insist that Luke surely does *not* mean to say that Paul, attended by his two Christian companions, is presiding at a Christian celebration of the Lord’s Supper before a “congregation” of 273 pagans! At the same time, Luke the savvy word-smith surely knows that his Christian readers (or hearers) would catch the resonance with the Christian liturgy (and with Luke 5:16 and 22:19).

Indeed, once that resonance is heard in verse 35, further resonances abound. For example:

1) Immediately before this mealtime blessing, Paul had said, “Not a hair of the head of anyone of you will be lost.” This, of course, repeats what Jesus had said in his end-time discourse (Luke 21:18), which also speaks of “signs in the *sun*, the moon, *and the stars*,” and asserts that “on earth nations will be in dismay, *perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves*” (Luke 21:25, emphasis added). In this literal experience of such a sea, Luke has made a point of noting that “neither the sun nor the stars were visible for many days” (Acts 27:20).

2) In a way that is more obvious in Greek than in English translation, Luke uses “salvation” language suggestively. The words used to describe physical survival of storm and shipwreck in this account (*sōzō* in vv. 20, 31; *sōtēria* in v. 34) are, to be sure, the usual words for describing rescue and survival; but in Luke’s work, they are also used for salvation in the ultimate (eschatological) sense (e.g., *sōtēria*, “salvation,” at Luke 1:77 [forgiveness of sins]; at 19:9 [Zacchaeus’s conversion]; and at Acts 4:12; 13:26, 47; *sōtērion*, “salvation,” at

Luke 2:20 and 3:6 [Isa 40:5]; *sōzō*, the verbal form of “save,” at Luke 7:50; 8:12; 13:23; 17:19; 18:26; 19:10; Acts 2:21 [Joel 3:5]; 2:47; 4:12; and 15:1, 11). That diction makes it easy, even inevitable, that readers will hear salvation overtones in the storm and shipwreck account of Acts 27.

3) Finally, in an extended work that has thematized the importance of detachment from material goods on the Christian journey of following Jesus, all the literally realistic details of dumping cargo, jettisoning gear, cutting off the dinghy, and abandoning anchors point to the need for traveling light to achieve salvation. (See Luke 10:4; 14:33; 18:25-27: “ ‘For it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.’ Those who heard this said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ And he said, ‘What is impossible for human beings is possible for God.’ ”)

This is not to say that Luke has composed an allegory of Christian life in Acts 27. Rather, he has reported this tale of God’s care of Paul and his mission in such a way that the historical account of nautical disaster and survival resonates with and alludes to the end-time situation of the church and the world. (We are “all in the same boat,” and God is our only hope.) A further clue that Luke has this resonance in mind may be the fact that only his version of the synoptic tradition of the stilling of the storm pictures Jesus and the disciples as *sailing* (*pleontōn*, Luke 8:23).

### **28:1-10 Malta: hospitality, vindication, and healing**

The story of the sea travel, including the “we” section that tells it, continues through the arrival in Rome (in verse 16, where the New American Bible translates “he entered,” the Greek has “we entered”). The safe arrival of all 276 on the shore of Malta leads to a supreme irony. Everything has been building, we readers have been led to believe, to a trial and judgment by the highest authority of the secular world, Caesar. But Luke will end his second volume without any mention of that Roman trial (which, tradition tells us, resulted in Paul’s death). Instead, we are told of judgment by a lower, more spontaneous “court,” reflecting the higher, divine judgment.

In Mediterranean antiquity, survival of disaster demonstrated divine favor. Luke calls the hospitable Maltese natives *barbaroi* (that is, non-Greek-speakers), but he speaks of their uncommon *philanthropia*. When they see Paul attacked by a snake, they interpret that as a sign of divine disfavor—indeed, proof that Paul is a murderer (v. 5). However, when he fails to swell up and drop dead, they call him a god! An overreaction, to be sure, but a powerful point has been made. As

God had vindicated Jesus through resurrection, so he vindicates Paul through rescue from storm and snakebite. Further affirmation comes by way of Paul's ability to extend Jesus' healing ministry to the father of Governor Publius and other sick of the island who come to him.

### **28:11-31 Arrival in Rome and testimony to Jews**

How a work ends is a matter of great importance to any careful author, especially in antiquity (recall Aristotle's stress on the importance of a beginning, middle, and end of a work). Luke chooses to end his two-volume work, not, as we already observed, with the expected Roman trial, but with several encounters between Paul and local Jewish leaders. Because these dialogues issue in "mixed reviews" at best and end with Paul quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 and turning once again to Gentiles, some commentators have read this as a declaration that God has, at this point, severed his covenant relationship with the Jews. Since this kind of interpretation has supported Christian anti-Judaism, it is important to read Luke's narrative ending carefully, on its own terms.

The first contact that Paul and his two companions make on Italian soil is with people in Puteoli, whom Luke calls "brothers." Since it is the Gentile Luke who refers to them as brothers, the presumption is that they are fellow Christians. After a week of enjoying their hospitality (the Roman guard himself apparently glad for the break), they move on to the Forum of Appius and then to the rest stop called Three Taverns. At both places brothers come down from Rome to meet them. Paul's response to the brothers ("Paul gave thanks to God and took courage," v. 15) confirms the likelihood that these are also Christians. (The Christian community in Rome had been founded by others than Paul or Peter, possibly by the "travelers from Rome" [2:10] who had witnessed the birth of the church at Pentecost.)

The author James D. G. Dunn makes a charming interpretive conjecture regarding Luke's inclusion of the name of the Alexandrian ship that takes Paul's party to Rome, the *Dioscuri* ("Zeus's Boys," that is, Castor and Pollux, twin sons of the god Zeus). Noting that Luke uses "brothers" four times in the next few verses, first of Christians then of Jews, this author suggests that Luke calls attention to the name of the ship because for him the Christian and Jewish "brothers" that Paul is about to encounter are "indeed twin children of the one God, brothers of Paul, and so of one another."

Once established in Rome, apparently under house arrest in his own rented lodgings (v. 28), Paul calls together (non-Christian) Jewish leaders, who are also

called “brothers” (vv. 17 and 21). His purpose is a kind of preemptive defense. Since the plaintiffs in his case are the Jerusalem Jews, he presents his apologia to their Roman counterparts. For us readers, the defense is familiar: the Roman authorities in Caesarea have not found him guilty of anything warranting the death penalty, and his behavior is perfectly Jewish: he preaches “the hope of Israel.” What is new is his hinting at the possibility (not pursued) of a countersuit (v. 19). They reply that they have heard nothing bad about him, by letter or hearsay. But they have heard about this controversial “sect” that he promotes, and they do want to learn more about that.

To this end, Paul holds an all-day conference with an even greater number of Jewish leaders, focusing on the heart of the matter: the kingdom of God and Jesus as fulfillment of the Scriptures. Some are convinced, others are not, and they leave without agreeing among themselves. As commentary on this divided response, Paul invokes Isaiah 6:9-10, implying that those who have failed to accept Jesus as the hope of Israel have fulfilled that prophecy. He adds, alluding to LXX Isa 40:5 (quoted earlier at Luke 3:6), that “this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”

Does this final word of Paul mean that the door is closed to further mission to Israel? No more than the presence of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the original commission of Isaiah of Jerusalem indicated that he had no mission to his people (belied by the sixty chapters that follow in the scroll of Isaiah). The rejection of the gospel by the majority of historical Israel is, for Luke, a fact to be faced. But this fact, and the turn to the Gentiles, is no more a definitive dismissal of the Jews than are the parallel moments in the synagogues of Pisidian Antioch (13:46-47) or Corinth (18:6). In ending with this episode, Luke has helped his (largely Gentile) readers understand (a) their relationship to historical Israel, (b) the majority of Israel’s rejection of its Messiah, and (c) how the Gentiles have become beneficiaries of Israel’s vocation to be a “light to the nations” (Isa 49:6).

Meanwhile, in the spirit of the parables of the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6-9) and two lost sons (Luke 15:11-32), the door remains open. In Paul’s continued ministry during his house arrest, he receives “*all* who came to him” (emphasis added). He models the community’s ongoing mission as “he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with boldness of speech [*meta parrēσίας*], without hindrance [*akō-lytōs*]” (v. 31, my translation). Note that the last two words powerfully affirm the theme of freedom running through the whole of Acts; *parrēsia* is that same freedom and boldness of speech for which the community prayed in Acts 4:29 and which the leaders exhibit

throughout Acts (2:29; 4:13, 31; 9:27-28; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; and 26:25). And the final word, *akōlytōs* (“without hindrance”) reminds us that neither the one who was sent to proclaim release to prisoners (Luke 4:18) nor his Spirit-led followers were hindered by imprisonment or even death.

Luke’s two-volume work, which began in the Jerusalem temple, ends with the mission continuing unabated in a rented Roman apartment. In the end, Luke’s history is not so much about Peter or Paul as about the fidelity of God and the continuing prophetic mission of the followers of Jesus. If the ending of Acts surprises us by failing to include the martyrdom of Paul (which was surely known to Luke), that very inconclusiveness serves to remind us that we are invited to continue the story with our lives.



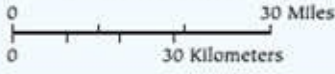




# Israel Settled in Canaan

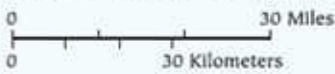
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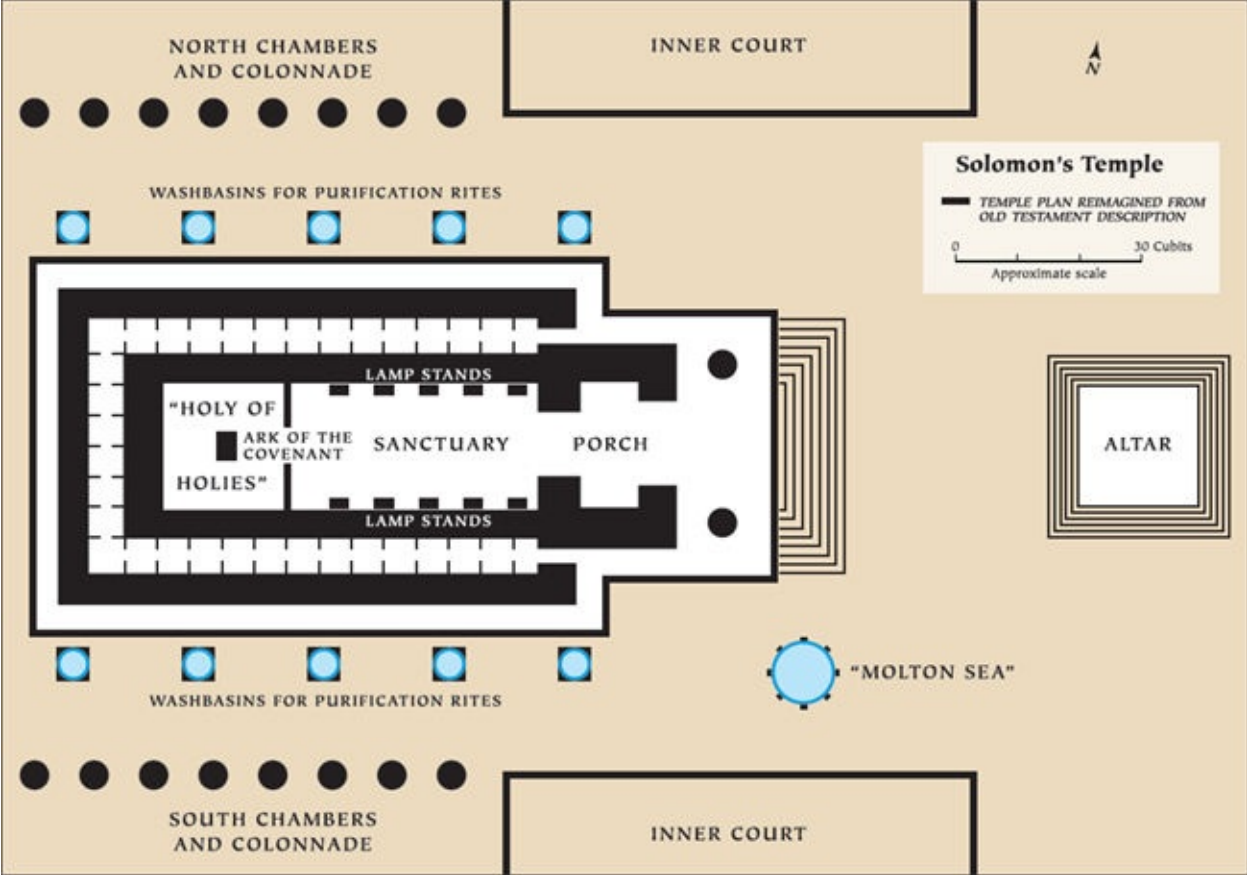
○ CITIES OF REFUGE



# United Monarchy of Israel

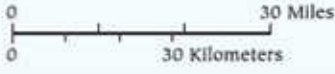
- MAXIMUM EXTENT OF THE UNITED MONARCHY
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# The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah

- APPROXIMATE BOUNDARY OF ISRAEL, JUDAH AND PHILISTIA
- KINGDOM OF ISRAEL
- KINGDOM OF JUDAH
- GAD** ISRAELITE TRIBES
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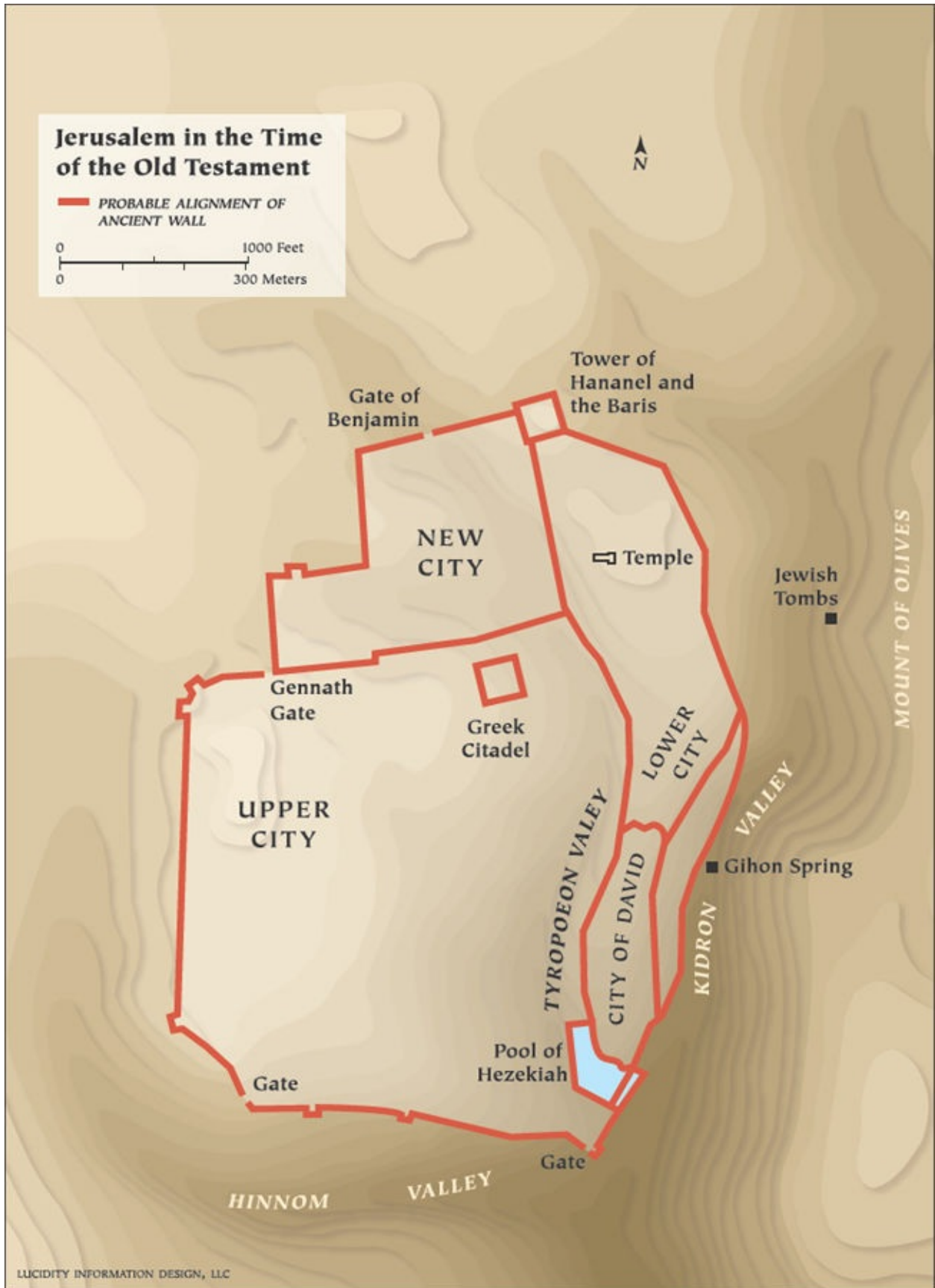




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# Jerusalem in the Time of the Old Testament

 PROBABLE ALIGNMENT OF ANCIENT WALL





# Jerusalem in the Time of the New Testament

- EXISTING WALL
- PROBABLE ALIGNMENT OF ANCIENT WALL

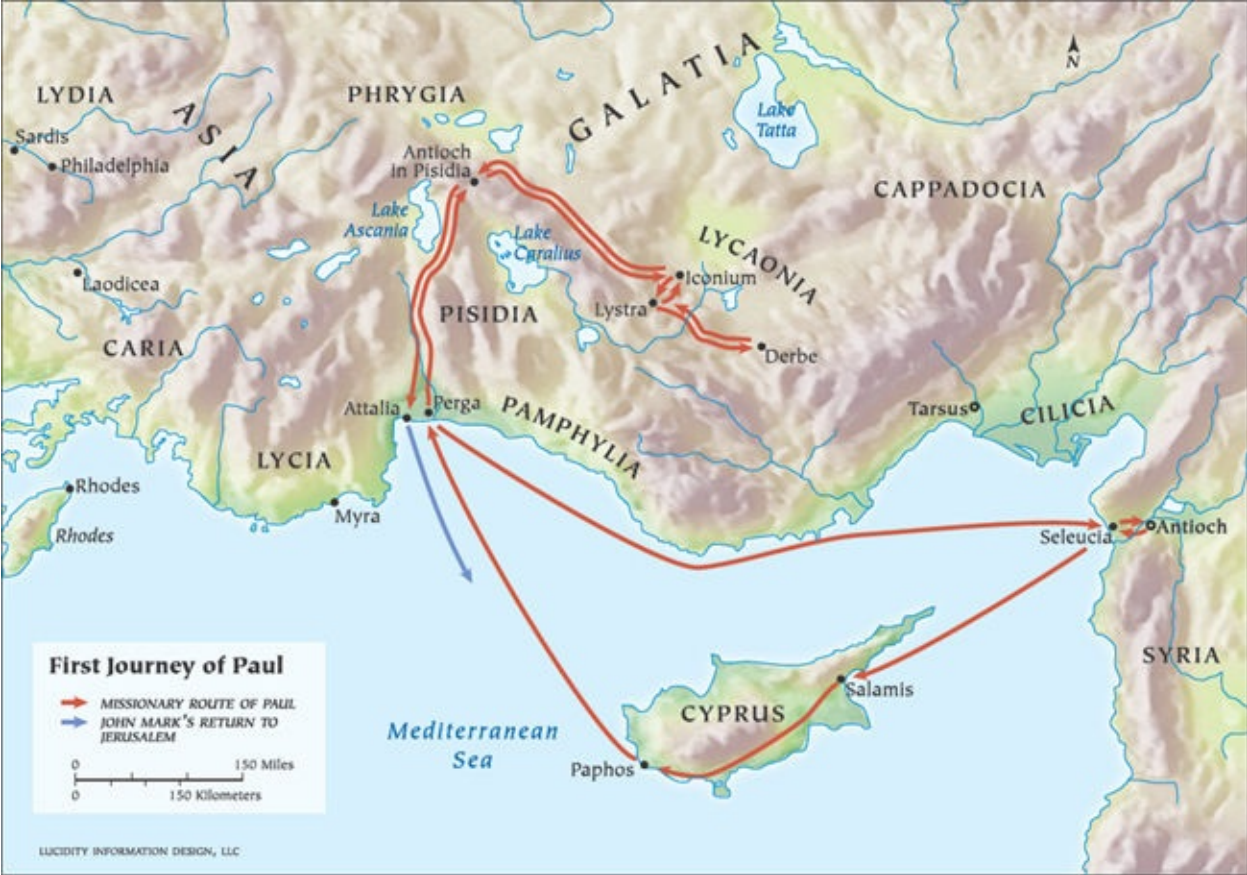


# Palestine in the Time of Jesus

- BOUNDARY OF HEROD'S KINGDOM
- CITIES OF THE DECAPOLIS
- FORTRESS







This map illustrates the geographical context of Paul's first missionary journey, starting from Antioch in Syria, passing through the island of Cyprus, and then traversing the regions of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) including Lycia, Pamphylia, Pisidia, Lycaonia, Galatia, and Phrygia, before returning to Antioch. The route is marked with red arrows, while the return path of John Mark to Jerusalem is shown with a blue arrow.





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