

A HISTORICAL
EXPLORATION of the FIRST
TWO CENTURIES OF JESUS MOVEMENTS

AFTER JESUS
BEFORE
CHRISTIANITY

ERIN VEARNCOMBE, BRANDON SCOTT, AND
HAL TAUSSIG for **THE WESTAR CHRISTIANITY SEMINAR**

FOREWORD BY
SUE MONK KIDD

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— **BEFORE** —

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the Jesus peoples and members of Anointed communities, wisdom schools, and Savior clubs in the first two centuries, whose voices we so long to hear and understand.

Epigraph

Many are the things that mortals,
seeing, can understand.

Without seeing, no one can tell
what the future is likely
to bring to pass.

SOPHOCLES, *AJAX*, LINES 1418–1420

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Foreword by Sue Monk Kidd

How This Book Came Into Being

Contributors

1. The Experiment
2. If Not Christian, What?

Part I: Living with the Empire

3. Engine of Empire: Violence
4. Gospel of Empire, Gospel of Jesus
5. Violence in Stone
6. The Deaths of Heroes

Part II: Belonging and Community

7. Testing Gender, Testing Boundaries
8. Forming New Identities Through Gender
9. Belonging to Israel
10. Experimental Families
11. Join the Club
12. Feasting and Bathing

Part III: Real Variety, Fictional Unity

13. Inventing Orthodoxy Through Heresy
14. Demolishing Gnosticism
15. Paul Obscured
16. Jesus by Many Other Names

Part IV: Falling Into Writing

17. Hiding in Plain Sight
18. Romancing the Martyr
19. Better than a New Testament?
20. Conclusion

Notes

Ancient Writings in Translation: A Guide

About the Authors

Copyright

About the Publisher

Foreword

by Sue Monk Kidd

You are about to read a book that possesses the potential to rewrite history, namely, the long-held “master narrative” of how Christianity came to be.

How do we perceive the founding story of Christianity? What really transpired during the first two hundred years after Jesus? Did early churches exist in the immediate aftermath of Jesus? Were there powerful, unseen dynamics behind the emergence of “Jesus groups”? Did these communities share a cohesive set of beliefs? What about women—were they “imperfect men” in need of fixing? Or boundary violators who sometimes led the way? Were “Jesus people” being martyred left and right by the Romans? Were there religious info-wars between the orthodox and the heretics? Did Christianity as we know it even exist in those pivotal two centuries?

The questions are formidable, tantalizing, disturbing, audacious, timely, and ultimately filled with hope. If I ask anything of you as you read the findings in these pages, it would be to not only allow the questions, but to love them.

* * *

On Easter Sunday, at the age of nine, I walked down the aisle of the First Baptist Church in my tiny hometown in Georgia and made what was known as a profession of faith. It was 1957, a long while ago, but that experience, along with an event immediately preceding it, occupies a prime piece of real estate in my memory. I had dressed in a lavender dress, white gloves, Mary Jane shoes, and the pièce de la résistance, a matching lavender parasol. There was something about that last accoutrement that filled me with both joy and spunk. Earlier that morning, sitting in Sunday School class, seized by a combination of boldness, mutiny, and unfettered curiosity, I had opened the parasol, revealing its magnificent purple canopy. The act

was met by a sharp reproach from the teacher and my beloved parasol's swift confiscation.

Shortly after this small kerfuffle, I strode down the aisle without my contraband where I was met by the minister, who asked a series of questions: Do you believe Jesus died for your sins? Do you believe God raised Jesus from the dead? Will you repent and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?

So began my religious life—in traditional, religious orthodoxy, in the beliefs and doctrines of the Baptist church of the 1950s in the American South. Yet hovering over it all was the lavender parasol, that small, prophetic moment of testing boundaries.

Throughout my adolescence and twenties, the orthodox master narrative that had been passed on to me that Easter Sunday became my lens for interpreting life. As a writer of stories, however, I'm aware that whether we're writing them, telling them, living them, or using them as a paradigmatic way to see and understand the world, a story always has a moment when the plot thickens. In other words, something happens. Otherwise, it's not much of a story. On the cusp of my thirtieth birthday, while reading a thin book titled *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke, something happened. I came upon this profundity: "Try to love the questions."

The words initiated me into the freedom of unknowing. I began to probe the givens and fixed concepts that had shaped me. I began to love questions more than answers. I recovered the spirit of challenging sacrosanct boundaries. You could say, I got my parasol back.

* * *

Whether your relationship to the Christian religion is deep, shallow, past, present, or nil, the way you read this book matters. If you do so while loving the questions, the book will plunge you into the freedom of unknowing. This rare state of being is what allowed the Queen in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to believe "six impossible things before breakfast." In our case, it will allow us to acknowledge a multitude of conclusions previously thought to be impossible because they've existed outside the traditional historical construct.

As our esteemed authors point out, the master narrative of the two hundred years after Jesus was conceptualized by looking back and molding events to fit the beliefs of an already established paradigm. In his book *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*, Umberto Eco recounts how the thirteenth-century Italian explorer Marco Polo searched for unicorns and doggedly claimed to have found them. At the time, European culture accepted the existence of these mythical creatures. What he actually discovered were Asian rhinos, animals for which he had no image or language. Marco Polo fell victim to what Eco refers to as “background books.” These invisible books, Eco writes, are our “preconceived notions of the world, derived from our cultural tradition. In a very curious sense we travel knowing in advance what we are on the verge of discovering, because past reading has told us what we are supposed to discover.”

We see things not as they are, but as we are, the saying goes. It turns out, seeing is not believing so much as believing is seeing.

It’s questions that will save us.

* * *

When I completed this book, I felt as if I’d uncovered an invaluable mosaic that had been lost in antiquity. Each chapter is a tile, a tessera dropped into place—one by one—until a new design of history comes into view. The picture reveals an era of immense social crisis transpiring across the Mediterranean world, giving rise to disparate “Jesus groups,” an array of communities from wisdom schools to supper clubs. Displaced, oppressed, and terrorized, the people in these communities are in search of identity and belonging, of ways to resist violence, torture, and authoritarianism. They capsize the rules of gender. They create diverse documents—hidden transcripts, stories, poems, and songs that disguise their rebellion, offer them strategies and catharsis, inspire courage, and soothe their heartache. One such text, discovered in 1945 among the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, known as *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, is an elegy I’ve read and reread for more than twenty years. Coming upon it within these pages was like seeing it in a thrilling new way. “I am she who exists in all fears and trembling boldness,” the divine voice in the poem proclaims. I imagine “Jesus people” reading those words almost two millennia ago and finding bravery in them, just as I have.

The world today wrestles with its own social crises—terrorism; authoritarianism; displacement; racial, gender, and ethnic oppression; climate change; global pandemics; the breakdown of religious structures. I often feel that contemporary Christianity is at a turning point and a new Christian paradigm is struggling to be born. The reimagined history set forth here opens new possibilities. It makes room for spiritual flexibility.

Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking defined genius as “radical humility.” When you humble yourself to all that you don’t know, he explained, you open yourself to what’s possible. In that sense, and perhaps in other ways too, this book is a work of genius. I invite you into an experience of radical humility. Set aside your background books. Open your lavender umbrella. Feast on this stunning reconfiguration of history and dream with me what it means for the future.

Are you ready?

How This Book Came Into Being

The time is right for this book.

Recent, surprising historical discoveries have opened up a wide, two-hundred-year-old gap between the historical Jesus and Christianity, and what is most surprising, this has gone almost unobserved. That is what this book seeks to remedy.

The Westar Institute is a research organization dedicated to cutting-edge scholarship on history and religion while also making that research accessible to readers outside the academy. Westar held the famous Jesus Seminar in the 1980s and 1990s that investigated which sayings and stories in the Gospels were most likely from the historical Jesus. In 2013, Westar decided to launch another seminar—the Christianity Seminar (hereinafter Seminar). The proposal, to put it simply, was to study *what came after Jesus*. Westar unfurled what could be at least ten years of work figuring out how Christianity came into being through a seminar of intergenerational and multidisciplinary scholars. In truth, we did not know what would happen. We even thought the name was problematic but did not know what else to call it.

What happened surprised us. Within our first several years, it became clear that the missing two hundred years between Jesus and Christianity was not just a holding pattern. Those two centuries after Jesus were not full of implicit Christianness, so to speak. That period had lots of new—not Christian—innovative peoples, groups, and movements inspired by Jesus but going in many different directions.

We did not rush to conclusions but began by examining twentieth-century scholarship about the first two centuries. Scholars had been drilling test wells in what they thought was the bedrock of Christianity and coming up dry or with something altogether different from the traditions, practices, and stories they expected to see. As we continued our investigations, we often found ourselves in disagreement, but we kept working together and

listening to one another. Sometimes the arguments were fierce. We researched as thoroughly as possible. We tested new models for collaboration within the academic pursuit of knowledge, sometimes taking steps forward, though sometimes, it seemed, taking a step or two back. We sought to paint a nuanced yet straightforward picture of this time period through thoughtful, constructive scholarly conversation. We did not shy away from complicated and at times contradictory scenarios. We knew from the beginning we could not get it all right because too much was unknowable. Ours was an experiment in a conscientious rewriting of a history of these first two centuries of what might be called Jesus movements, although what to call “them” or “it” turned out to be one of our thorniest problems. Most of all, we wanted to write for you, the curious public, not just for scholars like ourselves. We believe this important research should be shared with the public and trust you will find it interesting, even if at times it is surprising or even shocking.

The method of all Westar Seminars is based on collegiality. We have long been an experiment in crowd-sourcing scholarship: we believe that knowledge is produced through discussion, through collaboration. The seven-plus years of meetings were based on about sixty-five scholarly papers that were shared, read, and discussed by seminar members in front of an average of 125 members of the public. After their discussions the Westar Institute provided ballots for the seminar members and the public in attendance on the main issues of each paper. In keeping with Westar principles, all ballots and results are available on the Westar website. These ballots and papers—and the hard work of seminar members—lie behind this book. In this way it is best to consider the Seminar and its members as the authors of this book.

We invite you on a journey into the unknown between Jesus and Christianity. We trust you will find it as exciting, disturbing, and at times thrilling as we have found it.

Contributors to This Book and Supporting Members of Westar's Christianity Seminar

For a more complete list of Westar fellows and seminar members, please visit www.westarinstitute.org. Every person that spoke up throughout the life of the seminar deserves acknowledgment and celebration. Westar thanks everyone at the seminar's table; in challenge and in affirmation, the voices present helped to newly hear voices past.

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1

The Experiment

The future is not inevitable; it is often random, a matter of accidents. Ours is an experiment in historical imagination into the possibilities of the past during the first two centuries of the Common Era (CE), as the time after the birth of Jesus is called. We begin in the years after the death of Jesus and move forward with an open mind. We begin before Christianity, not assuming anything about the phenomenon that emerged well after the death of Jesus. That sounds like common sense to most historians, but in this case it is unusual and not traditionally how Christian history has been done.

This experiment relies on reading history forward. Too often, we turn to look behind us. We fall victim to the fallacy of the inevitable. Because it happened, it had to happen; we use future events to understand the past. This fallacy is a constant temptation because it scares us back into what we already know, or into what we think we know. Questions like “How did we get to where we are now?” are interested more in the present than in the past.

Reading history backwards blinds us to the open character of the future. When we approach history backwards, we are always informed by the present. Here we are, in the twenty-first century, with our diverse forms, traditions, and structures of Christianity. The question up to this point has been “How did we wind up in this place?” We look to the past, seeking our links—here are the steps that got us here; here are the causes that led to these effects, with an emphasis much more on those effects (present) than causes (past). We have been trying to construct a building from the top.

A skyscraper, however, does not begin with its observation deck.

The “master narrative” of Christianity has been the traditional way in which history was read backwards. It refers to the conventional story of early Christianity, the notion that the origins of Christianity are settled, in need of no new data. This big story is stuck in our heads, not as fact, and despite our often knowing better. Here is the basic outline of the master narrative:

- Jesus came down from heaven to establish the Christian church. He was a fantastic person whose birth marks the very beginning of civilizations. He taught the truth and did god-sized things. He handed on his complete teachings to his most loyal followers, the apostles.
- These apostles then relayed correctly to the bishops of the early churches all of the great things Jesus said and did.
- These first bishops correctly passed down Jesus’s teachings and magnificent deeds to the next two-plus centuries of bishops.
- The faithful line of bishops summarized perfectly Jesus’s teachings and acts in the fourth-century Nicene Creed, which carried full truth and authority to the twenty-first century.

As the Christianity Seminar patiently examined the available evidence, the idea that the master narrative’s assumption that “Christianity” acted as a unified, continuous early tradition in unbroken line representing a single truth made little sense. That is why members of the seminar questioned, and ultimately rejected, the master narrative of Christianity’s birth.

Much new research points to multiple and different stories of Jesus peoples (not “Christians”) in the first two centuries. The seminar’s work on these first two centuries resembles not a predestined master story but more a set of mosaic tiles in the process of being pieced together. Many pieces are still missing, and at times, some pieces pop into unexpected places. More accurately, these vibrant, many-shaped tiles work to create not one story, but many; the picture of the Jesus peoples of the first two centuries ends up more like the view inside a kaleidoscope, the tiles shifting and the picture changing with each turn of the cylinder.

The master narrative did not happen because of any cache of research. Instead, as later forms of Christianity began to be viewed as more orthodox—advocating “proper” belief and practice—this strand heavily influenced European and American societies, projecting their own power and belief

systems back onto the earliest centuries. Writers of the master narrative reduced a wide variety of ideas, stories, and poetics to a simple either/or of orthodoxy or heresy. This self-serving manipulation diminished the breadth of practice and experimentation of the early Jesus peoples.

One of the core contributions of this book is its rejection of the master narrative. We do not take this preexistent narrative for granted. This examination of previous assumptions allows the reader to see clearly the many important experiments and diverse Jesus movements that have been lost in the master narrative.

Reasonable, solid construction starts with foundations. Our experiment is one of foundations, and only of foundations. So if we do not assume we know the future, what can we reconstruct about the lived experiences of diverse peoples across the ancient Mediterranean? This question is in itself an exciting historical accomplishment.

This forward-looking approach to our evidence—evidence from new places, from new sources, in unexpected material forms—soon makes an essential circumstance clear. If we stand on the ground of Rome, of Athens, of urban and rural spaces across the Mediterranean in the first two centuries CE, we do not see anything resembling contemporary “Christianity,” or, for that matter, “Christianity” as it was in the later ancient world, in the Middle Ages, or across human history. In the first two centuries, what we think of as “Christianity” did not exist.

WHAT WE DISCOVERED

What happens when we approach the first two centuries forward, rather than backwards? What happens if we start at the very beginning and see what happens from there, taking one careful step forward at a time, with minds open to an unknown, unassumed future? This groundbreaking, holistic approach yielded incredible and surprising results. The discoveries we encountered showed us, among other things, a world of Roman violence, the emergence of new genders and forms of family, and an Israel both creative and traumatized.

This framing for our experiment rests on new archaeological finds and possibilities for evidence that have dramatically opened up scholarship on the realities of the first two centuries. Ever since the discovery of the Nag

Hammadi collection of ancient writings in 1945 in Egypt, which posited a much more diverse range of Jesus peoples in the early centuries after Jesus's death, researchers have advanced new perspectives and challenged conventional views of history. The substantial breadth and depth of this ongoing research helps us see very different realities occurring within the earliest Jesus peoples. Over the past eight years, the Westar Christianity Seminar that produced this book has reviewed the research from the past thirty to forty years and has consolidated and advanced the gains made.

In this chapter we introduce six surprising new discoveries of recent scholarship. The remaining chapters lay these insights out in greater detail. These six new perspectives are important because they transform how we think about the first two centuries CE and their relationship (or not) to the later phenomenon of Christianity. The first two centuries are not an interim or structured "origin" period that allowed Christianity to get its act together. No, with these new perspectives, the first two hundred years end up being an absorbing, unfinished story or, more accurately, a series of absorbing, unfinished stories.

A significant portion of the early, varied Jesus movements did not complete their journeys or continue their unfinished processes. Many of their stories have not yet been told. These six powerful and somewhat unfinished developments from the first two centuries allow for productive historical breakthroughs, though these breakthroughs are still incomplete. Our evidence is always in fragments, and we can work to make these fragments only meaningful, rather than whole. At the same time, these breakthroughs undo the necessity of fourth-, sixteenth-, or twenty-first-century Christianity as being perceived as perfect or complete. Their viability as loosely affiliated directions does not necessitate the inevitability of Christianity. Nor do these breakthroughs assume that there is, behind them, some essence of Christianity awaiting to emerge.

These discoveries undo much of the conventional picture of the first two centuries. They do not represent a uniform portrait, and indeed they often contradict one another. But they do open the door to possibilities for reimagining who these different groups were, enabling us to see these groups and peoples more clearly.

1. They Resisted the Roman Empire

A wide set of what we call Jesus clubs, movements for the Savior, communities of the Anointed, and schools of the Lord successfully resisted the Roman Empire. These peoples' resistance against Rome often kept violence at bay and gave their people courage and an experience of safety. A key dimension of their resistance to empire was invoking God's compassionate and strange empire, or kingdom, as later translators have it, in contrast to Rome's cruel and dominating one. These various groups made fun of Roman military power and mocked Rome's claim of divine power, even though they themselves had almost no power. The Empire of God challenged the Empire of Rome. Caesar Augustus as Lord conflicted with Jesus Anointed as Lord.

2. They Practiced Gender Bending

A wide range of Jesus peoples practiced gender bending—that is, gender roles were fluid and flexible. One of their primary identities was that they were neither male nor female, but all were “one” through different lived, experienced realities of gender pluralism. Women, and a significant number of men, rejected both male dominance and female passivity. A wide swath of Jesus groups rejected marriage and traditional families, with the envoy Paul often leading the way. Although some Anointed groups and individuals supported male dominance and demanded female obedience to men, many men shifted toward acting more vulnerable and less domineering. Women cut their hair and dressed like men. These gendered activities and actions brokered new possibilities for identity among various Jesus peoples, well beyond the regular masculine/feminine dichotomies of the first two centuries.

3. They Lived in Chosen Families

With traditional families increasingly broken and dispersed, a variety of Jesus groups started living in experimental family groups. These new family groups were voluntary; that is, they lived together increasingly outside of blood or married relationships. Whereas previously the primary relations for living arrangements were extended families of multiple generations with cousins, aunts, and uncles in the mix, Jesus people associated daily with each other according to mutual

support and affection. More and more “supper clubs” became crucial and core associations of daily life. Economic sharing provided ways that members of these groups bonded. In some cases, larger housing arrangements came into play for the groups through a donor exhibiting compassion. Although most of these new kinds of families were small, occasionally a wealthy person provided larger space for bigger groups.

4. They Claimed Belonging to Israel

The largest and most common identity of Jesus groups was their allegiance to Israel, regardless of whether the groups or members came from Israel-based bloodlines. This bond applied whether they lived in geographical Israel or around the Mediterranean basin. Small and large groups understood themselves to be following the God of Israel, read Israel-based holy writings, prayed and meditated according to the various Israel-based forms, bathed ritually according to Israel’s traditions, and—perhaps most of all—gave allegiance to their Israel-born teacher and leader, Jesus. Since Jesus belonged to Israel by blood and practice, the larger Jesus movements assumed and explicitly practiced Israel’s ways. But after the Bar Kokhba War (132–136 CE), the second major revolt against the Roman Empire of the people inhabiting the territory known as Roman Palestine, this allegiance was increasingly challenged.

5. They Had Diverse Organizational Structures

As was the case with larger Israel itself, the many different groups, schools, clubs, and Anointed communities had a variety of practices, beliefs, and organizational patterns. These peoples had no central leadership and so had neither interest in telling nor the ability to tell the myriad groups how to practice or what to believe. The models for such organization were local and occasionally regional, and so Jesus groups generally followed the diverse club organizational rules or the varieties of synagogue practices around the Mediterranean. The idea of Christian synods and ecumenical councils lay in the distant future. As occurred both in local clubs and in synagogue patterns, it was normal for different groups to dispute with one another about practices and beliefs.

6. They Had Persisting Oral Traditions

Writing did not dominate the life of the early communities of the Anointed to the same degree as surviving documents have dominated how we have imagined their life. There was nothing like the New Testament in the first two centuries CE. Throughout those centuries, Jesus peoples celebrating, arguing, and debating combined many forms of speaking and writing. Reading—as in all Mediterranean cultures—was done together publicly, especially when the few people who could read would read to a whole group. But often there was no reading. There was significant writing among the different groups, but this writing was part of a boisterous, complicated community dialogue, group reading, ritual practice, and—most of all—intense discussion. Much material overlapped Israel’s developing readings of Torah, the Prophets, and Wisdom literature, the writings increasingly being set apart, designated as particularly meaningful for the life and identity of these peoples. Other writings were letters between communities, partially developed stories, and songs from within communities. Important writing was also done through a few words etched in stone and referenced as rules or statutes for Jesus clubs and associations.

These short descriptions of the Seminar’s six major discoveries about the first two centuries of Jesus peoples show how dramatic the results of this experiment are. At the end of the second century, a wide range of possibilities and combinations of organization and meaning making were on the table. Our experiment is to explore the what, who, how, and why of those first two centuries, and to let these unique presences unfold in their astonishing variety. With this approach, we aim to deepen the understanding of the eclectic range of experiences, ideas, stories, and poetics that have been edited out of history, allowing ourselves to consider the breadth of practice and experimentation of the early Jesus movements. Walking forward in this way enables us to reconstruct the diverse experiments in identity, power, and belonging by those seeking to live in an Empire of God while negotiating the Empire of Rome. These major shifts in how to think about the first two centuries of the Common Era also suggest changes in how people see themselves and the world today. We welcome and encourage such reimaginations.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

BeDuhn, Jason, Lillian Larsen, Nina Livesey, Brandon Scott, Hal Taussig, and Erin K. Vearncombe (the Christianity Seminar Steering Committee). “Summary, Westar ‘Christianity Seminar’ Trade Book on the Period 25–211 CE of ‘Early Christ People’; Content and Organization of Book: Product of Six Years of Seminar Research, Debate, Papers, Specific and Focused Seminar Session Spring 2018, and Three Years of Work by Seminar Steering Committee.” Spring 2019.

Dewey, Arthur, Joanna Dewey, Lillian Larsen, Celene Lillie, and Jeffrey Robbins. “Individual Responses to ‘Rewriting the First Two Centuries of Early Christ Movements: An Introduction.’” Spring 2018.

Taussig, Hal. “Rewriting the First Two Centuries of Early Christ Movements: An Introduction.” Spring 2018.

If Not Christian, What?

When we survey the first two centuries of the Common Era, we find a great variety of people who are loyal to Jesus in different ways and to different degrees, addressing Jesus with a variety of titles. These peoples organized themselves into communities, clubs, groups of followers, and schools. Meals were their primary social engagement. They called themselves a variety of names: the Enslaved of God, the body of the Anointed, brothers and sisters, the Way—the list is extensive. They strongly identified with the traditions of Israel and often thought of themselves as part of Israel.

These peoples had no single name for themselves but a variety of names, and sometimes no name. The use of the term “Christian” was very rare, with no certain occurrence in the first century. Our first challenge, then, is figuring out what to call them, given that they did not call themselves “Christian” or “Christians.” Previous scholarship has sometimes understood this problem but has never addressed it; the name “Christian” is still used to identify these diverse peoples, even with the acknowledgment that the word does not apply. We put a lot of importance in names, especially when we are trying to understand something. Naming something helps us to know it. If we try to name these peoples more accurately, our understanding of them may change dramatically.

Figuring out what to call these various groups and clubs requires us to answer three primary questions:

- What does the word “Christian” mean?
- What did it mean and how was it used in the first two centuries?
- What did these communities call themselves?

WHAT DOES THE WORD “CHRISTIAN” MEAN?

“Christian” in contemporary English refers to “one who believes or professes the religion of Christ; an adherent of Christianity,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, generally considered the authoritative historical dictionary of the English language. This definition, which is still current in the latest online version of the *OED*, was written by the dictionary’s first editor, James Murray, in 1889 and has not changed since. The *OED* definition is nearly identical to the definitions of “Christian” in the current editions of the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* (2020) and the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2012). What is even more impressive is that Murray’s *OED* definition is nearly identical to Samuel Johnson’s definition of 1755 in his *A Dictionary of the English Language*, the first English dictionary: “professor of the religion of Christ.” This consistency indicates a very stable definition from Johnson in 1755 to today. The definition represents a certain common sense; of course “Christian” has to do with “Christ” and the religion of Christ.

As obvious as this contemporary definition may seem, it will not work for the first two centuries of the Common Era. This definition assumes an identifiable phenomenon called Christianity. But those who were loyal to Jesus had not yet definitely broken off from Israel to form separate associations or groups, much less a new religion. Also, the Greek word usually translated as “Christian”—*christianos*—has a very particular meaning in the first two centuries, a meaning that we lose when we transliterate, rather than translate.

The (now) English adjective “Christian” is not a translation of the Greek, but a transliteration. Transliteration means representing one language system in the terms and tools of another language system. “Christian” approximates the letters of the original language (Greek: Χριστιανός) in the letters of the Latin alphabet, that is, the Greek letter chi (Χ) is transliterated as “Ch”; the Greek letter rho (ρ), as “r”; and so on. This transliteration, rather than translation, of “Christian” does not tend to strike us as strange, but it should. The Greek word *christianos* is made up of two parts. *Christos* is a translation of the Hebrew word *messiah*, meaning “anointed with oil.” In Israel, kings, prophets, and priests were anointed with oil. The Anointed One was the king; this term therefore had explicit, unavoidable political overtones. Proclaiming someone *messiah* or *christos*

—an anointed one, a king of Israel—was bound to catch Rome’s attention, and not in a good way.

The second part of “Christian” is the suffix *-ian*, which means “belongs to the party of.” This suffix is used in both Greek and Latin with this meaning. The Gospel of Mark refers to the Herodians, or those who belong to the party of Herod, as among those who plot against Jesus: “And the Pharisees, having gone out, immediately held counsel with those who belonged to the party of Herod against him, concerning how to destroy him” (Mark 3:6).¹ Understood in these terms, the translation of the Greek *christianos* into English is straightforward: “One who belongs to the party of the Anointed.”

When the word began to be used in Latin, instead of translating the Greek word, it was transliterated; that is, Latin writers simply used the Latin alphabet for the Greek letters. *Christianos* in Greek became *christianus* in Latin. “Anointed” or “oiled” in Latin is a very different word: *unctus*. The transliteration *christianos* to *christianus* looks simple, but it means that the new Latin word is now a foreign word. *Christianus* has no meaning in Latin, not a meaning like “anointed” or “oiled.” It becomes a loanword by transliteration, as *umbrella* (from Italian), *ballet* (French), and *avatar* (Sanskrit) are loanwords, that is, words integrated into one language from another, without translation (Greek to Latin, or Italian to English).

The English word “Christian” meaning “one who believes or professes the religion of Christ; an adherent of Christianity” is far from the Greek meaning of “one who belongs to the party of the Anointed.” The process of transliteration from Greek involved a loss of original meaning and the invention of new meaning. Change in the meanings of words is a natural feature of languages, signed and spoken; languages are dynamic, describing the realities they attempt to communicate; and, as descriptive, languages are flexible and accommodating. Our “new meaning” of “Christian” is not bad or wrong; it is just a change. If we want to understand the many Jesus associations and groups of the first two centuries, though, we need to use and understand words in the ways that they were used and understood in those contexts during the first two centuries.

We will encounter and grapple with the significance of transliteration in our interpretation of ancient phenomena in different ways throughout this book. In this chapter, we are wrestling with the word *christos* as naming an anointed king of Israel. Other important transliterations we will encounter

include “baptism” (a word that refers to “bathing” or “dipping” in Greek, see [Chapter 12](#)) and “heresy” (a word that simply means “choice,” rather than some form of false belief or deviance, see [Chapter 13](#)).

WHAT DID IT MEAN AND HOW WAS IT USED IN THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES?

The New Testament’s twenty-seven books contain approximately 138,015 words in Greek. “Approximately” may be surprising, but in fact ongoing work with ancient textual variation and with newly discovered fragments of canonical writings has shown that the collection called the New Testament is not as fixed as we might think. Among those approximately 138,015 words, *christianos* is found only three times. A comparison with other important words in the New Testament is revealing:

- “Jesus” is found 1,002 times
- “Mary” is found 54 times
- “Israel” is found 71 times
- “Judean/Jew” (the same word in Greek) is found 147 times
- “Disciples/students” (the same word in Greek) is found 241 times
- “Paul” is found 169 times
- “Believer(s)/those who trust” (the same word in Greek) is found 65 times

The word *christianos* never appears in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Nor does it appear in the letters of Paul. Thus, apparently it is not a significant word in the vocabulary of the movement associated with those who belong to the party of the Anointed.

Three Uses in the New Testament

1. Acts of the Apostles 11:25–26

The first occurrence of the word *christianos* in the New Testament is often quoted in scholarship and popular discussion. It occurs in the Acts of the Apostles, the sequel to the Gospel of Luke that tells the story of the development of Jesus groups across the ancient Mediterranean. Following

the ancient Greek meaning of the word, we translate *christianos* as “those who belong to the party of the Anointed.”

And going to Tarsus to look for Saul, Barnabas, when he had found him, brought him to Antioch. For an entire year they met with the assembly and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the students were first called those who belong to the party of the Anointed. (Acts 11:25–26)

Christianos is not used in the surrounding story, and the sentence is an aside, almost a throwaway comment. The idea is not picked up again; the sentence seems to play no role in the narrative. The passive construction, “were called,” suggests that the word is used by others. Translated in its first- and second-century context as “those who belong to the party of the Anointed,” *Christianos* is not a term used by members of the groups, the insiders, but by those outside the group.

Notice the difference in meaning when “those who belong to the party of the Anointed” is used instead of the traditional transliteration “Christians.” If we read this passage from Acts and use “Christians” for the Greek word, the traditional transliteration makes it sound as though this event in Antioch marks the coming out of the Christian religion. But our translation has a different sense. In Antioch the students of the Anointed were first called “those of the party of the Anointed.” It notices an important shift in perception from “students” to “party.” The passage sounds different and has a very different meaning, read in translation.

2. Acts of the Apostles 26:27–29

In Paul’s final trials before he is sent to Rome, he comes before King Herod Agrippa II, the last Herodian king and a client ruler of the Roman emperor. The king is also a follower of the traditions of Israel and parries a question from Paul about whether he, the king, believes in the prophets of Israel. Paul is convinced he does; Agrippa’s belief is not called into question. Paul is really asking a question about whether Agrippa believes Jesus fulfills the prophecies of Israel’s prophets:

[Paul said,] “King Agrippa, do you trust the prophets? I know that you have trust.” Agrippa said to Paul, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become one who belongs to the party of the Anointed?” Paul replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might belong such as I do—except for these chains.” (Acts 26:27–29)

This second occurrence of the Greek word *christianos* provides more context for how the word functioned. In the standard modern translations, Agrippa asks Paul, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?” The modern reader understands this transliteration to mean, “Are you trying to persuade me to convert to Christianity?” But our translation provides a different, more historically accurate meaning. Agrippa questions Paul, “Are you asking me, a client of the emperor Augustus, to join the party of the Anointed King of Israel?” That question is not only very different, but much more politically threatening and dangerous. The fact that Paul is in chains in this passage, on trial before Agrippa, highlights the political threat.

This translation also makes more sense in the context of the story. Paul does not claim that he is “Christian” in any part of his trial. Rather, he asserts his continuity with the people of Israel. He belongs to the party of the Anointed, commissioned to spread the word of the Anointed to Israel and the nations alike; he is not a “Christian.” The transliteration makes no sense in Acts.

3. First Peter 4:14–16

The third occurrence of *christianos* in the New Testament comes in the First Letter of Peter. This letter was written in a context of persecution by the Roman state.

If you are reviled for the name of the Anointed, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as one who belongs to the party of the Anointed, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. (1 Pet. 4:14–16)

While bearing the name of the Anointed, the letter writer asserts, members of this community will not be charged by the officials as murderers or thieves, that is, as common criminals, but as those who belong to the party of the Anointed. “Belonging to the party of the Anointed” is, from the magistrate’s point of view, a criminal offense. Israel’s kings were known as Anointed Ones; the word has clear political implications. Belonging to the party of the Anointed is therefore a threat to Rome’s power.

Letters of Pliny and Trajan

Another early usage of *christianos*, at least as early as those in the New Testament, if not earlier, occurs in the early first century correspondence between Pliny (known historically as Pliny the Younger), a well-connected governor of a remote Roman province, and his superior, the emperor Trajan. They are writing about how to process those people Pliny calls *christiani*. This correspondence is in Latin, not Greek, so where the term appears, it is a transliteration from the Greek alphabet to the Latin.

Pliny writes describing his practice of dealing with *christiani* and asking for the emperor's guidance. When encountering the words "Christians" or "Christ" in the translation below, imagine the appropriate transliteration, *christiani* or *christus*, instead:

It is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance. I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature or the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them . . . For the moment, this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution . . . There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial.

. . . I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue (which I had ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with the images of the gods) and furthermore had reviled the name of Christ . . .

. . . They declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath . . . to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind . . . This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women . . . I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant length. (*Letters* 10.96)²

This translation from the Loeb Classical Library, considered in scholarship as the standard translation of ancient writings, employs the translation convention of "Christian," which we have seen is problematic. But this letter is in Latin, not Greek. The transition to Latin is where the transliteration problem originates. So, how did Pliny and Trajan understand this word? They clearly did not think it meant "Christian" in the sense of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Both Pliny and Trajan know this word; they do not have to explain it to each other. Belonging to this group is sufficient to be accused of breaking Roman law and being judged or punished by Rome, punished even by death. Pliny is enquiring of the emperor Trajan whether he is following correct procedure, like a good bureaucrat.

If the meaning of the Greek word *christianos*, “one who belongs to the party of the Anointed,” is straightforward, the meaning of the Latin transliteration is less so. As we have seen, Greek *christos* is a translation of Hebrew *messiah*, both meaning “anointed.” Neither Greeks nor Romans anoint their rulers, but whereas the Greeks *translated* the Hebrew, the Latins *transliterated* the Greek. Why?

Roman writers probably understood *christus* in Latin as the name or title of an individual. They recognized it as a foreign-sounding word, connected with strange superstitions from Israel, a place of continued rebellion. As the name originated in this place of rebellion, they probably recognized it as signaling rebellion or resistance, for which they were on the lookout with those connected to Israel’s traditions.

There is one more possibility. *Christus* could be sounded as *chrestus* in Latin, which means “the good one.” There is one important support for this possibility. The Roman historian and senator Tacitus, writing around 116 CE, shortly after Pliny’s letter to Trajan, describes the great fire in Rome during the reign of Nero. Tacitus mentions *chrestiani* and *christus*. The confusion of *i* and *e* in Latin is common.

Tacitus also notes that this “degenerate cult”—the word “cult” here also potentially translated with an ancient meaning of “superstition”—had arisen first in Judea, a clear indication that it was Judean and then spread to Rome, “where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue,” according to Tacitus (Tacitus was an upper-class snob).³ As much as he hates Nero, he hates these foreign superstitions even more. Referring to the adherents of *christus* as degenerate and as superstitious are stereotypes that Pliny also uses. Furthermore, these stereotypes are often used by Roman writers in reference to Judeans. The orator Cicero, for example, refers to certain Judean practices as “outlandish superstition” and to Judeans as mass crowds, close-knit throngs prone to disruptive behaviors. Defying the will of the “crowd” of Judeans “that on occasion sets our public meetings ablaze” is “the height of responsibility” to Cicero,

an act of public interest. Jerusalem, he states, is a city of “suspicion and slander” (*Pro Flacco* 67–68).⁴

Tacitus ties the term *christianus* to the traditions of Israel. He is making a distinction *within* various types of Judeans. *Christianus* is a type of Judean; any further meaning of “belonging to the party of the Anointed” or of “the good ones” is actually irrelevant to Tacitus. The association with Judea is enough. The transliteration of *christianos* (Greek) to *christianus* (Latin) is significant because it signals a Judean provenance, an association with a people of rebellion and resistance. “Christian,” in Latin, refers to yet another troublesome group from the eastern Mediterranean. The meaning has nothing to do with who they are, but where they come from, and their resulting potential to cause trouble.

The Importance of Dating

In tracing this history of the term “Christian” and the political and cultural attitudes toward these people during the first two centuries, it’s important to pinpoint when this shift began. To this point we have sidestepped the thorny and controversial issue of dating these early writings. But we can avoid it no more. The one date we know for sure is that Pliny was governor of the province of Bithynia between 111 and 113 CE. Pliny’s governorship fixes the date of the Pliny-Trajan correspondence.

Traditionally, the Acts of the Apostles was understood as written by Luke, a follower of Paul. Since Acts does not record Paul’s death, it was likely written before Paul’s death (ca. 62–64 CE) and therefore in the late 50s CE. First Peter was taken as written by the Apostle Peter and so also had an early date. However, this dating scheme has been challenged and rejected by modern scholarship. The tendency in recent years has been to date both writings to the second century CE: according to the Westar Institute’s Acts Seminar, a predecessor of the Christianity Seminar, the Acts of the Apostles should be dated after 125 CE.⁵ First Peter is often dated after 150 CE.

Surprisingly, then, the likely earliest extant usage of “Christian” is in Latin, not Greek, and it is used by Pliny, an outsider, as an apparently bureaucratic term. Belonging to this party is clearly a chargeable offense. Since both the emperor Trajan and Pliny use the term and know its meaning, we obviously have here not the first usage. How much farther the

word goes back is hard to know, but probably not much before 100 CE; otherwise, a usage would likely have turned up.

The statement “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called *christianos*” (Acts 11:26) is often used to prove that “Christian” and “Christianity” were established usage before 70 CE. But what it really indicates is that Pliny, Tacitus, and the author of Acts shared a common early second-century Roman bureaucratic term.

The most prominent association of *christianos* in the second century is with people who are threatened, have been killed, or are willing to be killed by agents of the Roman Empire as a threat to empire. This association accords with the basic meaning of the word “one who belongs to the party of the Anointed.” It is rarely, if ever, used to connote all those who belong to the Jesus movement.

The predominance of usage is in the late second century. Approximately 35 percent of all uses of *christianos* during the first two centuries were made by just two men, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, writers of the late second and early third centuries. In the extant literature, the word occurs about 215 times in the first two centuries, if one does not count Tertullian and Clement. The gospel that uses the word *christianos* the most, seven times, is the Gospel of Philip, also probably written in the late second century.

The lack of use of *christianos* in the first century and its infrequent use in the second century clearly indicates that it is not a significant word or identifier of the early Jesus movement. It most probably was an imperial Roman bureaucratic term used to identify a subgroup of the larger groups of Israel, specifically one that had the potential to cause trouble, like other groups from the region. This trouble-making affiliation made membership in this group a chargeable offense against the empire. Like many nicknames, the word was used against the group or party but then later was adopted as a badge of honor and symbol of resistance to dominant structures of power. That transition may well be evidenced in 1 Peter.

WHAT DID THESE COMMUNITIES CALL THEMSELVES?

If “Christian” has become the default term for the whole phenomenon and yet is inappropriate in the first two centuries, what words can we use to accurately represent the wide variety of those dedicated to Jesus or the Way or the Anointed during the first two centuries? These questions are particularly vexing because almost all current biblical scholars have overlooked them. Indeed, most of them simply use the word “Christian,” often in quotation marks, when referring to the followers of Jesus in the first two centuries, noting that “Christian” may be inappropriate but not knowing what vocabulary might be more accurate. Even when the problem is acknowledged, a solution is never provided.

As this realization came clearly into focus, the Seminar refused to overlook this major problem. Our research, however, has not turned up a perfect answer. Our vocabulary is limited, and any word we choose seems to oversimplify or assumes too much. Even “Jesus peoples” assumes that Jesus was central to the lives and activities of these groups and movements, though that was not always the case, and there was no fixed idea of Jesus either, or why and how he was meaningful. We have two basic solutions: names these peoples themselves used and names we can use when they do not name themselves.

First- and second-century groups employed a range of names for themselves. Since these groups were very diverse, their names were also different. They did not all call themselves “those belonging to the party of the Anointed.” It also is likely that many of these group names have been lost or never written down, so our policy has been that when a group uses a name for itself, we use that name as the group’s descriptor.

At times we need a term for all the groups together. Even when we know the different groups had major and minor differences, sometimes we have to discuss what they hold in common. In these cases, we have employed several generalized phrases, like “Jesus peoples” or “followers of the Anointed.” This solution is inadequate if for no other reason than these groups did not use these terms. Often, they were anonymous or their names were not recorded.

Many people identified with Jesus as a teacher while he was alive and after his death. With Jesus as their teacher, these people identified as “students.” The primary word for “student” in Greek is translated traditionally as “disciple.” In contemporary English, however, “disciple” does not mean “student.” “Disciple” is an ecclesiastical translation that

sounds biblical and therefore out of the ordinary. The best translation is “student” as it’s the most frequently used name for followers of Jesus Anointed in the first two centuries. When we read the Gospels in English substituting the more accurate “student” for the backwards-looking ecclesiastical translation of “disciple” (“backwards” as in interpreting history on the basis of what we know now, or contemporary categories), suddenly the writings feel different. New potential for meaning opens up.

Vocabulary drawn from the school environment is frequent. Jesus often is called a teacher, and drawing on this association, he is also called Wisdom, because he personified the wisdom characteristic of teachers. This identification is also more nuanced and more clever than being smart, but it also names a divine figure in Israel’s holy writings. *Sophia* (“smart” or “wisdom”) in Greek can mean a wise divine figure, as well as the quality of being wise. The Greek noun *sophia* is also feminine, opening up other ways of imagining Jesus. Calling Jesus *sophia*, a feminine divine term, is very different from the patriarchal vocabulary normally applied to Jesus. Likewise, the followers of Jesus, the wise teacher, are “the wise ones,” or potentially “the wise women,” given Wisdom’s gendered identity.

In this same fashion other widely used names for Jesus have been overlooked. The Greek word *Christos* was one of the most significant names used to identify Jesus. As already noted, this Greek word translates the Hebrew *messiah*, and both words mean “someone anointed with oil” or “Anointed.” In Hebrew culture, kings, prophets, and priests were anointed with oil, and Jesus was often identified with one or more of these roles. Eventually the root meaning of “anointed” slips away, and *Christos* more or less becomes Jesus’s name, but it never completely loses the connotation of being anointed with oil as long as Greek was the dominant language of the movement. In English, Jesus Christ becomes his name, and “Christ” is free to take on a variety of meanings not found in Greek.

Seminar member Brandon Scott gave “Christian,” a name applied to Jesus followers, a new twenty-first-century clarity. What emerges from his work is a wide set of evocative group names from Jesus’s connections to kingship and prophet. “King” is especially resonant when one realizes that the Roman Empire destroyed the sovereignty of Jesus’s homeland, while Jesus people sparked resistance to Rome. In other words, naming Jesus “King of Israel” is both silly, because Israel was ruled by Rome, and dangerous, because the title challenged that rule.

When groups proclaimed Jesus as Anointed One, that placed him in a role as a king or prophet of Israel over and against Rome's claims. Imagining Jesus as anointed king or prophet makes him a national figure of Israel, which then features Jesus groups as the followers of such a national anti-Roman leader. When they were called "adherents of the party of the Anointed One," "party" would be read as a party or group making claims of a political nature. As [Part I](#) of this book makes clear, under the leadership of Jesus as the Anointed King of conquered Israel, the Jesus people's resistance to Roman domination points to their national longing and identification with conquered Israel.

"The people of the Anointed" or "the people of the Anointed King" helps us see how the variety of Jesus people showed their political and social ambition, as well as hid such meanings. More variations of groups or Jesus movements came to expression in names like "Believers of the Anointed," "Confidants of the Anointed," "Friends of the Anointed," "Sisters and Brothers of the Anointed," and "Intimates of the Anointed."

Early on, people from other defeated peoples or nations also began thinking of themselves as Adherents, Confidants, and Faithful to the Anointed King or Prophet. While many of these followers were quite taken with imagining the crucified and risen Jesus as a political figure, it is also important to bear in mind that very few, if any, such groups were trying to defeat Rome militarily. On the other hand, it also is apparent that the groups that called themselves Adherents, People, Sisters and Brothers, or Intimates of the Anointed One had a significant political agenda of resistance that derived from following Jesus, both before and after his death. Just as our naming many different Jesus followers "students" or "wise ones" rather than the ecclesiastical "disciples" makes more sense, groups naming themselves Adherents, Confidants, and Faithful to the Anointed King or Prophet gives the groups political and social overtones.

The Seminar also found ten names of different groups in specific writings. These group names are especially fascinating in that none of them use the word "Jesus" but most of them seem to allude to activities or values of the various Jesus groups. Paul refers to a group that gathers under the leadership of a Corinthian woman called Chloe; the name of the group is Chloe's people (1 Cor. 1:11). In the Acts of the Apostles, a group or movement is called "the Way," with no other description (9:2). In the Acts of Paul and Thecla, apparently the young woman leader Thecla (and

perhaps Paul) belong to a group that is called “the Enslaved of God” (37:3). From the somewhat extended description of Thecla’s activities, these are a group of single women (and perhaps some men) who have left their families. Paul may have been the founder of this group of young women (and men) that Thecla leads. The composition called the *Shepherd of Hermas* (a second-century vision which identifies Jesus as an angel, sometimes included in manuscripts of the later New Testament) also uses the term “Enslaved of God” (2:4). These groups are cited in multiple chapters of the work (1[38]10; 5[48]2). The Gospel of Truth describes a group and their duties to reach out to people in difficulty and trouble and says to them, “Say then from the heart that you are ‘The Perfect Day’” (17:10, 11).

Colossians paints a picture of a group at the beginning and end of the letter that are faithful “brothers” of one another. This could be one of the chosen families that are not related by blood that are described in [Chapter 10](#) of the present book or a larger movement across different geographical areas. There are many other writings in which groups call themselves “brothers,” “sisters,” “brothers and sisters,” or “siblings,” with Colossians being a kind of example of such group names or nicknames. Both James and 1 Peter address their letters to “the Migrants” (James 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1). First Peter goes out of its way to underline this name by describing them also as “aliens.” It seems most probable that this name in both writings is of a larger movement, not just of a small group.

The Gospel of Matthew, however, cites a particular group of celibate men that it names “the Children” (18:2–7; 19:10–15). When the Odes of Solomon addresses its group regularly as “Members,” the meaning is a double one: it mostly uses the image of a group as parts of a body, but it also plays on the belonging character of people in close proximity to one another (3:2; 6:2; 8:14). The Letter to the Hebrews identifies two different groups, each with quite metaphorical names. “The Order of Melchizedek” is named after a king and priest from the ancient territory of Salem, and the writer of Hebrews clearly refers to Jesus Anointed as a priest in that order. In Hebrews, as well, there is another picture of a kind of Jesus group that the writer calls “the Altar” (13:9–16).

Although there must have been at least several hundred different names for Jesus peoples during the first two hundred years of the Common Era, our research over the past two years of the Seminar has identified only

twenty-four in actual documents. Nevertheless, the process of doing justice to the many different groups of those first two hundred years is now under way. The inaccuracy of thinking that these many Jesus peoples were all already Christians in the first and second centuries is behind us. Rethinking who they were and how they identified themselves is moving ahead. Naming is connected to identity. When we use an accurate name, we have a much better chance of understanding, or more respectfully, learning about identity.

The past forty years of research on the first two centuries of the Common Era has uncovered much viable connectivity among a great variety of clubs, families, movements, schools, communities, and groups associated with Jesus the teacher, the Anointed, Lord, and Savior. The remaining chapters of this book explore this fragile, multivalent vibrancy that occurred after Jesus and before Christianity.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Scott, Brandon. "If Not Christian, What?" Spring 2020.

Part I

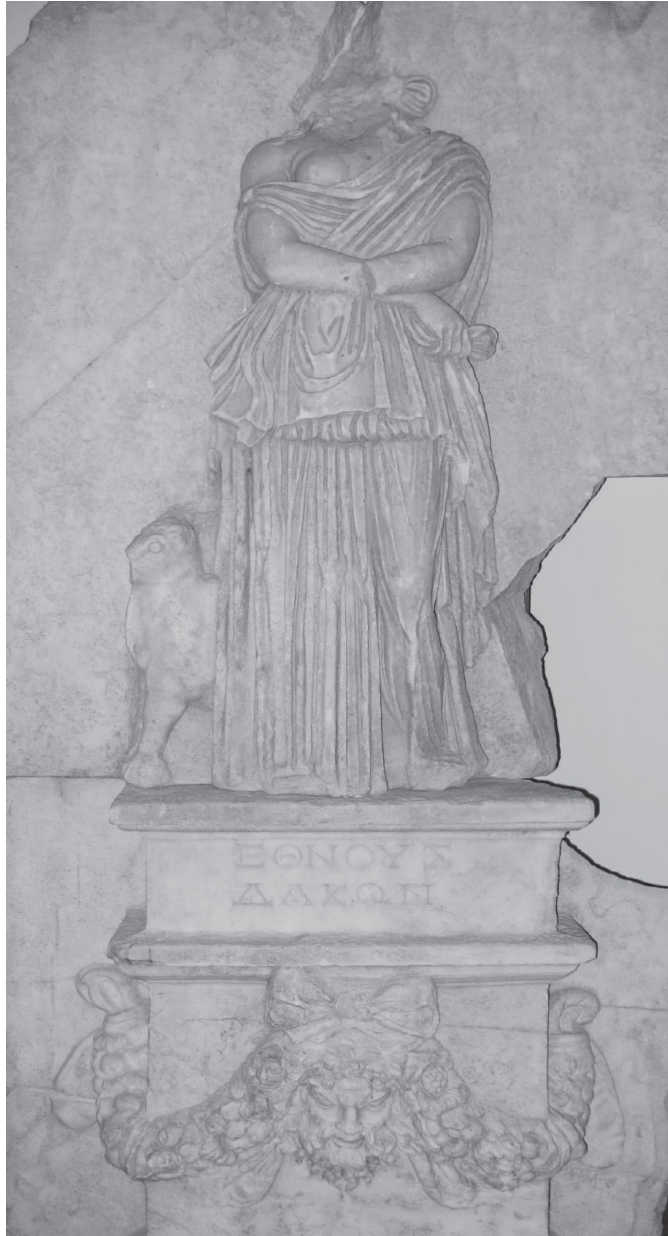
Living with the Empire

3

Engine of Empire: Violence

The crucifixion of Jesus is exhibit Number One for evidence of the violence at the heart of Roman rule. The basic facts about Roman crucifixion lay bare the charge: (1) crucifixion was the act of nailing a person to a makeshift tree until they slowly died; (2) Romans crucified hundreds of thousands of those they conquered; (3) such government crucifixions were intentionally undertaken as public torture and terrorism; and (4) many of the early communities of the Anointed emphasized the centrality of crucifixion for defining who they were. Early Anointed-association envoy Paul said, “I know nothing but Jesus Anointed and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). The Gospel of Mark has Jesus saying, “Those who want to be a follower of mine . . . let them take up a cross” (8:34). Paul understands himself and his relationship to Jesus associations in terms of crucifixion: “I am crucified with the Anointed, and yet I am alive” (Gal. 2:20).

In this chapter’s overview of this foundational dimension of the first two centuries, we first examine Rome’s policy of violence and then the many rejoinders of the Jesus peoples living in and through this violence.



This statue shows the powerful Mesopotamian nation of Dakon under Roman rule. The exposed breast indicates military defeat as public spectacle.

Hal Taussig

ROME'S VIOLENT STRATEGY



An iron nail embedded in this right heel of a first-century person named Yehohanan, son of Hagkol, was found among a collection of bones north of Jerusalem. This is the only direct archaeological evidence of a crucifixion in the ancient Mediterranean.

Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem / by Meidad Suchowolski

Although Roman violence was a primary concern for the early Jesus movements, Roman rulers did not focus on those movements. Violence was part of a larger Roman strategy that aimed to coerce conquered nations to think of themselves as half-human “barbarians.” Jesus communities were seldom on Rome’s radar during the first two hundred years CE; the empire thought of Jesus groups as a subset of conquered Israel.

Military Conquest and Torture

The city of Rome’s domination began and ended with military conquest. Even in the centuries before the city grew into an empire, the city’s armies secured most of what is now Italy. Its power then spread eastward through Greece and Asia Minor during the last two centuries before the Common Era. It was an empire before explicitly claiming the name. At this same time, Rome’s leaders engaged in sporadic civil wars to claim authority over the city and its growing domain. All these real battles and wars—both around Rome and far away from it—damaged and finally destroyed the

somewhat democratic Republic of Rome. The assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 Before the Common Era (BCE) was less what ended Rome's Republic and more a perfect picture of what Rome had become. Violence and combat became the trademark of Rome's rising power in the Mediterranean.

Although Roman generals nearly tore the empire apart as they competed for power and prestige, their armies nonetheless seized and held on to the whole of the Mediterranean basin and central Europe and then formed it into a permanent empire. With Rome as the capital, the empire was ruled by one dictator after another. Augustus Caesar ended Rome's disastrous civil wars by defeating Mark Anthony and Cleopatra at the sea battle of Actium (31 BCE). Rome named Augustus divine and bringer of "peace" whose military victories successfully eliminated any other competing nations for the next four hundred years. All over the empire, monuments celebrated the military victories of Augustus and the emperors who followed him.

Roman violence did not result in just dominion over a huge swath of territory. At least as important was the way violence became a signature for the Roman character itself. As Seminar member Celene Lillie's studies have demonstrated, the main stories of how Rome came into existence show rape as being an integral part of who the founders of Rome were.¹ Roman soldiers regularly raped enemy soldiers who survived their battles.

Although Rome had a relatively early code of written laws, lawyers, and judges, torture was a strong feature of its system—as was the case in most ancient governments. Roman citizens generally were not tortured, but no legal protections prevented conquered peoples from being tortured. Crucifixion was legal and designated as the punishment for noncitizens fomenting revolt against Rome. Roman officials were always on the lookout for potential rebellion in the empire. Both imperial officials and military members were known for practicing widespread torture and random crucifixions.

Vast Enslavement

A main prize of Rome's military conquests was an empirewide program of enslavement. After every major battle or war, Roman soldiers captured thousands of inhabitants of the subjugated territories and enslaved them to serve the empire's ever-expanding domination. Strategic to this larger program of enslavement was the transportation of many newly enslaved peoples to other parts of the empire. Following the Roman destruction of

Jerusalem in 70 CE, almost one hundred thousand Judeans were sent to Rome to be enslaved.² Many of these enslaved people built the Colosseum, the amphitheater still central to tourism in central Rome today.

In addition to the huge number of enslaved people doing manual labor, many people of high social rank or status from the nations Rome seized were enslaved to help administer Roman affairs and imperial networks. They were displaced throughout the empire to staff remote villas and become the bureaucratic scribes who churned out the writing that managed the empire. The economy of the empire was built on, driven by, and grew by enslaving more and more people.

Besides being enslaved through warfare, people were enslaved for being in debt, committing or allegedly committing crimes, or being born of enslaved women. Slavery was everywhere throughout Roman society: both the government and private individuals engaged in the slave trade; most kinds of work received substantial support from the enslaved; the empire used the enslaved to construct huge monuments to Rome's glory. Silver mines in Spain were infamous for their harsh treatment of the enslaved. A tombstone of a four-year-old enslaved boy named Quintus Artulus (or Quartulus; the inscription is worn away in places), shown standing with his miner's hammer and basket, tells the tale of his early death in a mine.³ Roman citizenship was tightly connected to ownership of the enslaved. Even relatively poor Roman citizens, by Roman standards, would have one or more enslaved people in their households.

Oppressive Taxation

The upper-crust members of the Roman Empire lived opulent lives and understood themselves as deserving of the wealth and resources of the nations Rome had conquered. Rome pillaged the art of Greece, the ancient treasures of Egypt, the silver mines in Spain, and the countryside from North Africa to Britain. But it was never enough.

Rome always asserted its right to take tribute from captured nations. As the empire grew, its administration became more elaborate. Provinces had different forms of taxation, some of which were under control of the Roman Senate and others under the control of the emperor. Often, provinces in the east of the empire remained under local control. Israel's Herod "the Great" is a good example of a client king who taxed his own country and gave much of it to Rome. He built not only a magnificent temple in Jerusalem,

but other buildings throughout the empire. Governors were responsible for tax collection in their provinces and often viewed their appointment as a way to increase their personal fortune. The cruelty of this taxation was multiplied by the rights of the tax collectors to take additional sums for themselves.



Emperor Claudius triumphs in battle over the nation of Britain. A conquered nation was typically portrayed as a woman. This statue was publicly displayed in Asia Minor.

Hal Taussig

Roman territories looked lavish in terms of the monuments and public works Rome built. But the result of taxation took a toll on both urban and rural areas. The notorious reputation of tax collectors among the population of Israel was typical of general resistance against Roman taxation. The gospel writings included in what is now the New Testament display much disdain for tax and tax collectors, and Jesus himself seems to have been in the middle of the fray, exhibiting sympathy for both impoverished populations and hated tax collectors.

Displacement of Peoples

Rome's policy was to displace the peoples it conquered—often, through enslavement. Rome's program of expanded road building and commerce pushed people into places other than where they had lived for centuries. The population of entire villages moved far away because work was available somewhere else. This lure of work in distant parts of the empire destroyed families, neighborhoods, and villages.

Rome also built many new cities and colonies either from scratch (the Decapolis region near Galilee) or from former cities destroyed by war (the rebuilding of Corinth). Many of these new cities were then populated by combinations of retired soldiers and conquered peoples who played major roles in the building of these cities.

Imperial Propaganda and Religious Dominion

Rome normally tolerated local religions while requiring participants to offer sacrifices to the honor of the emperor and to pray for him, so the many religions in the Roman Empire had roots in the conquered nations and tribes. Others, like Egypt's cults of Isis and Osiris, were ancient religions spread around the empire and were even welcomed in the city of Rome. Both the Babylonian and Egyptian versions of the religion of Israel derived from migrations from the homeland. Because of the breadth of the spread of the practice of Israel throughout the empire, Rome exempted Israelites from the requirement of sacrifice, but not from praying for the emperor.

Rome developed its own imperial religion in ways that supported its violence and power. Beginning with Augustus Caesar, most emperors were divinized to one degree or another, and votive offerings were made in temples and public venues, at meals, and in private villas. Most emperors were proclaimed gods after their death, and stars were named for them as

the emperors were considered to be the stars, in and from which they continued to rule. At least as important were the monuments built around the empire that portrayed the emperor in the pose of one of the gods, often Zeus, or in warrior garb. The Sebasteion at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor, constructed by local officials, shows the emperor Claudius leaning over Britannia (the nation/woman) in a pose suggestive of rape.

The ancient Mediterranean of the first two centuries of the Common Era was a highly visual culture, and these images and stories of the divine emperor killing, raping, and ruling over the empire were perfect propaganda matches for the military and economic domination of the empire. Such demonstrative displays in public left no doubt that crucifixion, beatings, and theft of land were the divine privilege and role of Rome and its power.

CREATIVITY AND RESISTANCE

Early Jesus groups feared Rome's oppression and brutality. They responded to Roman violence with anger, but also through imagination, resistance, and humor. They did not follow a party line nor share common tactics against the empire. Despite how later Christianity and then scholarship ignored the challenge to Rome of early Jesus groups, scholarship in the past twenty-five years has begun recovering the creative resistance of these groups.

Jesus groups answered Roman violence with various strategies: some focused on resistance, others on creativity, and some employed both. In sly yet tangible ways, they worked to stop Rome from damaging their lives and to help people heal from torture and loss. At the same time, most Jesus peoples were even more drawn to joyful and imaginative ways of carving out their own spaces that left them freer to be lively and present. We suspect that these quite different groups, schools, and clubs leaned more toward aliveness, relationships, and community practices rather than what modern people might imagine as full-tilt battle against an evil empire. [Chapter 4](#) takes a longer look at these community practices that carve out such spaces, but it is important first to see how these groups were both active and clandestine, sometimes in overlapping ways, in their opposition to Rome.

Resisting Empire

Telling the story of Jesus's crucifixion in an open way, and celebrating it, was an act of resistance to Rome. Jesus's crucifixion was not unique but was duplicated over and over throughout the empire, and the stories of Jesus being tortured to death allied his story with those of hundreds of thousands similarly executed.

Early Jesus groups dramatically described how their Anointed leader was crucified by Roman soldiers. They proclaimed openly that Jesus was an executed enemy of the state. Later Christians obscured Rome's violence by highlighting Jesus being crucified to save people from their sins. Without being sidetracked by that later Christian doctrine, most communities of the Anointed of the first and second century publicly acknowledged the paradox that Rome's defeat of Jesus the Anointed was actually Rome's defeat.

The stories of Jesus's death would have produced sympathy for other victims of Roman violence. This is clear in the stories of his death in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, both of which describe Jesus being mocked as he was crucified and Jesus screaming out to God, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46). The empathy in these stories is anti-Roman.

Most of the stories of Jesus's crucifixion also proclaimed that Jesus was vindicated and raised up by God. This claim would have been understood as an anti-Roman claim of victory over Roman violence. Indeed, this was not just a claim of a victory over Rome, but a dramatic victory over one of Rome's most demonstrative methods of control and sovereignty. Like Jesus's successful resistance to crucifixion, the reports in the second century of Romans killing Jesus followers—who were later called "martyrs"—ended in those followers being raised up to their God's heavenly throne. These stories also exhibit resistance to Roman imperial claims.

There are many other expressions of resistance to Rome. The Gospel of Luke relates John the Baptist speaking about deep poverty and real hunger in the midst of Rome's ostentatious rule over Israel: "Anyone who has two tunics must share with the one who has none, and anyone who has something to eat must do the same" (Luke 3:11). To the Roman tax collectors he says, "Collect no more than what's appointed to you" (3:13). To the Roman soldiers known for their killing, beating, and stealing throughout the empire, he says: "No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!" (3:14).⁴

The Revelation to John angrily describes the death of many nations and Jesus peoples by a Rome “intoxicated with the blood of the holy ones and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (Rev. 17:6).⁵ John demands protection for the Jesus people and vengeance against Rome: “Come out, my people, away from her [Rome], so that you do not share in her crimes . . . Her sins have reached up to the sky, and God has her crimes in mind. Treat her as she has treated others . . . Every one of her pomps and orgies is to be matched by a torture or an agony” (Rev. 18:4, 5, 7).⁶

Paul, a teacher, envoy, and letter writer, brags about having been beaten, thrown in prison, whipped, and stoned. He acknowledges similar violence against those who follow the Anointed, and he associates the Anointed’s crucifixion with the cruelty most of them have experienced. Paul even cites a song about Jesus’s death, praising him as an example when “he took the form of an enslaved person . . . even accepting death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7, 8).

Inventing a Life in the Face of Violence

The word translated as “gospel,” meaning “good news” (derived from the Greek word *euangelion* and the Old English word *gōdspel*; see [Chapter 4](#)), occurs 101 times in the New Testament across eighteen books. Good news is not a religious expression but means what it says. It is an expression that celebrates a joyful event as a sort of public statement or proclamation. Often in imperial accounts, good news is the birthday of the emperor. Among the surprises in pursuing the writings created by the Anointed clubs, schools, and groups are the creative and even comical ways they built their lives. This invention of different kinds of daily life looked with resistance into the face of Roman violence, creating unexpected, good news for these communities.

Two things help us understand good news in the ancient world. First, unlike so often in the contemporary United States, good news was not measured by the amount of money and property one had. Good news marked a significant event that changed the world, whether it was the birth of an emperor or the coming of the Anointed.

Second, most of the members of these groups—perhaps two thousand people twenty years after Jesus’s death and maybe a total of twenty thousand fifty years later—were mostly peasants, day workers, the enslaved, and craftspeople. Although there were occasionally wealthy

people in some groups, in many there were none. The communities called “the Migrants” and other gatherings were predominantly composed of people of meager means (a middle class in this era was nonexistent, the great majority of people being enslaved, laborers, and poor). Whatever good news meant for these various movements, it had more to do with the ways people lived together, the aliveness they experienced in community.

This good news was not about winning a great battle or gaining a material foothold. Nor was it about gaining assurance of life in the hereafter. What made a difference for these communities was caring for one another, bestowing forgiveness, being fed, finding a future, and being surrounded by companions. No wonder student sages mused, “You are the salt of the earth . . . the light for the world . . . Don’t fret about your life—what you’re going to eat or drink—or your body—what you’re going to wear . . . Take a look at the birds of the sky: they don’t . . . gather into barns . . . You are to seek God’s domain, and . . . justice first, and all these things will come to you as a bonus” (Matt. 5:13, 14; 6:25, 26, 33).⁷

Stories of Jesus communities exhibit surprises in their daily lives: a worker makes serious mistakes in seeding his field, yet there is a harvest. A woman bakes a huge amount of bread as if she’s expecting a party (Matt. 13:33). Small gatherings of people for supper don’t have quite enough food or couches; other people crash the party, but everybody relaxes, reclines next to each other or on each other’s lap, singing at the top of their voices with plenty to eat and drink (Luke 7:36–39; 12:17; 10:4–9). The country healer insists that it was the confidence of the sick person that made her better (Mark 5:34). Judeans and members of other nations figure out what and how they can eat together (Rom. 14:1–210). A large crowd listens to a teacher in the field, people get hungry, and somehow a small amount of shared food is more than enough (Matt. 14:13–21). A woman begs a healer to cure her daughter; the healer insults her; the woman persists; and when she returns home, her daughter is well (Mark 7:24–30). At a dinner party a young man falls asleep and then falls out of the window, but he is okay, and his companions carry him home (Acts 20:9–12).

Another hallmark of their lives was the “Empire of God”—traditionally translated as the kingdom of God. We lean toward the comic, ironic, and sociopolitical translation Empire of God because it captures the irony and opposition of this “God reality” to the violence of the Empire of Rome. It reminds us that when speaking of the Empire of God, the Empire of Rome

is directly challenged. Moreover, the Greek word is the same in both cases. Stories and images about the Empire of God build upon small events in daily life, not long speeches about power and might, nor about the nature of God. Parables about the realm or Empire of God were experiential snapshots, not theological dissertations or moral aphorisms. Empire of God—used as often as “good news”—compared God’s action to what happened in the ordinary field, market, and house.

Some groups used “good news” and “Empire of God,” or both, frequently in their daily conversations and weekly meals. Others used them sometimes, and yet others rarely or never used them. Some talked a lot about Jesus; others, somewhat; and some, hardly ever. God was seldom the direct topic of exposition, except within the usage of Empire of God, in which good news happened. Rather than a commonly shared vocabulary or set of beliefs, there was the experience of folks gathering together for food, drink, and conversation.

This sharing of experience went on in the midst of the Roman Empire’s systemic violence and domination. So the clubs and schools of the Anointed were an experience of good news and God’s empire in the face of Rome’s violence. Their stories of Jesus’s crucifixion and of others being tortured are featured in their writings, as well as at their meal gatherings. As the wine flowed and conversation unfolded, good news of God’s empire emerged in their everyday experience that challenged and mocked Rome’s empire.

This introduction to the gatherings of the Anointed points toward a bondedness and a sense of belonging explored more in [Part II](#). In major and multitudinous ways, the early Jesus movements resisted Roman domination and built alternative lives related directly to the strength of their inventive and multiethnic communities.

Humor

Humor was a major part of these people’s meals together. Although pietistic Christianity of our day has forgotten how humorous the early Jesus people were, this wit and sparkle is easily spotted in early writings. Jesus in the Gospel of Mark critiques the idea that some food is unclean (that is, not appropriate) with potty humor: “It’s not the things that come into a person that are dirty, it’s what comes out of a person that’s dirty” (Mark 7:15).

Perhaps the darkest joke in Mark’s story makes fun of the idea of happy or sad endings. Its madcap version of Jesus’s resurrection (or mysterious

lack thereof) doesn't let things get *too* happy or *too* sad, but they are all confused. Mark's Gospel, a writing of good news, was probably drafted in the aftermath of Rome's grinding war against Israel in 68–70 CE and the resulting Flavian propaganda. While Rome was arguing over who was going to be the next emperor, Judea and the Galilee had managed in 67 CE to free themselves from the empire. But when Rome figured out who its next emperor was, it came back and recaptured Israel in vicious fashion, ending with Jerusalem in flames, the Temple destroyed, thousands of people crucified by the Romans, and many more thousands carried off in enslavement (see [Chapter 5](#)).

In the wake of these events, Mark's good news—full of sadness, healing, loss, and humor—was written. The truest vein of humor aimed straight at the terror of such violence. In Mark, Jesus heals many people; but strangely, when he does so, he commands them not to tell anyone about the healing. When no one pays any attention to his directions, he becomes a famous healer. Then Jesus is crucified and buried. None of Jesus's male followers come to his tomb, but several of his female followers do, to anoint his dead body. When they approach the tomb, however, they see only a young man, not Jesus. The young man tells the women that Jesus has been raised to life and the women are to tell his followers to meet him in Galilee where they used to be together with him. But the women are amazed and afraid, so they run off and never tell anyone about Jesus's resurrection. Now, for the first time, no one tells; no one ever knows that Jesus has been raised. And the reader is left to ask, "What happened?"

This is deadly serious comedy. It is about the horrible violence that happens to all the different kinds of people in Israel when the Romans retake Israel in 70 CE. This Gospel is written for the particular Jesus people(s) who have been damaged by Rome in the aftermath of the events of 70 CE. But the tragicomic and quizzical end to Mark's Jesus story has an incomplete resurrection and witnesses who crazily obey for the first time Jesus's instructions not to tell anyone. Significantly, it ends not with God wreaking apocalyptic vengeance on his Anointed's tormentors, but with women running away, afraid and saying nothing. It is incomplete good news in the middle of Rome's horrendous terror of 70 CE for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

The family movement called the Enslaved of God told stories about a first-century companion of Paul named Thecla with a similar mix of Roman

violence and humor. In one of those stories, Thecla is sentenced to death in the arena for encouraging men and women not to get married but to join her and Paul in wandering around teaching and healing. The Roman soldiers strip Thecla naked and take her before the lions and bears. But hundreds of women in the arena throw perfume into the arena, and the animals lie down drowsily, leaving Thecla safe before them. She then escapes the wild beasts, which have suddenly lost their appetites.

In the Middle of Violence: Creativity and New Identities

Awareness of what Roman violence did to conquered peoples changes our thinking about how the Jesus communities came into being. The ruthlessness and oppression of Rome robbed millions of their identities. Rome successfully ravaged their bodies and psyches to the extent that they began to think of themselves as half-human barbarians, and others came to think of themselves as Roman. The central question was always how to respond to the violence of the Roman Empire.

But this is not the entire story. Adherents of the party of the Anointed developed various practices, communities, and ways of life that helped them to understand themselves in different and renewed ways. They resisted Roman violence, insults, and authoritarianism; and they built alternative identities for themselves that brought them vitality, a different sense of belonging, and internal resistance.

The standard way to describe how these peoples emerged has for centuries focused on the aspect of “believing in” Jesus. Curiously, this long-held model has had little to say about the Roman Empire or its violence. For the most part, it is ignored, except in the case of the deaths of community heroes later called martyrs. In the past twenty-five years, however, scholars have discovered the importance of the intensity of Roman violence and how much the writings and life of communities of Jesus Anointed were about resistance to Roman violence as well as aliveness and depth.⁸ A more accurate picture would see the Jesus movements in the grips of Roman terror as a range of partially formed social identities that carry unresolved brokenness, authentic renewal, good news, and mixed messages. Rejecting a tendency to see Roman violence as simply devastating these groups or as these peoples always triumphing over Rome, we continue to take the effects of Roman violence seriously and explore the various dimensions of these emerging community identities. We do not see these peoples simply as the

beginning of an otherworldly religion, but as complex, growing, and creative humans struggling toward the good news of the Empire of God.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Dewey, Arthur. "Switchback Codes: Paul, Apocalyptic and the Art of Resistance." Fall 2015.

Marshall, John. "Judean War and Judean Diaspora: Class and Networks." Fall 2015.

McGaughy, Lane. "God, Retaliation, and the Apocalyptic Scenario." Fall 2015.

Taussig, Hal. "What Do Fiction, Mass Crucifixions and Killer Seals Add Up To? Summarizing Break-Throughs in Martyrdom Scholarship Since 1990." Spring 2015.

Wendt, Heidi. "From the Herodians to Hadrian: The Shifting Status of Judean Religion in Post-Flavian Rome." Fall 2015.

Gospel of Empire, Gospel of Jesus

GOSPEL AND GOOD NEWS

The first two centuries involved two “good news” parties: the Romans and the Jesus peoples. The meaning of “good news” presents us with a challenge of translation. In contemporary English there are two important translations of the Greek word *euangelion*. That word translates well in English as “good news,” since its two Greek word stems are “good” and “news” or “announcement,” and having a general expression of good news is useful for any language. But for this general meaning of “good news,” there was another more specific meaning in the ancient world. *Euangelion* also referred to an official governmental announcement of some particular good news for the whole Roman Empire. So, for instance, the empire could wish an emperor an official and public “Happy Birthday” using the word “good news,” in the sense of a proclamation.

For most English speakers in the twenty-first century, “gospel” is the most common translation of *euangelion*. Since there are writings called “gospels” and since those writings originate by and large in the first two centuries, those ancient writings probably were called gospels in the ancient world and even then were meant to be proclamations that brought good news about Jesus and the people who were around him and came after him. “Gospel” derives from an Old English word, however: *gōdspel*. This Old English word maintains the “good news” interpretation: *gōd* means “good”; and *spel*, “news.”

These words in multiple languages may be somewhat confusing. This book mostly addresses the meaning of *euangelion* as the more ordinary

meaning of “good news,” news that simply designates something about life that is good. Some chapters occasionally use the word “gospel” for “good news” to refer to the ancient and modern writings called gospels. When readers and audiences encountered the word *euangelion* in the first two centuries, the meaning was “good news.” “Gospel” as a technical term for early writings that told stories about Jesus came much later.

In the first two centuries, two distinct versions of “good news” go head to head. Rome announces a brash and powerful good news event about the beauty and might of the savior emperor, who destroys his enemies and makes everything right with the world, calling it peace. The budding Jesus schools, parties of the Anointed, and supper clubs, each with different names, announce good news that celebrates a crucified Anointed One and looks forward to a new creation, calling *it* peace.

During this time, tens of thousands of people recognize the “good news” that the Roman Empire announces. It is everywhere. It is the good news that the ruling government has saved all people in the Mediterranean. All these people are no longer in danger, for instance, from pirates on the open seas and thieves in their communities and homes. Civil war is at an end. The good news is that now people are safe. This good news spans thousands of miles. In addition, the government and its allies have built extensive and (mostly) safe roads to everywhere. There are magnificent cities with stunning buildings. Baths are built for all, and towering aqueducts carry water into the cities. Countless large and small boats carry goods all over the ocean. The golden age of *Pax Romana* was, indeed, peace for Romans. Empire certainly had its advantages.

The major caveat to this “peace,” however, as described in [Chapter 3](#), was that most people in the Roman Empire experienced it as oppression. For these people, the definition of “good news” came in smaller doses and was mostly experienced in communities. People in these small groups found good in relationships. They were thankful for the solidarity with others that provided them with help and support in daily life. These groups were known for their joy and compassion. They claimed a wisdom that pointed toward values of generosity, experiments in how to live, and bonding with one another. Their lives centered around regular meals together and public bathing in smaller groups. Most of them had an ongoing relationship with Jesus after his death, many of them focusing on Jesus as the Anointed King of Israel. Other groups formed local schools to explore

their understanding of kindness, joy, Jesus’s teachings, mutual support, and the reign of Israel’s God in their world. Others became groups that lived together, often as ordinary families but many others as experimental families, living apart from bloodlines. These fresh practices, encounters, and developments were the other good news (explored more in the following chapters of this book).

The good news of Jesus and friends inspired people to resist Roman power and violence, creating new concepts of what should be considered “good news.”

Good News Carved in Stone

“Good news” first appeared as a political term with Rome’s first emperor, Gaius Octavian. The Senate gave him the title *Augustus*, “exalted one,” for his defeat of Mark Anthony and Cleopatra, which ended a long-running civil war and brought peace to the empire. This was *Pax Romana*, the original good news of peace and salvation for all.

An inscription from the reign of Caesar Augustus from Asia Minor celebrates the birthday of the emperor as the good news:

Since Providence, who has ordered all things and has great interest in our life, has perfectly ordered life by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as savior for us and for those coming after us, that he might end war and arrange all things. Since he, Caesar, by his appearance, surpassed even our anticipations beyond all previous benefactors, he did not even leave to posterity any hope of exceeding what he has done. In this way the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good news for the world that existed because of him.¹

The inscription, known as the Priene Calendar (“calendar” because Augustus ushers in a new age), piles on the accolades. Augustus is proclaimed as:

- The occasion of perfectly ordered life
- Savior of all
- Ender of war
- Greatest of all benefactors
- God Augustus
- The one whose birthday is the beginning of the good news for the world

If it's good, Augustus is the cause.

The Gemma Augustea

A small engraved onyx stone dating to the early first century CE encapsulates the Roman worldview of good news. It is commonly referred to as the Gemma Augustea. The delicacy and fineness of the engraving speaks for the prerogative and privilege of the people represented by, possessing, and viewing this gem. Its very richness speaks of empire. This beautiful household piece was probably commissioned by a member of the imperial family. Such portraits were widespread and a part of imperial propaganda.



The Gemma Augustea (7.5 × 9 in.), attributed to the Roman workshop of the artist Dioskourides. Now part of the Kunsthistorisches Museum collection in Vienna.

Wikimedia Commons

The good news is framed in the tension between the upper panel, replete with success, leisure, and power, and the lower panel of struggle, pain, and implied death. On top is the world of power and peace; on the bottom is the world of imperial violence.²

The upper panel forms the focus of the composition. By design the eye is drawn to Augustus seated on a divan, dressed as the god Jupiter. To his left is the queenlike goddess Rome in battle garb, facing the emperor. They sit together on a divan like a married couple. Jupiter's eagle gazes up adoringly at the emperor. To the right of the emperor are three figures. The figure crowning Augustus with a wreath of oak leaves is the inhabited world (*oikoumene*), symbolizing the submission of the whole world to Augustus. The female figure seated next to the divan is Mother Earth, with a cornucopia and two children representing fertility. Increasing Roman fertility rates was a major part of Augustus's return to traditional Roman family values. The final figure on the right, between the inhabited world and Mother Earth, is the ocean (Neptune). Thus, all the creatures of the world, the earth, and the oceans support Augustus. The cosmos is his.

The upper and the lower panels appear separated as two different worlds. But there is a subtle and important connection between them: beneath the feet of Augustus and Rome are the shields of the defeated contestants, overlapping into the world of contest and turmoil below ever so slightly.

The lower panel pictures a military victory over the "barbarian" (non-Roman "other") nations. In contrast to the upper panel, there is no central organizing viewpoint; nothing detracts attention from Augustus above. The panel does divide into two sections, however. On the far right are two prisoners. Their nakedness and long hair symbolize that they are barbarians, probably Celts or Germans. Those barbarians who survive this battle will be enslaved for the greater glory of Rome. The woman is being pulled by her hair and the man is pleading for mercy.

The left side of the panel pictures a triumphant soldier raising the standard of victory. In the grouping of three men pulling on a rope, a central figure stands out and wears the helmet of Mars, the god of war. Below the standard are two more barbarians showing obvious signs of grief and despair. The unshown but implied scene is the binding of the barbarians to the victory standard.

The lower panel depicts a turbulent world of Roman victory and non-Roman defeat, despair, and desperation. The one figure with its back to the viewer is the goddess Diana with her hunting spears. She stretches out her hand to a fallen barbarian who kneels, pleading for mercy. Diana suggests

the magnanimity of the Romans in victory, oddly paralleling the beauty of the carved stone itself and the serenity of the upper panel.

The suggested magnanimity of Diana is a ruse, however. The beauty of the carved gem should not cause us to miss the primary statement of Roman good news. Rome's good news is not just beautiful, muscular rule by the beautiful, muscular bodies of the emperor and supporting gods. The empire's good news is that the elite rule over the rest of the world with an iron fist by divine fiat. The Gemma Augustea pictures in miniature a world writ large. Roman peace and prosperity come through military might. The violence of military conquest is the engine that drives the empire. This gem, carved during the difficult and brutal Germanic wars led by Tiberius during the first century, reinforces the empire's right to carry on such brutal campaigns. Roman good news is for those in command, with misery for the rest. There is no doubt about the haunting message of this good news.

Good News in Speech

The promulgation of Caesar Augustus's good news prompted the various movements of the Anointed Jesus to claim their own good news. A version of their own celebratory inscription can be found in one of the letters of the teacher and envoy of the Anointed, Paul, to the holy ones in Corinth. This good news is not about the birthday of the savior of the world:

I want you to understand better the meaning of the good news I preached to you, my friends, that you received and is the ground on which you stand and by which you are being saved . . . I passed on to you as of paramount importance what I also had received: that the Anointed died to free us from the seductive power of corruption according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised "on the third day" according to the scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1-4)³

This good news also involves being saved, but its signs are very different. It is identified with the Anointed who was defeated and whom God vindicated. Even more, this God is aligned with the holy writings of a nation defeated and conquered by Rome. How is a defeated nation, a defeated Anointed King, a defeated God good news?

Practicing Good News

The new good news paved the way for an insistent and growing set of practices and lifestyles for surviving and being safer during the first two centuries of the Common Era. This kind of life had a great deal of integrity

and was not delusional or simply imagined. The good news of Chloe's people in 1 Corinthians, the gender creativity of groups of adult men called "the Children" in the Gospel of Matthew, hundreds of groups called "the Students of Jesus," and many different versions of the party of the Anointed were joyful alternatives to the good news proclaimed by the Roman Empire. To discover these alternatives, we follow their practices, what they did, and how they built group cohesion.

Sharing Communal Meals

Communal meals are the practice that comes closest to being universally characteristic of the widest range of early Jesus groups. These meals attracted people who had lost other connections through violence, poverty, or the disruption of family connections. The exuberant moods of these meals, the chance for people to have both light and heavy conversations, and the humor characteristic of these meetings reframed what life could be for the many people experiencing disruption. Eating regularly in groups of six to fifteen developed intimacy, loyalty, community, shared values, and intelligence. [Chapter 12](#) examines in detail communal meals and how they were both a threat to the government and a way for people to build safe connections.

Creating Wisdom Circles

Much of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament, as well as the Gospels of Mary and Thomas, depict Jesus and his students teaching in marketplaces, at community meals, on roads, at seashores, and in fields. Their teaching was directed mostly to people at work, on the way someplace, or in their neighborhoods. The teaching and learning occurred in groups with lots of discussion. Our sources point strongly toward the teaching in the form of small sayings like parables, proverbs, questions and answers, and short stories, most not lasting more than two to three minutes. Topics of conversation were rarely formally philosophical and not explicitly about heaven or politics. Rather, the main topics were about work, nature, relationships, conflict, sickness, and possessions. The approach to all of these give-and-take discussions varied between debate, humor, and consensus.

It is hard to overestimate what these kinds of conversations can do for people who experience them day after day—as was the case in the first two

centuries. Spending a great deal of time in dialogue leads to learning about life, people, and nature; building working relationships and friendships; learning skills in meaning making, strategic thinking, and community building. The ancients called this wisdom, so we might call these kinds of conversations “wisdom circles.” Wisdom regularly explores long-term projects, God or some other kind of ultimate concept, and loss and pain. Such engagement with the everyday is good news.

Developing Identity by Belonging

As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), living with and resisting violence—as well as the brokenness of families and nations and the difficulty of finding any sense of belonging—was a great challenge for people under the Roman Empire. By policy, Rome classified peoples it had conquered as barbarians, that is, not fully human.

Large portions of the population needed to rethink and reinvent themselves. Although many today see the development of identity as an individual task, that is not generally the case across humanity. Rather, growth and elaboration of identity are more often social and communal. Many of the Anointed groups created a sense of belonging by following Jesus as the Anointed King of subjugated Israel. This was an imaginative new identity or form of belonging. A fascinating aspect of this new identity/belonging was the announcement that people were no longer Judean or Greek, enslaved or free, woman or man, but they were all one in Jesus, the Anointed King of Israel (Gal. 3:28). The inventiveness of this new identity lay in its explicit invitation to all kinds of different ethnic, gendered, and enslaved people to think of themselves as a part of Israel, whose God was on their side.

On a less grand scheme, some women of Corinth had a new identity as “Chloe’s people.” They established new sexual and intellectual practices that changed their understanding of marriage. In following their teacher Paul away from marriage, the group identity of Chloe’s people created a new space for them. Likewise, those who followed Thecla as the “Enslaved of God” eschewed marriage. When people in the letter *To the Ephesians* are called “the faithful brothers,” this naming could very well refer to a specific kind of voluntary family group of only men who are claiming an identity of men who stand against traditional family. These men may be experimenting

with a group identity different from the one they lost in either broken families or conquered nations.

Since there are so many groups, clubs, schools, and movements that did not have a particular name or whose name we do not know, how to characterize the new group identities or belongings of those people is difficult. Finding oneself in a group of compassion and new possibilities, though, is good news.

Building Confidence and Trust

Confidence and trust were two of the most important values in these early groups and movements. Roman propaganda worked tirelessly to persuade the conquered that they should fear the empire and that resistance put one in mortal danger. The Roman Empire could and did destroy those under its thumb. But the communities of the Anointed taught tirelessly that one should not be afraid, but confident. They contain many stories of women facing sickness, death, and danger who nevertheless stand firm with confidence. In these stories their confidence is rewarded, and they are seldom harmed. They trust in themselves or God, or both.

In the New Testament, the word “confidence” or “trust” occurs 252 times. A typical example is the story of the woman who has been bleeding for twelve years who touches Jesus and is healed. He tells her, “Daughter, your trust has cured you” (Mark 5:34). Pithy teachings of these groups constantly shout out encouragement of confidence and trust. Here are just a few:

Congratulations to those who grieve. They will be consoled. (Matt. 5:4)

Congratulations to those who hunger and thirst for justice. They will have a feast. (Matt. 5:6)

Don't fret about your life, what you're going to eat, or about your body, what you're going to wear.

Remember, there is more to living than food and clothing . . . Think about how the lilies grow; they don't toil and they never spin. (Matt. 6:25, 28)⁴

Why is this ringing endorsement for confidence and trust so absent from most translations? The Greek word *pistis* is conventionally translated as “faith” or “belief.” Recently, scholars agree that these conventional translations of *pistis* are misleading. The ancient meaning of *pistis* is properly translated in contemporary English as “confidence” or “trust,” as in having trust in a particular person or people.

This kind of trust and confidence transforms community from being fearful to being loving. The practice of trust and confidence was the engine

that put heart into these communities whose members found themselves belonging to one another. The wind goes out of the sails of life when *pistis* becomes “belief in” some truth instead of confidence or trust. In the first two centuries, even when groups believed different things, their practice of confidence was good news. And practice was what counted.

ASSESSING THE TWO KINDS OF GOOD NEWS

As the Gemma Augustea makes clear, Rome’s definition of good news was more socially and politically powerful than that of the communities of Jesus Anointed. Rome’s definition built more impressive cities and monuments, killed more people, and conquered far more nations. Rome saved more people from pirates on the open sea and kept more cities safe from invading armies. Roman infrastructure—water, roads, baths—improved many lives dramatically. But Rome also intentionally and accidentally broke apart millions of families, tribes, and nations.

We were tempted earlier in this chapter to write that the good news of Chloe’s people, the Confident Party of the Anointed One, the Students, the Members from the Odes of Solomon, and other Jesus groups paled in comparison to Rome’s good news. But when the practices of these plethora of communities is assessed, a lot more is revealed than just crazy clubs and exaggerated fantasies. When carefully examined, the practices of sharing communal meals, forming wisdom circles and schools, developing identities, and building confidence and trust can be seen as creating healthy communities with a wide range of examples of authentic good news. This kind of good news in many groups countered the violence and dominance of Rome. These practices taught groups and movements different values, communal skills, bright new ideas, and strategies of resistance that created new forms of safety. The strength and agility produced by these practices enabled these groups to survive and resist Roman damage. In the midst of social brokenness and state violence that was producing many difficulties and problems, real good news found a place. That is good news.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Dewey, Arthur. “Switchback Codes: Paul, Apocalyptic and the Art of Resistance.” Fall 2015.

Violence in Stone

MEMORIAL

The Arch of Titus, an honorific arch located at the head of the Roman Forum and built in 81 CE, is a vivid picture of the recapturing for Rome of the territory of Israel in the first century. The arch explains the real beginning of our larger rewriting: a context of massive crucifixion and of the wrecking of the central symbol of Israel's monotheism, the Temple in Jerusalem. These events were of crucial importance in the first two centuries for the many and varied followers of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The arch memorializes the emperor Titus's great accomplishment—the reduction of Israel, which had successfully broken away from Rome's control in 66 CE, to an enslaved state. The final act in this retaking of Judea was the siege and sacking of Jerusalem and then the destruction of the Temple of the Judeans. Since so little survives from the ancient world, that this arch of all arches should have endured into the twenty-first century is telling. This “accomplishment” of the emperor is carved into the surface of the arch, offering a concrete and complex depiction of Roman power and Israel's political disappearance for 1,950 years.

Monuments celebrating a conquering general's great victory always hide the pain of those who were defeated. The Arch of Titus is no different. It exults in the divinity of the conquering hero, while exhibiting the violence that lies at the heart of imperial Rome's *Pax Romana*, or Roman peace. It also foretells the violence the followers of Jesus Anointed are to face. But to ferret out this twisting and twisted story, we must coax the silent stones of the Arch of Titus to tell their story.

The arch was built shortly after the death of the emperor Titus in 81 CE by his brother, the new emperor Domitian. In the tradition of Roman emperors, Domitian declared his dead brother to be a god. There is a certain irony in this declaration, given the relationship between these brothers. Allegedly, Titus's last reported words were "I have made but one mistake."¹ Ancient Romans debated the meaning of these words and the circumstances of Titus's death—did Domitian poison his brother, or just abandon him when Titus fell ill? The Roman history writer Dio Cassius suggests that Titus's mistake was not killing his brother Domitian when he had the chance.² Violence lies at the very heart of the Roman Empire, within the imperial family itself—not the serene, beautiful portrait, certainly, that we viewed in the Gemma Augustea, in the [previous chapter](#).

Before the Arch

What is knowable about the movements that traced back to Jesus before the building of the Arch of Titus is very limited and often buried in the obscurity of myth and legend. The first major effort to tell the story of the origins of Jesus and his legacy, a writing now known as Gospel of Mark, was most likely written about the time of the Arch's construction. The first story of the origins of the larger movement, the Acts of the Apostles, does not occur until the first quarter of the second century, well after the building of the arch.³

Paul, an envoy among the early Jesus followers, provides one of the few windows into how these groups viewed themselves before the Arch of Titus. Paul was neither founding nor joining a new religion. A Judean, he wanted to get the members of the nations into the covenant of Israel. He did not see this new covenant between the God of Israel and the nations as replacing the covenant between God and the people of Israel, but rather as the final fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. Paul remained a part of the people of Israel, and according to his teaching, those members of the nations who trust in Jesus the Anointed became children of Abraham and a part of Israel, too.

During the period before the building of the Arch of Titus, various groups attached to Jesus are working out their identities within the people of Israel. There is no one set way of doing this. The debate over circumcision in Paul's letters, for instance, illustrates the different ways that followers of Jesus considered themselves as being part of Israel, as does the

larger claim of the Gospel of Matthew that they, not the Pharisees, are the true Israelites. Group identity is not clear; that negotiation and experimentation will go on for a long time.

THE JUDEAN-ROMAN WAR

In 66 CE, a revolt broke out in Judea, the southern part of Israel. We are well informed about this revolt because a participant, Flavius Josephus, wrote a history of the events that has survived. His name “Flavius” indicates that his patrons, his essential social and financial supporters, were the Flavians, an important family in Rome. Indeed, the very general that the emperor Nero placed in charge of putting down the Judean revolt was Titus Flavius Vespasian, more commonly known simply as Vespasian. The emperor Titus was his son.

Josephus was born Yosef ben Matityahu (Joseph son of Matthias). He was a priest of Israel and reports that he was a Pharisee, a relatively new and innovative group within Israel in the first century. When captured by the Romans in 67 CE, however, he became an advisor to Vespasian and Titus, who in turn became his patrons. His allegiances, to say the least, are complicated. Josephus, as is clear from his name alone, was not a neutral observer. His history of the Judean War needs to be read with his specific allegiances in mind.

Josephus’s patrons, the family named Flavian, was a plebeian family from Rome, that is, not part of Rome’s aristocracy. They were actually the first plebeian family to rule the empire. The Flavians were the only dynasty in which succession was by natural birth alone without any adoption of extended family.

After several Roman disasters in putting down the revolt in Israel, the emperor Nero gave Vespasian four legions to command; he was a competent but not brilliant general. Most important, Nero thought Vespasian was no threat to his power so was not someone to be feared politically. Vespasian, however, was in no hurry to end the revolt because the Judeans needed to be punished; they needed to become an example of why revolt against Rome was unwise. Furthermore, Nero’s grasp on power was tenuous, and Vespasian knew that interesting opportunities might

present themselves to a Roman general with so many legions under his command.

Vespasian arrived on the scene in Judea to begin a slow, gradual, and grinding reduction of the revolt. It was in the early stages of “pacification” (that is, the subjugation of Judean peoples through violence) that Josephus was captured.

Nero’s suicide in 68 CE led to political chaos—a time known as the Year of Four Emperors, the last of whom was Vespasian. As things began to crumble, Vespasian saw his opportunity and seized it. In short order, his troops proclaimed him emperor, he turned against the third emperor Vitellius, made quick alliances with other generals in the eastern part of the empire, took Egypt, and defeated Vitellius. On December 21, 69 CE, the day following the defeat of Vitellius, the Roman Senate proclaimed Vespasian emperor.

With Vespasian in control of the empire and having the title of emperor, he needed a military victory to bolster and solidify his claims to authority. After all, what made an emperor an emperor was military might and victories. The Latin word *imperator*, which we translate “emperor” but might better be translated “conqueror,” originated in a proclamation by the troops after a great military victory. With its basic meaning of commander or general, the title always retained a strong overtone of military victory.

To consolidate his rule, Vespasian dispatched his son Titus to bring the revolt in Judea to an end and plunder Jerusalem. Titus quickly brought the main elements of the revolt to a conclusion, but resistance had been long and fierce. Jerusalem had been in the hands of the Judean rebels for four years, since 66 CE. The city was strongly fortified by three walls.

At this point, Josephus’s story of the war becomes important. After Josephus’s capture, Vespasian gave him the high honor of Roman citizenship in 69 CE. Yosef ben Matityahu was now Flavius Josephus, a client of the emperor. Josephus was free to tell the story of this war and the history of the Judean peoples, but his audience was the emperor. Josephus becomes a historian, but his history is told for the empire, for the honor of Rome.

Josephus does offer a unique perspective as a historian: he was on the ground as a military commander and was familiar with both Judeans and Romans. He describes Titus’s siege of Jerusalem under Vespasian in great detail: according to his history called *The Jewish War*, more than one

million people were killed during the attack on and destruction of Jerusalem, and around one hundred thousand were enslaved. Numbers are very unreliable in ancient accounts, but it is clear that the number of people killed during this siege was extreme.

The Roman troops captured those fleeing from the city to gather food and began to crucify them before the city walls. According to Josephus, they crucified five hundred Judeans a day, so many that there was a shortage of wood in the area.⁴ Josephus is at pains to indicate Titus's pity for those suffering, but nevertheless the slaughter continued. His story is an interesting mix of both honoring Rome and pitying the suffering Judeans. The sole purpose of these massive numbers of crucifixions, Josephus tells us, is to terrorize those remaining in the city:

[Titus's] main reason for not stopping the crucifixions was the hope that the spectacle might perhaps induce the Jews to surrender, for fear that continued resistance would involve them in a similar fate. The soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number, that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies. (*The Jewish War* V.449–451)

When the Roman legions finally broke through the city walls, the rebels fortified the Temple, the heart of Judean ritual. According to Josephus, Titus's intention was to bring the revolt and the siege of Jerusalem to a quick end. A council of generals disagreed on the proper fate of the Temple, but Titus—at least according to Josephus—decided to keep the Temple intact:

Titus, however, declared that, even were the Jews to mount it [the Temple] and fight therefrom, he would not wreak vengeance on inanimate objects instead of men, nor under any circumstances burn down so magnificent a work; for the loss would affect the Romans, inasmuch as it would be an ornament to the empire if it stood. (*The Jewish War* VI.241–242)

Titus implies that the Romans' war is with people, not with the house of a god. The beauty of that Temple, and the god it honored, could be incorporated into the empire, a visual celebration of Roman dominance over the known world.

But that is not what happened. Given Josephus's complicated and compromised relationship with the Flavians, especially Titus, some historians have doubted his view of Titus's motives. Did Titus really want to save the Temple? Given the way he so publicly acknowledged and celebrated its destruction, it is hard to imagine he did not intend it. On the

other hand, Josephus was there and was close to Titus; what would he gain by undercutting Titus's propaganda victory? It is hard to decide. History is full of these unresolvable questions.

In Josephus's dramatic account of the destruction of the Temple, he writes: "At this moment, one of the soldiers, awaiting no orders and with no horror of so dread a deed, but moved by some supernatural impulse, snatched a brand from the burning timber and, hoisted up by one of his comrades, flung the fiery missile through a low golden door" (*The Jewish War* VI.252–253). Once the fire started, things merely got out of hand. According to Josephus, the Jerusalem Temple, the heart of Judean religious worship and tradition, was destroyed by accident.

THE ARCH OF TITUS

Accidental destruction: How does Josephus's history fit with the history depicted on the Arch of Titus? Are the stories of the arch and of Josephus the same? Is it odd that Titus's military campaign would be memorialized through an image of an accident? Or did Titus destroy the Temple on purpose, intentionally destabilizing the religious and social lives of the people of Israel?

The Arch of Titus was built to be seen. It dominates the highest point on the Via Sacra, marking a prominent entrance into the Roman Forum. It is 50 feet high, 13.5 feet wide, and 15.5 feet deep. On the attic of the arch, right at the top, is the original inscription:

**THE SENATE
AND THE ROMAN PEOPLE
[DEDICATE THIS] TO THE DIVINE TITUS, SON OF VESPASIAN,
VESPASIAN AUGUSTUS**

The interior of the arch consists of three panels, all in marble relief. The north panel pictures Titus as the successful general in his triumphal procession after the victory in Jerusalem. This triumphal march took place in 71 CE and was a joint victory for both Vespasian and Titus. Vespasian, however, is missing from this depiction.

Prominently on view, accompanying Titus in a chariot, is the goddess Winged Victory, who is crowning him with a laurel wreath, a sign of victory. The depiction of the victorious chariot with its four horses and Winged Victory is a traditional cliché, frequently found on coins and other items. But in the standard mythology of the triumph, an enslaved person stands behind the triumphing general, whispering to him, “Look behind you. Remember you are a man.”⁵ Significantly, in this visual version of the mythology preserved on the arch, there is no enslaved person. This shifts the standard way of visualizing a triumph to emphasize Titus’s divinity, as Winged Victory crowns him. Leading the chariot is the goddess Rome in battle gear with bared breast, symbolizing Rome’s military might.



A panel from the first century CE Roman monument the Arch of Titus. Riding in a chariot drawn by four horses, the goddess Victoria (Victory) crowns the emperor Titus. They ride the chariot into the conquered city of Jerusalem.

Daderot, Wikimedia Commons



Known as the “Spoils of Jerusalem,” this panel on the Arch of Titus depicts the sacred treasures of the Jerusalem Temple being carried into Rome as part of a triumphal procession. These treasures include a menorah, the Table of the Bread of the Presence, trumpets, and other sacred cups and vessels.

Jebulon, Wikimedia Commons

The south panel, immediately opposite the first one, depicts the Roman legionnaires carrying in the triumphal procession booty from the Temple in Jerusalem that will eventually be placed in the newly built Temple of Peace in the Forum of Vespasian. The menorah stands out, along with golden trumpets and the Bread of Presence table, so named for loaves of bread that were always signaling the presence of God.

The panel in the vault depicts the raising into heaven (*apotheōsis*) of Titus. Zeus in the form of an eagle bears him aloft. This is the point of the arch and Domitian’s point in its construction—to announce the divinity of this brother, and by association, his family and himself. While the divinity of the triumphant general was temporary, the divinity proclaimed by this arch was permanent. Titus was now one of the gods.

Logic of the Arch

The Arch of Titus tells the story of Titus’s rising to the status of a god, but it also lays out in stone the imperial logic of power and divinity. Two panels depict Titus as a god: in the north panel, where he is crowned by Winged Victory, and in the panel in the vault, where he is shown ascending into heaven with Jupiter.

Titus is a god because he triumphed over the God of Israel. This triumph is evidenced in the south panel with its prominent display of the booty from the Judean Temple. This is the logic of Roman imperial might: we Romans must be in the gods' favor and Titus must be a god because we defeated your god. Without that triumph over the Temple, the earthly home of a god, Titus's claim to god-status is unconvincing.

The defeat of the Judeans featured prominently in the propaganda of the Flavians, further bolstering their claims to divinity. All three of the Flavians issued coins with the legend "Judea Captured."

One of the most famous edifices of the Roman world, the Colosseum, was intimately associated with the defeat of the Judean revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple. Originally known as the Flavian Amphitheater, the Colosseum stood near the Arch of Titus on the spot where the previous emperor Nero's enormous and notorious palace, the Golden House, had stood. The gigantic amphitheater supported the Flavian propaganda machine. According to a recent reconstruction of the original dedication, the cost of building the amphitheater came from Vespasian's share of the booty from the sack of Jerusalem.⁶ The Roman Colosseum was built with stolen property. Furthermore, many of the twenty thousand enslaved Judeans Titus brought back to Rome were involved in the quarrying of the stone for the amphitheater and its construction.



From the inside of the arch, this relief shows the emperor Titus's *apotheōsis* or his being made into a god.

Martom Bax, Wikimedia Commons

ROME'S RESPONSE TO ITS OWN VIOLENCE

Roman elites were well aware of the empire's violence, but they had a solution. The emperors were very successful at co-opting others into the values of the empire. Along the Appian Way, one of the most important roads into Rome, stands a monument in memory of three men: Baricha, Zabda, and Achiba. These men, as argued by the classicist Mary Beard, were likely part of the Judean rebellion, brought to Rome in enslavement by Titus and sold to a Roman citizen by the name of Lucius Valerius.⁷ Lucius Valerius eventually freed them and gave them Roman citizenship, shown on the monument in the attachment of Lucius Valerius to each man's name: the plain Judean name "Baricha" becomes "Baricha, freedman of Lucius Valerius." Judean and Roman identities become intertwined. By the mid-second century, half the population of the city of Rome were descendants of enslaved people. Some responded to Roman violence by eventually becoming citizens, while others joined communities of Jesus Anointed.

Flavian Propaganda

While Josephus may well be right about Titus's intention not to destroy the Temple, once it was destroyed, Titus doubled down. Its destruction had to be presented as a great Roman victory, hence Vespasian and Titus's triumph, the building of the Flavian Amphitheater, multiple coins celebrating *Judea Capta* (Judea's capture), and the Arch of Titus. The Flavian propaganda machine was on a roll.

Not rebuilding the Judean Temple was against long-standing Roman policy. Romans did not go to war against a nation's gods, but against its people. Destroyed temples were always rebuilt. Conquered people's gods were invited into the Roman pantheon. The emperor and the empire brought benefits.

In Josephus's extensive description of Titus's triumph, he enumerates the piles of booty from the conquering of Judea and the many golden vessels from the wasted Temple of Jerusalem, "and last of all the spoils, was carried the Law of the Judeans" (*The Jewish War* VII.150–151). This was war not only on the people of Israel but also on their God. Vespasian and Titus's triumph and not rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple set policy both for the Flavians and for the remainder of antiquity. All the subsequent emperors followed their lead. Upon the death of Domitian in 96 CE, the next emperor, Nerva, and the following Antonine dynasty of emperors continued the Flavian policy. After that, it became set in stone, almost literally.

AFTERMATH

Tensions remained strong in Judea, especially as Roman settlement increased, and the people of Israel were forced out of their homeland. The tensions reached a crisis when the emperor Hadrian (reign, 117–138 CE) built a new city named Aelia Capitolina at the site of the destroyed Jerusalem. This remained the official name for Jerusalem until the Arab conquest in 638 CE, when it was renamed Iliyā', the Arab name derived from the Roman name Aelia.

Hadrian escalated tensions yet again when he began the construction of a temple on the site of the old Judean Temple that he dedicated to Jupiter Capitolinus, named after the temple in Rome, which was the final destination of Vespasian and Titus's triumph and the principal temple of

that city. The intended insult could not have been more direct. This was Roman erasure of Judean presence. This in turn provoked the Bar Kokhba War of Judean rebellion in 132–136 CE.

The political environment created by the Flavians and their successors is the context in which all the stories of good news, the gospels, were written and much of what later became the New Testament. The Roman Empire's stance toward the people of Israel also affected, shaped, and distorted the emerging Jesus peoples' movements as they interacted with their fellow inheritors of Israel's traditions and eventually grew into the Christian church.

All of this, as Josephus would have it, stemmed from a military accident—all from an unintended consequence: a fire accidentally started, a sacking of a city that got out of hand. History is not inevitable and historical events often are unintentional. Was the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, like much of history, also unintentional? We cannot ever know for sure. The Arch of Titus, even with its mixed-up history, demonstrates how Rome's violent conquest of Israel provides a complicated, tangled frame for and a direction going forward for the Jesus peoples' agony and hope.

We don't have any images of crucifixions from the ancient world, even though mass crucifixions are often described in literature. The Arch of Titus and the many other triumphal arches scattered around the Roman world are an effort to mask that horror in a fantasy of Roman glory. The massiveness and endurance of the arch demonstrates what those who chose to follow the Anointed King of Israel were up against. The arch announces how devastating is the power that will come down on those who resist. The Roman historian Tacitus quotes a British chieftain staring down ruin by Rome: "To plunder, butcher, steal, these things [Romans] misname empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace" (*Agricola* 30.5).⁸

Even though it falls outside of the first two centuries, one more issue remains that directly flows from the Arch of Titus. What had been the policy of the Flavians toward the Judeans became the policy of succeeding emperors throughout antiquity, and then of the Christian church afterward. The significance of this transfer of the anti-Jewish policy of the Flavians, first to the subsequent emperors and then to the Christian church, cannot be overestimated. This is the genesis of the twisted and tragic Christian church policy of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. The violence continues.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Scott, Brandon. "The Arch of Titus." Spring 2018.

———. "Review and Evaluation of Martin Goodman's *Rome and Jerusalem: Impact on the Rise of Christianity*." Fall 2015.

Wendt, Heidi. "From the Herodians to Hadrian: The Shifting Status of Judean Religion in Post-Flavian Rome." Fall 2015.

6

The Deaths of Heroes

Living under *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, could be dangerous. This peace brought many benefits, about which the emperors were always reminding their subjects, but was maintained by an overwhelming military force. Resistance could be lethal. The conquered nations all told stories of their heroes who died for the cause. Having heard of so much Roman cruelty in the previous three chapters, we turn now toward a major way conquered people, including Jesus peoples, coped.

THE NOBLE DEATH

Socrates

The most famous hero in the ancient world who died for a cause was not someone who died at the hands of an empire, but of a democratic government. The death of the Greek philosopher Socrates in 399 BCE became the archetype of all such “noble deaths.” His death was much commented on in the ancient world and has continued to inspire thinkers and artists to this day. Socrates wrote nothing but was a frequent character in Plato’s dialogues. Whether we are hearing Socrates’s voice or Plato’s in these dialogues is highly debated, as in the various gospels concerning Jesus’s voice.

Why did the ancients admire Socrates’s death and think it so important? The primary reason was that he stood up to what he perceived to be the tyranny of the state. Socrates opposed democracy. He did not think that a vote of the majority was the correct way to determine the truth. That was

available to only a few wise men after much hard work. The prosecutor brought two charges against Socrates: impiety against the pantheon of Athens' gods and corrupting the youth of the city. Socrates admitted that if he was let off with a lesser punishment than death, he would continue to teach the same things, as he said, to sting his fellow Athenians. He even described himself as the gods' greatest gift to Athens. A majority of the five hundred jurors voted for conviction.

In discussions with the prosecutor, Socrates joked that for his punishment he should get free meals from the city, an honor normally reserved for the city's benefactors and victorious athletes. He also offered to pay a fine, and his friends offered an even more substantial sum. The prosecutor remained firm, insisting on the death penalty. Ironically, more jurors voted to sentence Socrates to death than voted for conviction.

His friends pleaded with him to flee the city into exile, which was expected by all and was a well-established tradition. But Socrates had taught that it was the duty of all citizens to follow the laws of the city, so he refused to go into exile. Instead, he drank the poison hemlock, bringing about his death. Taking the hemlock was his individual decision as to what was just and good. By this act, standing up to tyranny became the fundamental aspect of the noble death.

A second aspect of the noble death is that it demonstrates self-mastery, a primary value in both Greek and Roman education. Self-mastery included control of the self and control of the passions. The emphasis was not on abstract knowledge, but on self-control that ensured integrity and overall character. Death, of course, was the last challenge to self-control. To take control of one's own death would be the ultimate sign of controlling the passions, of self-mastery.

This self-mastery is clearly evident in the account of Socrates's last hours in Plato's writing *Phaedo*. After Socrates took his bath, his gathered friends began to cry. Socrates said: "Really, my friends, what a way to behave! Why, that was my main reason for sending away the women, to prevent this sort of disturbance; because I am told that one should make one's end in a tranquil frame of mind. Calm yourselves and try to be brave!" (*Phaedo* 117d–e).¹

Self-control and mastery of the passions are male virtues, and so Socrates not only excludes the females so that a quiet, controlled

atmosphere will prevail, but he accuses the men of behaving like women. Plato remarks, “We controlled our tears”: self-mastery prevails.

Plato remarks that Socrates “quite calmly and with no sign of distaste . . . drained the cup in one breath” (*Phaedo* 117c). As Socrates dies, he remains calm the entire time. His last words are to his student Crito, “We ought to offer a cock to Asclepius,” the god of healing (*Phaedo* 118a). He dies remaining faithful to his civic duties.

Taking control of one’s death in the face of tyranny also demonstrates one’s good name. Even the jailer testifies to Socrates’s good name: “I have come to know during this time that you are the noblest and the gentlest and the bravest of all the men that have ever come here” (*Phaedo* 116c). At the very conclusion of *Phaedo*, the writing’s last words echo the jailer’s testimony: “Such . . . was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we know in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man” (*Phaedo* 118).

Other Noble Deaths

The philosopher Zeno (ca. 430 BCE), who lived before Socrates, was involved in a conspiracy to overthrow the tyrant Nearchus. When tortured to reveal the names of his fellow conspirators, he refused. But he told the tyrant he did have another secret to reveal. When the tyrant leaned in to hear, Zeno bit his ear and did not release his bite until he died and the tyrant had lost his ear.

Rome also had its famous examples of noble deaths—including one from the legendary beginnings of Rome that exhibits the noble death of a woman. The noblewoman Lucretia (died 510 BCE) was beautiful and described as a good, faithful wife. Late one night, Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king, at sword point threatened to frame her for adultery if she did not submit to him. Tarquinius raped Lucretia and left, “exulting in his conquest of a woman’s honour.”² She summoned her father and husband and confessed what had happened, asking, “What can be well with a woman when she has lost her honour”?

Lucretia threatened to take her life as her father and husband pleaded with her that the rape was not her fault, but to no avail. “Though I acquit myself of the sin,” she said, “I do not absolve myself from punishment.” She then plunged a dagger into her chest to demonstrate her virtue. Her kinsmen took revenge, and this led to an outrage on the part of the general

populace, which revolted and overthrew the monarchy. Thus began the Roman Republic. A deeply troubling story of sexual assault became a pivotal part of the founding myth of the Roman Republic.

Lucretia's death at her own hand demonstrates the perfidy and corruption of the Roman kings and leads to their overthrow. It also shows, in this ancient context, her control of her own destiny, even though she is a woman—again, this story must be read in its ancient context—and it preserves and reinforces her good name and honor, which the rape by Tarquinius had challenged.

The telling of these stories of noble deaths reinforces the cause against tyranny, and the memory of them creates a way for others to envision how to resist tyranny. Lucretia's story is disturbing on many levels, but as an ancient "noble death," we read it in this important context of resistance.

DYING FOR TORAH AND ISRAEL

The people of Israel had their own stories of noble deaths as they struggled against tyranny. The galvanizing moment was the attack of Antiochus IV Epiphanes on the very life of the nation of Israel. While exactly what happened has never been successfully reconstructed, the stories that were told became critically important. The way it was remembered and retold fashioned a new way of viewing Israel's relation to suffering at the hands of tyrants.

Following what he thought was a revolt, Antiochus Epiphanes ("God Manifest") attacked Jerusalem in 168 BCE and desecrated the Temple. He followed this up with an effort to suppress and abolish the religious life and practice of Israel. He forbade worship in the Temple, as well as circumcision. This was unprecedented in the ancient world and goes against the usual policy at the time, which was to respect the religious practices of conquered populations. The extreme character of Antiochus's prohibitions led to the Maccabean revolt (beginning in 167 BCE), a brief respite of independence, and then Roman intervention (63 BCE).

These memories provoked a series of stories about those who suffered death during all this mayhem because they refused to cooperate with the decrees of Antiochus. In 2 Maccabees, written sometime in the first century BCE, there appears the story of a mother and her seven sons whom the king

tortures to death. He forces them to eat pork to violate Torah. They all refuse, are tortured, and die.

As the second son dies, he calls out to the king, “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws” (2 Macc. 7:9).³ This story sees the issue as a direct contest between two kings: King Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the King of the universe. This poses the problem of theodicy, that is, the existence of a good and compassionate God despite the existence of evil. To die as Socrates did for the truth is one thing, but to die for God’s law, to die because one is righteous, calls into question the character and very existence of the God of the universe. Being raised up to eternal life is the solution to this problem and argues that Antiochus’s offense will not hold.

The youngest son in his speech notes how the death of his brothers is redemptive for the nation of Israel:

I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation. (2 Macc. 7:37–38)

Their noble deaths are not in vain but will benefit the people. The nation deserves to suffer, but the sons’ deaths will relieve that need.

The cycle of stories of a mother and her seven sons is retold in 4 Maccabees, written probably in the first century CE. The mother’s speech to her sons directly picks up the themes of a noble death:

My children, noble is the struggle, and since you have been summoned to it to bear witness for our nation, fight zealously for our ancestral Law. Shameful were it indeed that [an] old man should endure agonies for piety’s sake, while you young men were terrified of torments. (4 Macc. 16:16–17)⁴

The cause for which they are dying is directly stated, the ancestral law, and thus their cause is just. They must be noble and not be frightened by torture. To encourage them, the mother rehearses the sacrifices made by their ancestors. The sons stand in a noble tradition, and their deaths will ensure that tradition has a future:

Remember that it is for God’s sake you were given a share in the world and the benefit of life . . . for whom our father Abraham ventured boldly to sacrifice his son Isaac, the father of our

nation; and Isaac, seeing his father's hand, with knife in it, fall down against him, did not flinch. Daniel also, the righteous one, was thrown to the lions, and Hananiah and Azariah and Michael were cast into the fiery furnace, and all endured for the sake of God. (4 Macc. 16:18–22)

She then applies this same lesson to her sons, saying:

“Therefore, you who have the same faith in God must not be dismayed. For it would be unreasonable for you who know true religion not to withstand hardships.” With these words the mother of the seven exhorted each one and persuaded them to die rather than transgress the commandment of God. (4 Macc. 16:22–25)

The multiple tellings of this cycle of stories over several centuries points to their continued importance and applicability as a vehicle for understanding the nation of Israel's dealing with a succession of empires, culminating in Rome. The influence of these stories would be considerable going forward in the early Jesus movement as a way of understanding Jesus's crucifixion and then later the deaths of his followers at the hands of Roman authorities for their allegiance to the Anointed of Israel. The noble death model was probably the earliest way by which followers of Jesus began to come to terms with his crucifixion. They drew on a general cultural model and directly from the Maccabean tradition. The tradition of Israel had already thought through this issue.

DYING FOR A FUTURE

In Paul's Letter to the Romans is a fragment of what might be an early “hymn.” Since the language is distinctly not Paul's, he appears to be quoting something else: “through the deliverance which is in the Anointed Jesus whom God has put forward as a means of propitiation” (Rom. 3:24).

This passage has often been the go-to text for the idea of sacrificial atonement that eventually developed in the Christian church, but that is not its correct context. Instead, it belongs to the noble death model. “Propitiation” refers to an act that gains the favor of the gods. In this case, the execution of Jesus is described as God putting him forward. The propitiation is not offered *to* God but *by* God. Why is God putting Jesus forward? To ensure the future of the people. The closest parallel to the language of Romans is in 4 Maccabees 17:20–22, where the narrator is describing the effects of the death of the seven sons who died for Israel (emphasis added):

These then, having consecrated themselves for the sake of God, are now honored not only with this distinction but also by the fact that through them our enemies did not prevail against our nation, and the tyrant was punished and our land purified, since they became, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. *Through the blood* of these righteous ones and through the *propitiation* of their death the divine providence recused Israel, which had been shamefully treated.

The noble death tradition with a strong presence in the larger Mediterranean world, as well as an important place in Israel's understanding of its dealing with the oppression of various empires, naturally aligns with Jesus's crucifixion and provides a way of understanding this tragedy.

Communal Meals and the Noble Death Tradition

As we have seen, communal meals were an important element in the social formation of the communities of Jesus Anointed (see more in [Chapter 12](#)). These meals also drew upon the noble death tradition and were often an important aspect of it. The retelling of stories of a person's life and death served to keep the memory and the good name of that person alive after that person's death. These tellings happened most often at meals.

Meals are an important aspect of the commemoration of a hero's noble death because they remind the participants that the hero died resisting the tyrant for the future possibility of the community, whether that community be the community of Socrates or the community of Israel or the community of the Anointed.

Paul introduces his comments about the communal meal in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 with a stereotyped sentence for the passing on of tradition: “I received from the Lord the same thing I passed on to you” (v. 23).⁵ The bread symbolizes the Lord Jesus's body: “This means my body broken for you” (v. 24). “Broken for you” indicates the bloody character of Jesus's death, as well as drawing from the noble death tradition of dying “for” the community, language in line with that we saw in 2 and 4 Maccabees.

The wine coming after the meal indicates that it is a libation; the pouring of the wine is a standard part of the memorial meal. The “new covenant” referenced in 1 Corinthians 11:25 is effected by Jesus's bloody death by crucifixion: “This cup means the new covenant ratified by my blood.” In both the bread and wine, heroic language is evoked; there is the

explicit call to remember. The hero's noble death of resistance to the tyrant must be remembered to have its effect.

The language in this meal is memorial and mythic, not factual. The memory keeps alive the resistance of original noble death and points to its founding function for the new Anointed peoples and communities: "Do it to remember me" (1 Cor. 11:24, 25).

Paul adds a final comment: "So every time you eat this bread and drink this cup you are proclaiming the death of the Lord until the day when he returns" (1 Cor. 11:26). Apart from the heroic tradition, Jesus's "death" can be understood in a bland sense. Jesus did not simply die; he was crucified, executed by the empire. So, death has a more fulsome and terrifying sense here. His body was broken, his blood was shed. Furthermore, it was the "Lord" who was crucified. "Lord" is one of the titles of the emperor. Lords are not crucified; they do the crucifying. The phrase, "the death of the Lord" in the context of what this meal is remembering is highly provocative, almost oxymoronic. The hero's death points to a future people who will be joining Jesus's meal tradition.

A standard part of Roman banquets was a libation for the emperor, which was almost like our playing of the national anthem before sporting events. To not offer the libation to the emperor was close to treason. But this libation is offered in memory of a Lord, an Anointed king, who was put to death by the emperor of Rome. The meal memorializes a conflict between empires. The provocative, dangerous, and even seditious nature of these meals in memory of an executed criminal is often overlooked.

Passion Accounts

How the passion accounts of Jesus's suffering and death came to be is a controversial and debated topic, with no agreed way forward. The controversy testifies to the multilayered aspect of the growth of the accounts. They also apparently developed after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, with the Gospel of Mark being the earliest one (that we know of today). As such, this is the telling we will follow. The elements of the noble death tradition are clearly evident: the hero has a final meal with his followers, the trial points to the innocence of the hero, and the death is depicted in heroic terms. We briefly examine each of these.

The Last Supper

The meal scene in Mark is elaborated from the memorial meal of the dying hero we examined above. The move is from mythic language to actual narrative account. In the process there are several significant changes. “On the night he was betrayed” or “handed over,” which opens Paul’s account of the memorial meal (1 Cor. 11:23), indicates that God handed the hero over; but now a person is named as the betrayer, Judas. In Mark’s story, Judas makes a deal with the Jerusalem priests, and in the garden of Gethsemane he hands Jesus over with the sign of a kiss. Jesus says at the meal’s end: “The Human One departs just as the scriptures predict, but damn the one responsible for turning the Human One in! That man would be better off if he’d never been born!” (Mark 14:21).⁶ This saying implies that Jesus’s fate is divinely willed.

In the transformation of the memorial meal into a narrative of the Last Supper, the libation of wine after the meal disappears. In the Gospel of John the meal is even more radically transformed, almost along the lines of one of Plato’s dialogues. Jesus carries on an elaborate series of speeches that take up nearly a quarter of the gospel (John 13–16). What is missing is the memorial meal itself.

The Innocence of the Hero: The Importance of Self-Mastery in Trial

The purpose of a trial in the noble death tradition is to demonstrate the innocence, nobility, and goodness of the victim. Often in the trial the offender makes his (or her) case.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus remains strangely silent but his silence demonstrates his self-mastery and elegantly speaks against his chief accusers, the Jerusalem priests. The Roman official in charge, Pilate, is the character who actually is tested in the narrative, and his failure to render justice implies Jesus’s innocence. The charge is presented at the very beginning of the trial:

And Pilate questioned him: “*You* are ‘the King of the Judeans?’”

And in response he says to him, “If you say so.”

And the chief priests started a long list of accusations against him. Again Pilate tried questioning him:

“Don’t you have some answer to give? Look at the long list of charges they bring against you!”
But Jesus still did not respond, so Pilate was astonished. (Mark 15:2–5)

Pilate's astonishment or wonder marks him as a neutral judge or observer in this telling. Pilate proposes a strange substitution. He will release Jesus instead of a dangerous prisoner:

“Do you want me to set ‘the King of the Judeans’ free for you?” (You see, he realized that the chief priests had turned him over out of envy.) But the chief priests incited the crowd to get Barabbas set free for them instead. (Mark 15:9–11)

In the context of the noble death tradition, the Barabbas story is very intriguing. He had committed murder during an insurrection; that is, he really was guilty of sedition, the charge against Jesus. This becomes an exchange of the truly guilty for the truly innocent. His name is the giveaway. *Barabbas* in Aramaic means “son of the father.”

Pilate now knows the true intention of the priests and knows that Jesus is innocent. He challenges the stirred-up crowd:

“What do you want me to do with the man you call ‘the King of the Judeans’?” And they in turn shouted, “Crucify him!”

Pilate kept saying to them, “Why? What has he done wrong?” But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

And because Pilate was always looking to satisfy the crowd, he set Barabbas free for them, had Jesus flogged, and then turned him over to be crucified. (Mark 15:12–15)

Pilate fails the test; he demonstrates lack of self-mastery by giving in to the priests and the crowd. His failure vindicates Jesus.

The Heroic Death: Jesus's Execution

During the execution, the condemned is to show courage, not to break under duress. The priests and those crucified with Jesus taunt him, but Jesus does not respond.

The Gospel of Mark's account of Jesus's execution plays against the noble death tradition. Jesus does not die calm and reassured, in charge of his dying. Instead, “Jesus shouted at the top of his voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’)” (Mark 15:34).

These final words of Jesus run counter to the expectations of a noble death and have long bothered readers, including those ancient writers who used Mark's story. The Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John both replace

the problematic saying with one that is more in line with the expectations of a noble death.

Then Jesus shouted at the top of his voice, “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit!” Having said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

When Jesus had taken some wine, he said, “Now it’s complete.” Lowering his head, he handed over the spirit. (John 19:30)

In the Gospel of Mark, the Roman official who was in charge of Jesus’s execution, upon seeing Jesus die this way, responds, “This man really was God’s son!” (Mark 15:39). The exclamation mark in this translation is an interpretation that makes this statement a confession and so brings our reading in line with a noble death narrative (if only Greek had punctuation!). But it stands in the Gospel without interpretation. It could just as easily be read as sarcasm, which would be the more likely interpretation. What about this scene would persuade a hardened Roman trooper that a man dying in despair is a son of god? The author of Mark provides no way out of the interpretive conundrum.

The author of Matthew’s Gospel does interpret the centurion’s saying as a confession, actually a group confession, noting that the centurion and those with him were filled with awe. In the Gospel of Luke’s account, the official proclaims that Jesus was innocent, remaining true to the expectations of a noble death. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’s mother, other women, and his favorite disciple gather around the cross, like the way Plato’s friends gather around him in his prison cell.

Why would the author of Mark’s Gospel alone diverge from the expectations of Jesus dying a noble death? For the same reason that this Gospel ends with women finding the tomb empty and going away telling no one. The readers of this Gospel must make their own decision as to what happened and why.

This survey of the different stories of Jesus’s death shows how the stories of heroic noble deaths in the ancient Mediterranean are present in each Gospel. This signals how a larger pattern of noble heroes dying for resisting tyranny and ensuring the integrity of those who came after is a basic part of all the versions of Jesus’s death.

DYING FOR TRUTH

The tradition of a noble death in defiance of tyranny has a long and deep tradition within the various cultures of the Mediterranean world. Dying for truth was a noble idea. The people of Israel adapted this tradition to their experience when Antiochus IV Epiphanes tried to destroy their religious practice and life, and that became a model for later generations dealing with other forms of tyranny. The early followers of Jesus employed the noble death tradition, particularly as expressed in the Maccabean tradition, to turn the catastrophe of Jesus's execution into the death of a hero that marks the beginning of communities of the Anointed.

This same tradition will be employed by later followers of Jesus in the second century as they confront yet more Roman imperial tyranny. They will call it martyrdom. We follow that second-century development in [Chapter 18](#).

Part II

Belonging and Community

Testing Gender, Testing Boundaries

In [Chapter 2](#) we considered Pliny the Younger's correspondence with the emperor Trajan early in the second century CE. Recall that Pliny is concerned about how to deal with the people he calls *christiani*:

It is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance. I have never been present at an examination of *christiani*. Consequently, I do not know the nature or the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed. (*Letters* 10.96)

In the course of this letter, Pliny mentions that to get information about these people, he has tortured two enslaved women, named as officials (or perhaps, according to the original Latin, promoters) of this group. Although historians have paid attention to Pliny's casual note about torture, the fact that these officials were two enslaved women has been overlooked.

Leaders who happened to be women, and to be enslaved women specifically, deserve special attention. Women's leadership in religious groups was not uncommon in the ancient Mediterranean, so perhaps Pliny and Trajan would not have blinked at the existence of two female officials, or two prominent female promoters, among these *christiani*. The enslaved status of the two leaders is more surprising. In the ancient world, the enslaved were not granted full human status and were more often called "bodies" than humans. How, then, should we interpret the roles and situations of these anonymous women, enslaved people and promoters of a Jesus group? Pliny drags them out into the most public of spaces, into the very gaze of the emperor himself. Surely, then, they are more than worth our gaze.

This letter begs a consideration of the importance of gender in early Jesus groups. Contemporary understandings of gender are not the same as those of the ancient Mediterranean world, and we should not read the ancient world in modern terms. Gender is a social concept, not a physical, biological, or anatomical one.

Because gender is a social concept, embedded in specific social contexts, it has not had a stable meaning over human history. What gender “is”—how we make and shape it, how we use and act upon it in our daily lives—has changed dramatically over time. As an everyday social reality, gender, though unstable, is still a very important category to consider. Keeping ancient understandings of gender firmly in mind will allow us to see meanings and possibilities within early Jesus groups and schools of the Way that we could not otherwise see. Above all, viewing the various ways they constructed gender will highlight just how diverse these movements really were.

GENDER AND LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY

How gender was viewed in early communities of the Anointed opens up real, lived possibilities for visibility, agency, and leadership, new spaces to imagine and exert power and authority. Women’s leadership in early Jesus associations was and still is a hotly contested topic, and existing ancient writings do not paint a cohesive or coherent picture of what gendered activities looked like within these groups. Two writings, however, can help us start to define and explore this topic: Gospel of Mary and 1 Timothy. First Timothy, included in what would become the New Testament, has been a major influence on historical constructions of Christian gender relations. Gospel of Mary, a fragmentary text dating to the late first or early second century, has not had the same voice throughout history; lost for centuries and then found at the end of the nineteenth century, it became a focus of scholarly discussion only in the late 1990s. These two texts present very different, and equally important, depictions of women’s leadership in the early movements of the Anointed and the roles and possibilities defined in, through, by, or in spite of gender.

Equality in Gospel of Mary

A brief overview of Gospel of Mary will make its importance in conversations about gender clear. The beginning of this gospel is lost; as it now exists, it starts in the middle of a teaching about the nature of sin. The Savior, as the Anointed One is called in this gospel, concludes his teaching and then departs, leaving his followers pained and weeping, despairing of their next move. “How shall we go to the nations and proclaim the good news of the Child of Humanity? If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?” the Savior’s followers worry (Gos. Mary 5:1–3).¹

As followers weep, Mary stands in the midst of this group of the Savior. She comforts and encourages them, exhorting them not to doubt, for the Savior’s “grace will be with you and shelter you.” She then “turned their heart to the Good,” and calming down, they begin to discuss the Savior’s teachings (5:4–10).

Peter asks Mary to teach them, saying, “Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of the women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember, which you know and we do not, nor have we heard them” (6:1–2). Mary obliges and begins to tell the followers about a vision she had of the Savior, and the Savior’s response to that vision.

Mary concludes her instruction. Andrew responds with disbelief: “Certainly these teachings are strange ideas,” he states (10:2). Peter, though he had asked Mary to teach them, then turns on her, sneering, “Did the Savior really speak with a woman without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and all listen to her? Did he choose her over us?” (10:3–4). Mary weeps. “My brother, Peter, what are you thinking?” she cries. “Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am telling lies about the Savior?” (10:5–6). Levi stands to support Mary, arguing:

Peter, you have always been an angry person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you, then, to reject her? Surely the Savior’s knowledge of her is trustworthy. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather, let us be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and proclaim the good news, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said. (10:7–13)

Levi has the last word; after he speaks, the members of this group of the Savior go out to teach, and the gospel ends.

Mary is presented very simply in this gospel: she is Mary, a woman. There are no other descriptors. No mention is made of which Mary she is; no mention of whether she is a virgin, a mother, a sex worker, a wife—

nothing. Mary is known by her activities: she is obviously a leader. She is a teacher, revealing and relaying words of the Savior unheard by the other followers. She is a seer, describing a vision of the Lord. She is an authority, exhorting the followers of the Savior to action when they would fear and despair, giving focus and stability to the group.



A strong nation, represented as a woman, thrives even when other nations were defeated by the empire.

Hal Taussig

Mary is also granted special, superior authority in this writing. Peter states that the Savior loved Mary more than “the rest of the women,” implying, significantly, that other women were part of the Savior’s core

group of followers. Levi then offers an important corrective to Peter's statement. He affirms that the Savior loved Mary "more than us"—more than any of his followers, female or male.

Gospel of Mary ends with Levi putting Andrew and Peter in their places; Levi defends Mary, dressing down the male followers, offering a new gendered possibility for men. As Seminar member Celene Lillie argues, Levi "provides an alternative position and attitude for men. While Andrew and Peter are defended, particularly at the end of the text when they attempt to police Mary and strip her of her authority, Levi holds that it is legitimate to believe a woman."² Mary is a legitimate leader, both on her own terms, given her activities among the followers, but also on the basis of the fundamental teachings of the Savior. Levi's statement demands that all accept Mary as such. Mary is to be believed and respected.

According to Gospel of Mary, women were held up as authorities in groups of the Savior; in the words of the Savior, they were teachers and leaders. Prohibiting women's leadership was actually a characteristic of "the adversaries": "Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries," Levi responds to Peter. While Peter might try to distinguish between men and women and between male and female activities or roles, those distinctions do not, and must not, hold. Levi reminds the group of the Savior that their primary concern is to "clothe ourselves with the perfect Human," to acquire true humanity—a status without gendered parameters. Followers are not to "lay down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said." Women and men have equal right to teach and to lead. This equal right derives from a shared focus beyond gender: a focus on the attainment of true, perfect human status.

The Prohibitive 1 Timothy

First Timothy, a letter attributed to Paul but written by a later writer, offers an entirely different position regarding women's leadership. This mid-second-century letter is best known for its verses that place limits on women's activities in a Jesus community, prohibiting their very right to speech, not once, but twice:

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence

with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Tim. 2:8–15)³

The letter writer prescribes and prohibits; he tells women what to wear and what not to wear, what to do and what not to do. Above all, he tells women to be silent.

First Timothy sounds very different from Gospel of Mary, to be sure, but also very different from the Paul of other letters. First Corinthians assumes that women are visible and active within Chloe's people in Corinth, leading prayers and prophecy. Chapter 16 of Paul's Letter to the Romans lists a significant number of female leaders and officials of Jesus associations there, eight by name. In Philippians Paul speaks to Euodia and Syntyche, two women who "worked with me in the good news," "co-workers," he calls them (Phil. 4:2–3). Galatians 3:28, one of Paul's most famous sayings, speaks directly to the significance—or rather, the insignificance—of gender in his Jesus communities in the context of belonging: "You are no longer Judean or Greek, no longer enslaved or freeborn, no longer 'male and female.' Instead, you all have the same status in the service of God's Anointed, Jesus." Paul is reimagining creation here, playing with the wording of Genesis 1:27: "So God created humanity in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." A new creation, with a new view of gender: Paul's position in Galatians is radical.

Where Galatians reimagines creative boundaries, 1 Timothy rigidly proscribes them. This letter seems to have more in common with the biblical letters Colossians and Ephesians, letters also attributed to Paul but authored by others, in the judgment of most scholars. Colossians and Ephesians include a household code—a list of ideal relationships within the main family unit, the household. Colossians 3:18–4:1 and Ephesians 5:22–6:9 both begin with a command for wives to be subordinate to their husbands, while husbands are to love their wives. "For the husband is the head of the wife as also the Anointed is the head of the assembly, the Savior of the body," declares the writer of Ephesians, continuing, "Just as the assembly is made subject to the Anointed, so also are wives, in everything, to their husbands" (Eph. 5:22–24). Children are to obey their parents, and fathers should not treat children too harshly. The enslaved are to obey their

masters, the male heads of the household, and the heads of household should treat the enslaved fairly.

First Timothy, like a household code, does place some limits on men. The letter focuses on group leadership, not household leadership, so the emphasis is on authority figures in the Jesus community: bishops and deacons, both male leadership categories in 1 Timothy. Men are given prescriptions and prohibitions in 1 Timothy; as the approved authorities of the Jesus group, their behaviors and inclinations also require policing. This policing is directed inward, toward group-specific ideals: deacons are told to hold “to the mystery of trust with a clear consciousness” (1 Tim. 3:9). This policing is also directed outward, toward larger social norms: bishops and deacons are to maintain standard households, the foundational units of Greek and Roman social life. Bishops must also be “well thought of by outsiders” (3:7), so that they, and presumably their communities, are not shamed, not disgraced. The letter writer is very concerned about how others see the community.

Men are policed in 1 Timothy as the only ones authorized for leadership within Jesus groups. Women in 1 Timothy are not authorized for anything except childbirth. Women are to be invisible in public and in the activities of the community. They are commanded to be silent.

As case studies on gendered possibilities for authority and leadership in the early Jesus groups, Gospel of Mary and 1 Timothy appear to be complete opposites. On the one hand, Gospel of Mary affirms that Jesus upheld women as equal, even superior, leaders. The goal of this group of the Savior was the attainment of true humanity, outside of or aside from a male-female binary. On the other hand, 1 Timothy appeals to Genesis 2–3 to deny women any right to activity within the community: women are to be seen but not heard, and preferably not seen, either. Surely 1 Timothy would fall into the category of “adversary” mentioned in Gospel of Mary!

What are we to do with these opposing writings when attempting to understand the groups of the Savior and Jesus clubs of the first two centuries?

TENSION, AMBIGUITY, PARADOX

The Question

These two writings and, by extension, the Jesus movements that produced them, seem to have nothing in common. Can the figure of Mary, and the list of women teachers and leaders in the Letter to the Romans, possibly connect to the proscriptive, prohibitive 1 Timothy, a letter that explicitly states that women are not to teach, nor even speak? Can we usefully compare the boundary challenge of Galatians 3:28, Paul's statement about all belonging in and through the Anointed, to the rigidity of the household codes of Colossians and Ephesians? No, Gospel of Mary and 1 Timothy imagine entirely different gendered possibilities. No, the form of belonging proposed in Galatians does not compare to the division that Colossians and Ephesians prescribe. These writings cannot be held in common. They speak of and to deep differences in the understanding of gender, and the possibilities gendering does or does not allow, in very different ways.

Most discussions of the writings of the early Jesus movements have not accounted for this difference. Conversation about these writings has centered on unanswerable questions when it comes to gender. "Is the New Testament (the New Testament being seen as one coherent volume, here) negative toward women?" is one such question that is often asked and one about which everyone has strong feelings, on one side or the other. Yes, the New Testament is negative toward women. No, while the New Testament contains some problematic passages, it can and should still be interpreted as positive toward women. The New Testament is both. Should we ask this question at all?

We like asking questions that have yes or no, good or bad, right or wrong answers because they seem simpler. We want to find a clear answer, on one side or the other. This good/bad positioning is a fine place to start an argument; it is always important to notice a surprise or discrepancy within a given source. Such positioning is not a place where we can end, however. The basic question remains: So what? What kind of meaning can be generated when the presentation of those stereotypes is examined more closely?

Nothing particularly new will be learned when binary questions are asked about gender in the diverse writings of the early Jesus movements. Are these writings negative toward women? Absolutely, and absolutely not. Ask the opposite question: Are these writings positive toward women and women's roles? Again, absolutely, and absolutely not. Where, then, can

binary questions and answers lead? How can we engage these writings more deeply?

The Loss of Visibility and Agency of Women in 1 Corinthians

Understanding the “yes and no,” the binary, is step one. The writings of the early people of the Way, some of which were later included in the New Testament, contain contradictory depictions of women and of gender, not just between biblical writings, but within them, individually. Paul’s first letter to Chloe’s people in Corinth presents readers with such tension, a tension both intriguing and challenging. In [chapter 7](#) of 1 Corinthians, Paul offers Chloe’s people some advice about marrying or remaining single: he would prefer it if everyone in the community could remain single, but if singleness is not possible, it is reasonable for community members to marry. When married, husbands and wives should grant one another their “conjugal rights.” Paul then states, “the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does” (v. 4). That representation of authority, husband over wife, is not surprising for ancient Greece and Rome. Next, however, Paul affirms, “likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” The statement that a woman has authority over the body of the husband, the head of the household, is not only much more surprising, but really radical. The male head of the household was the primary authority figure in ancient Rome, wielding power over the other men, women, children, and the enslaved in his house.



This small detail from a once large Roman fresco from the turn of the first century CE depicts an unidentified woman sipping from a cup and looking out from a balcony.

Woman on a Balcony, courtesy The J. Paul Getty Museum (Gift of Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman)

Paul then moves to a discussion of situations in which a man or woman marries someone who does not follow the Anointed. Paul declares, “the husband who is not a member is consecrated through his wife and the wife who is not a member is consecrated through her husband . . . After all, wife, what do you really know about whether you will save your husband; or what do you really know, husband, about whether you will save your wife?” (1 Cor. 7:14, 16). The reciprocity expressed here, the rights for both wives and husbands, is remarkable.

Later in this same letter, the situation shifts. First Corinthians 11:2–11 offers some confusing instructions concerning women’s head coverings in public gatherings. A man should not veil his head, Paul writes, “since he is the ‘image and reflection’ of God”; but, he continues, “woman is the reflection of man, because man did not come into being from woman, but woman from man. And man was not created for woman, but woman for man” (vv. 7–8). This declaration does not sound much like 1 Corinthians 7, where husbands and wives were created for the sake of each other with a carefully balanced mutuality. This difference is so great and the ideas seem to disrupt the overall argument of the letter to such an extent that many biblical scholars therefore consider this section to be an addition by a later author.

Paul continues his case for the veiling of women in the activities of Chloe’s people with an argument about what he calls “nature”: “You be the judge: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering” (1 Cor. 11:13–15). There is nothing natural about hair length; Paul’s argument rests on a social convention of gender. It was socially acceptable for men to have short hair and women to have long hair.

Where Paul previously upsets social convention in 1 Corinthians 7, here in chapter 11 he, or perhaps a later editor of Paul’s letter, reinforces it. In ancient Greece and Rome, socially “decent” adult women covered their heads in public. A covering indicated a woman’s social status as true “woman”: a Greek woman was not actually called such until she had given birth to her first child within the bonds of marriage. “Woman” was a status a person became. The proper sexual status or sexuality of the Greek woman, as a woman, was made visible by her covered head.

In Paul’s context, adult women active in public with uncovered heads were sexually and socially transgressive—they violated expected norms. New groups like Chloe’s people were always viewed with suspicion in ancient Greece and Rome, and this suspicion often included charges of sexual immorality. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul, or a later author, tries to reign in the free activities of Chloe’s people, activities that would be labeled as sexually, and therefore socially, deviant. Mutuality in marriage is one thing;

implications of transgressive sexuality due to uncovered heads is quite another.

Women in this letter, and in this particular chapter of the letter, are envisioned as present and visible in the community. They are active during communal gatherings, participating in prayer and prophecy. But how do we resolve the gendered ambiguity in the letter? Is Paul stating, “Yes, women, you are free to participate, but could you maybe tone it down a little bit? Could you observe a bit of normal social protocol?” Or, is this passage even from Paul? Is it perhaps an addition by a later editor of Paul adjusting Paul’s letter to a new situation? These two solutions are, of course, not the only options; 1 Corinthians 11 can easily lead us down a rabbit hole of interpretation. We cannot satisfy all our curiosity.

First Corinthians 14 is less ambiguous. “Women should be silent during the meetings,” the writer asserts. “They are not allowed to speak, but must be subordinate, just as the Law says. If there is something they want to know, they should ask their husbands at home” (vv. 34–35). These statements leave no room for interpretation. Women are not to be heard. They are not to be active participants in the community’s ritual life. They do not even have the right to ask questions.

First Corinthians 11:2–11 and 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 both seem out of place in the argument of the letter and therefore are likely additions to the letter made after Paul’s time. Several translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version, place 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 in parentheses to highlight the dubious or perhaps later (post–second century) authorship of those verses. Some interpreters go further and think that these verses should be removed from the letter entirely, since they only harm readers. But does removing the offending verses solve the issue, even if Paul did not write them? How can or should chapters 7, 11, and 14 of 1 Corinthians make sense together? An early editor of the letter thought that these passages all made sense together, from Paul.

RECONCILING THE CONTRADICTIONS

First Corinthians is just one example of contradiction at most, ambiguity at best, within a single writing. Such ambiguity is often found in studying and interpreting ancient writings, which have an internal history and social

situation that are not always apparent to later readers. The ambiguity of 1 Corinthians and the ambiguities about gender within other early Jesus associations force a move away from yes/no, good/bad, right/wrong questions and answers. Simple questions like, “Did the early Jesus movement value women? Did the movement prioritize women’s roles? Did Paul like women?” can be answered only, “Yes, no, and both.”

More than anything, “yes and no” tell us that the early groups of the Savior were incredibly diverse. The imagined community that found 1 Timothy meaningful was likely not the same group of the Savior that found Gospel of Mary meaningful. This conclusion is important in and of itself, for it argues against the popular notion that “Christianity” was some kind of unified “whole” from the start and that fragmentation or disunity—diversity—came later. There was no such thing as “Christianity” in the first centuries of the Common Era.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Dewey, Joanna. “Women: Their Visibility and Agency and Loss of Agency in Early Christian Texts.” Fall 2018.

Lillie, Celene. “Thinking Through Gender in the Second Century Jesus Movements.” Fall 2018.

Wheeler-Reed, David. “Re-Reading *Regulating Sex* One Year Later.” Fall 2018.

Forming New Identities Through Gender

Seeing gender in the groups of the Savior enables us to see the testing of boundaries. The lack of clear boundaries for identity, group belonging, and cohesion prompts gender-boundary violation. This disruption demonstrates, in a way nothing else can, the multiplicity of the early Jesus movements. Boundary maintenance or protection was not something that many Jesus peoples were particularly interested in. Yet gender was and is all about boundaries: their definition, maintenance, and defense. The use of gender by these groups became the ultimate tool for testing boundaries, for slipping a toe across a line, for withdrawing and creating new boundaries, for disordering the social world around them.

This disordering of the social world is made possible through the manipulation of gender by and through women. Women of the early communities of the Anointed test the social fabric, probe its weak spots, and thereby imagine alternative warps and wefts. Gospel of Mary, 1 Timothy, Galatians, Colossians, Ephesians, and even Pliny's letter to Trajan all share in common a socially male interest in fixed, stable boundaries. They also share in common a socially female interest in instability, in challenging boundaries. The author of 1 Timothy, co-opting the voice of Paul, commands, "Let a woman learn in silence with all subordination" (1 Tim. 2:11). The need for this prohibition, of course, suggests that women were not "learning in silence" at all. "Let us teach!" or "We are teaching!" are the imagined other sides of this silenced story.



Thecla, a teacher and healer, was thrown into a pool in a Roman arena as a means of execution. But she survived with the help of many women cheering for her, and, so her story goes, the beasts of the arena were killed by lightning. She stayed in the water with the animals and baptized herself (see [Chapter 13](#)).

Sarah Sexton Crossan

This boundary challenge is present in an Anointed community writing from the first two centuries called Acts of Paul and Thecla. Paul's main goal in this story concerns marriage: he aims to free young people from the violence and patriarchy of the married state. Thecla is the one who takes this teaching to heart and suffers the brutal consequences. She abandons the path set out for her by society and violates boundaries. She is then abandoned by her family, tortured by political authorities, and even abandoned by Paul himself. She exemplifies the price paid by those who violate the fixed male boundary.

GENDER IN GREECE AND ROME

The male focus on fixity and female interest in instability makes sense when considered in the context of Greek and Roman ideas about gender. The ancient Mediterranean was a “one-sex” world in which men were the “reality,” fully formed physically and socially. Women were imperfect men, unfinished, their genitals inappropriately inverted: “the female is as it were a deformed male,” Aristotle affirmed in *Generation of Animals*.¹ According to the physician Galen, born in Pergamon in the second century CE, women and men did not have different organs or body parts; men’s organs were properly external and public, while a woman’s were turned inside. He writes:

All the parts, then, that men have, women have too, the difference between them lying in only one thing, namely, that in women the parts are within [the body] whereas in men they are outside, in the region called the perineum. Consider first whichever ones you please, turn outward the woman’s, turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man’s, and you will find them the same in both in every respect.²

Galen goes on to compare a woman’s inward-facing parts to the eyes of a mole: while moles cannot use their eyes to see, the eyes still exist, unopened, “left there imperfect.”

Similarly, the second-century CE physician Soranus builds upon the work of an earlier physician named Herophilus, whose late fourth-/early third-century BCE work, though surviving only in quoted fragments, showed a particular focus on gynecology. Soranus quotes:

And in his *Midwifery* Herophilus says that the uterus is woven from the same thing as the other parts, is regulated by the same faculties, has the same material substances at hand, and is caused to be diseased by the same things . . . Accordingly, says Herophilus, there is no affection peculiar to women, except conceiving, nourishing what has been conceived, giving birth, “ripening” the milk, and the opposites of these. (*Gynecology* 3.3)³

Medical works from the first two centuries suggest that men and women were not understood as different kinds of bodies. The difference between men and women was of degree, a vertical axis with “man” at the top and “woman” as a progressive movement downward or away.

This one-sex perception of human bodies played out socially in significant ways. Men, genitals-turned-out, belonged to the public sphere,

while women, genitals-turned-in, belonged to the private sphere. The ancient understanding of the body was profoundly social rather than physical or biological. Our use of the words “male” and “female,” “man” and “woman” in this book attempts to align with these social categories as understood and used in the first two centuries.

The male body was the “normal” body, the exemplar of the complete or perfect body, but it was not a “natural” body, as we would understand that term. “Natural” here really means socially natural, or socially appropriate and acceptable. Acquiring this natural or socially acceptable body required constant work. Infants were bathed, massaged, and swaddled so that their bodies literally could become molded, shaped into acceptable male and female characteristics. The reference to Mary’s swaddling of Jesus, her wrapping of Jesus in bands of cloth (Luke 2:7), takes on a different meaning when viewed from this perspective: Mary is forming his body so that Jesus can eventually take the shape of a man. Jesus’s swaddling is an act of masculinization.

Nobody—no *body*—could ever achieve masculinity in its fullness, could ever actually become or be male. Like the body of an elite athlete, the ancient body required constant, strategic work. Care of the body focused on the appropriate expression of social norms. The Latin word *vir* means “man” but specifically refers to an adult male, over twenty years old, married to a woman, freeborn, not enslaved, a Roman citizen, engaged in military activity, and expressing virtues such as courage and honor. The word constructs not simply “male” but a web of social relationships. The word is not about biological sex, but social status.

Ancient men were also defenders of boundaries. Male bodies were associated with qualities like hardness, hotness, solidity, and definition. The male body should protect itself, its household, and its empire from external threat. Male bodies perceived to be without such qualities and therefore potentially violable were subject to ridicule. One of the worst insults in antiquity was the charge of effeminacy, the labeling of a man as being feminine or womanly.

By contrast, the female body, as an imperfect male body, was a violation and violator of boundaries. The female body was constantly penetrated by social and physical forces; it was leaky, porous, cold, soft, wet, moving across and between spaces. The female body was dangerous, therefore, in its potential to transgress, to go beyond or violate boundaries. All kinds of

leaky female bodies appear in the writings of Jesus groups. Mark's Gospel relates the story of the woman "suffering from hemorrhages"; no matter what treatments physicians offer, her leakiness becomes worse and worse. She approaches Jesus knowing that he can stop her leakiness and restore her boundaries. "If I could just touch his clothes," she avows, "I'll be cured!" (Mark 5:28). The miracle of Jesus in this context is the restoration of boundaries to this particularly porous woman. In giving the woman's body some clearer boundaries, Jesus also restores her to social acceptability. Healing her body is a social healing.

Men's bodies were firmly bounded; women's bodies were transgressive and thus required bounding or "fixing." The Greek word for a woman's head covering or veil, *krēdemnon*, makes this point quite clearly. While used most often to refer to a veil, the same word also refers to a city's fortifications or battlements, and to the lid or stopper of a wine jar. Could the implications of the different uses of this term—a defense, a wall, a stopper, a lid, a woman's head covering—be any clearer?

The construct of gender enabled the embodiment of social realities. Men (again, understanding this word as a specific social construct from a specific time and place) were active, public, authoritative, and bounded. Women were passive, private, submissive, and in need of bounding. Gender was completely bound up with social position and power. Gender is obviously, then, a hugely important tool, perhaps the most important tool, as a person or group explores and defines identity.

TESTING AND QUEERING BOUNDARIES

Given the default understanding of gender in the ancient world, the interest of the early Jesus movements in boundary testing and violation allows us to see something not apparent without the lens of gender. Writings that appear to have nothing in common, on one level, all point to the use of gender as a means of testing boundaries. Specifically, *women* test boundaries.

Female boundary testing, such a prominent feature of this diverse collection of writings, really makes good sense. Women were boundary violators, characterized negatively by instability. These early Jesus schools and associations employ an ancient social construction of gender in a very positive way. Of course, women are testers of boundaries—that's who

women *are*. In the early groups of the Savior, this boundary testing is used to achieve constructive or affirming ends. It is central to the experience of these groups, for both women and men.

Much of this boundary-testing activity is best understood as a queering of ancient structures of gender. The word “queer” has different modern meanings, but for the purposes of this chapter, queering refers to a disruption of conventional, normative ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality, especially ideas that make heterosexuality the norm from which all other forms of sexuality deviate. Queering opens possibilities for new modes of identity and belonging. Queering questions, challenges, resists, deconstructs, and disassembles categories we think we know—man, woman, male, female—and renders them “other.” This strangeness is what opens new social spaces in which to experiment. There is nothing natural about gender. While contemporary contexts operate as though the male/female binary still directs social life, these categories are not the only possibilities for social existence and never have been. Just because we *say* that something is male or female does not mean that that thing actually *is* male or female.

By exploring how gender functions among the early peoples of the Way, it becomes apparent that they queered gender and, as a result, imagined new space for social existence and identity. Scholar Virginia Burrus makes this landmark argument in an examination of narratives about martyrs.⁴ Previous scholars who considered gender and sexuality in the martyrdom stories insisted that these stories actually reproduce and therefore affirm conventional ideas of gender. The goal of martyrdom, according to the competing arguments, was the final achievement of the status of “man.” The martyrs are shown to be active, courageous, strong, in control, and dominant—all qualities of the ideal Greek or Roman male. The martyrs are like gladiators, athletes, or soldiers; again, all roles open exclusively to men.

Burrus, however, takes a closer look at just who these supposed “men” were in the martyrdom accounts. Who are these bodies that are associated so strongly with conventional symbols of masculinity? Burrus notices that these bodies are entirely unconventional for their social context: the bodies of the martyrs are old, disabled, enslaved, female, maternal, children. The bodies are non-men, according to Greek and Roman social norms. What could such a privileging of non-male and non-masculine bodies mean?

The most prized male virtue in the ancient Mediterranean world was courage. Courage is actually synonymous with manliness in this context; the Greek word for courage, *andreia*, is formed from a root meaning “man” (*andr-*). Courage, therefore, is equivalent to “being a man,” a skill that takes practice and discipline and is never fully mastered. Burrus examines the concept of courage/manliness in a story about nine Judean martyrs that appears in 4 Maccabees, a text likely written in the first century CE (see [Chapter 6](#)). This narrative is the origin story of all martyrdom stories that are to come. It presents itself as a philosophical treatise about the relationship between reason and emotion, highlighting rational judgment as the pinnacle of virtue. The author demonstrates the sovereignty of rational judgment through descriptions of the violent deaths at the hands of imperial authorities of Eleazar, seven unnamed brothers, and finally, the young men’s mother, also never named.

The story in 4 Maccabees is set in Judea during a period when it was under the control of the Seleucid Empire. The ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, is remembered for his cruelty. In 4 Maccabees, Antiochus is introduced as “an arrogant and terrible man” who banned religious observance. When his decrees were ignored, “he himself, through torture, tried to compel everyone in the nation to eat defiling foods and to renounce Judaism [ancestral practice]” (4 Macc. 4:26).⁵ Eleazar is brought before the king. He is “a man of priestly family, learned in the law, advanced in age, and known to many in the tyrant’s [Antiochus’s] court because of his philosophy” (5:4). Antiochus repeatedly draws attention to Eleazar’s age, calling him an “old man,” noting his gray hairs, urging him to consider his “years” and “old age” to compel Eleazar to eat pork and meat sacrificed to idols. Eleazar turns Antiochus’s ridicule around: “You, O king, shall not defile the honorable mouth of my old age, nor my long life lived lawfully. My ancestors will receive me as pure, as one who does not fear your violence even to death. You may tyrannize the ungodly, but you shall not dominate my religious principles, either by words or through deeds” (5:36–38).

Antiochus does not respond well to Eleazar’s refusal to eat his unclean meat. Eleazar is stripped, tortured, beaten, and burned. Despite his agony, Eleazar is “courageous and noble.” He is “unmoved”; “he kept his reason upright and unswerving.” The narrator repeatedly references both Eleazar’s courage and old age at once: “Like a noble athlete the old man, while being

beaten, was victorious over his torturers; in fact, with his face bathed in sweat, and gasping heavily for breath, he amazed even his torturers by his courageous spirit” (6:10–11). Eleazar is remembered as a glorious war general: “No city besieged with many ingenious war machines has ever held out as did that most holy [old] man . . . he conquered the besiegers with the shield of his devout reason” (7:4–5).

The mother in the narrative receives the highest praise. She not only watches her seven children die before Antiochus, but she persuades them to die rather than give in to the empire’s demands. She then casts herself into flames so that no one can touch her body, completely and fully in control of herself. She is “of the same mind as Abraham” (14:20), “mother of the nation, vindicator of the law and champion of religion” (15:29), the ultimate athlete “who carried away the prize of the contest in [her] heart” (15:29). She is “more noble than males in steadfastness, and more courageous [manlier] than men in endurance” (15:30).

Manliness and courage are synonyms. What is courage, in this context? What is true manliness? Eleazar, the seven brothers, their mother: they are not powerful individuals in their social worlds. They are not kings, like Antiochus. Since courage equals manliness in the ancient world, we would expect this manliness to manifest itself as active, dominating, aggressive, and penetrating. Masculinity is about domination. Antiochus, then, should be the ultimate man in this story. Instead, the aged Eleazar and the mother emerge as the true men. The virtue of *andreia* is wholly redefined. Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother do not become “men” in any conventional kind of way; they do not become penetrators, and they do not dominate. Manliness actually becomes completely disconnected from domination. Fourth Maccabees presents a total reversal of the gendered ideal.

Burrus argues that this redefinition of a gender category, the redefinition of “man,” must be seen in light of the politics of 4 Maccabees, which presents a vivid depiction of violence under imperial rule. The challenging and threatening life of Judeans under the Roman Empire demands a reimagining of social possibility. For Burrus, 4 Maccabees exposes a time when “the excesses of imperial rule have rendered masculinity *qua* domination deeply problematic, posing the challenge of imagining masculine virtue otherwise.”⁶ The pervasive conventions of male and female can no longer stand, given the brutality of life under those conventions. No one should be a man if the ideal man is a vicious tyrant

like Antiochus. In queering gender, the story gives readers a way to imagine what life could look like apart from imperial rule, what life *should* look like. The reimagination of gender is also a reimagination of social possibility, of a way to resist, to keep living in a world of crushing oppression.

QUEERNESS AND STORIES OF MARTYRDOM

Fourth Maccabees is just one example of a martyrdom story that queers gender. Martyrdom stories told by the Jesus schools and associations follow in the tradition of 4 Maccabees. Queering disrupts the principles and realities of the worlds behind these narratives. As a tool for disruption, gender becomes an essential opportunity to envision alternatives. In the story of the Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons, preserved in the writings of fourth-century historian and bishop Eusebius, the unexpected body of a chronically ill enslaved woman, Blandina, is at the center. Blandina is “filled with such power that those taking turns to inflict every form of torture on her from dawn to dusk failed and gave up, confessing that they were defeated and had nothing left to do to her . . . her entire body was torn and laid open.”⁷ Blandina, “like a noble athlete,” gained new strength, we are told, in her declaration of her group identity: “I am of the party of Christus; we do nothing to be ashamed of” (5.1.17–19).⁸ We see a different facet of martyrdom in the second-century story of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in which the elderly bishop Polycarp, entering the arena to be burned alive, is told by a “voice from the sky” to “make yourself manly!” (9.1). Being a man here seems synonymous with being a follower of the Anointed: being a man is about patience, endurance through suffering, quiet calm, and confidence.

We see these traits exemplified by a woman in *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*, when Perpetua has a vision in which she takes on an Egyptian gladiator; as she is stripped in preparation to fight, she becomes male: “I became a man” (10.7). The Latin reads *facta sum masculus*, “I become male” or “I am made male.” *Facta* is a feminine word form indicating a feminine identity for the speaker, Perpetua. *Masculus* means “male” or “masculine” and identifies the speaker as masculine. Perpetua, in three

words, *facta sum masculus*, is both female and male. This story is full of gender fluidity and ambiguity.

TRANSFORMING BOUNDARIES AND IMAGINING NEW ALTERNATIVES

Gender in the writings of the early Jesus movement is blurred and tested. This queering at its core is a disruption. Gender is something always under construction, and therefore always under threat in the social worlds of the groups of the Savior. That threat, that constant risk, is in these narratives an *opportunity*. They use, even exploit, that risk in order to test new, unconventional modes of existence. For people without social power, without any other means of changing their circumstances or shaping their identities, gender was a tool at everyone's disposal. For people living under empire, under oppression and violence, the boundary-testing potential inherent in the construction of gender became a powerful tool for imagining something other, for representing one's self, one's identity, through newly imaginative means.

“Queering” was not a term that these movements would have used of themselves. The application of this modern analytical category of queer to the narratives discussed in this chapter builds on contemporary queer theory. Gender was a foundational part of ancient Mediterranean social life in very specific ways. When that context is carefully and thoughtfully considered, the use of queering as a lens to examine these narratives and understand these peoples becomes dynamic and constructive. When the context is clarified, a context so different from our own contemporary constructions of gender, the queer lens can accurately apply. We can see through the glass clearly. And what we see is transformative.

Stories help us to understand our social worlds differently and to make arguments about these worlds. Narratives represent their social worlds, not completely, but significantly. They offer arguments about those social worlds. Through their representation and argument, they give readers new opportunities to offer their own representations and arguments. The entanglement of narrative and social world is appropriate across very different cultural worlds. The use of the modern category of queer helps us

to understand these worlds. When we read the writings of the early Jesus people, we can know them better—again, not completely, but significantly.

Specifically, knowledge of these early peoples of Wisdom comes through in their use of gender in their writings. The different kinds of gendered possibilities in this literature, possibilities as wide-ranging as those from 1 Timothy to Gospel of Mary, all explore boundaries, testing and fortifying, constructing and deconstructing, re-creating and reconfiguring. Women in particular, as porous, leaky bodies, have the potential to disrupt these lines and offer social alternatives. Gender in these writings stimulates imagination.

Gender was not significant among early Jesus clubs only in writing, however, but also as a lived reality in their actual experience of diversity and fluidity in social roles. Women are named often in Paul's letters as leaders and are named in the same way as male contemporaries; Paul applies the same terms to men as to women. The visibility of women in many schools of the Savior associated with Paul was a taken-for-granted reality. Indeed, women in Paul's time were relatively common religious leaders, but later their roles were minimized or erased. Junia is named as an apostle in Romans 16:7. Junia, a female name, was turned into Junias, a male name, in later biblical manuscripts and translations, and Paul's fellow female apostle disappeared. Paul took women's leadership in his Jesus groups for granted. Beyond the New Testament writings, clearly women were more prominent in these early associations than has traditionally been recognized.

There is no straightforward answer to binary questions about whether the early movements of the Way were positive or negative about and toward women. We have seen that the evidence makes that either/or way of asking the question problematic, or even the wrong question to ask. We cannot survey all of the writings of early Jesus groups that use gender, but the writings surveyed here tell us the following:

- The early Jesus groups, schools, and clubs were diverse and multiple.
- Gender demonstrates, as no other category or mode of questioning can, the interest among these communities in testing boundaries and imagining alternative life possibilities.
- This boundary testing was a “queering” of identity among these peoples, groups, and movements, a disruption of their status quo.

There is no question that people of diverse gender identities were active and visible within the earliest groups of the Savior.

These writings are complex and challenging. But the more we question, the more we begin to see, the more possibility we see in the bodies of, for example, those two enslaved women mentioned in Pliny's letter to the emperor. Gender had the capacity to dismantle forms of social domination, and thereby allow people to reimagine life apart from the empire.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Burrus, Virginia. "The Gender of Martyrdom." Fall 2018.

Dewey, Joanna. "Women: Their Visibility and Agency and Loss of Agency in Early Christian Texts." Fall 2018.

Lillie, Celene. "Thinking Through Gender in the Second Century Jesus Movements." Fall 2018.

Belonging to Israel

In the late second or early third century CE, a man named Publius Aelius Glykon built a limestone coffin for himself and his family on a hill outside Hierapolis, an ancient city located in what is now western Turkey. Glykon's sarcophagus is part of an impressive necropolis system, an ancient cemetery, on the outskirts of the city. While made for the dead, Glykon's sarcophagus tells an interesting story about the dynamics of belonging for the living. The inscription on his family tomb reads:

This grave and the burial-ground beneath it along with the base and the burial-place which is round about it belongs to Publius Aelius Glykon (son of) Zeuxianos Aelianus and to Aurelia Amia, daughter of Amianos the son of Seleukos. In it he will bury himself and his wife and his children, but no one else is allowed to be buried here. He bequeathed to the solemn leadership of the purple-dyers 200 denarii for grave-crowning, in order that it would give from the interest a portion for each to gain in the seventh month during the festival of Unleavened Bread. And likewise he bequeathed to the association of carpet-weavers one hundred and fifty denarii for grave-crowning, so that the proceeds from the interest should be divided, half during the festival of Kalends, in the fourth month, on the eighth day, and half during the festival of Pentecost.¹

Glykon leaves money to the local association of purple-dyers, people who dyed cloth with expensive purple for a living, for taking care of his tomb. This money should accrue interest and through the interest, enable the association to contribute to the festival of Unleavened Bread, a Judean religious festival. To the association of carpet-weavers, he leaves money for a grave ceremony marking the festival of Pentecost, another Judean festival, as well as Kalends, a Roman festival for the new year.

While Glykon does not explicitly name himself as Judean, the request for grave ceremonies on two Judean holy days certainly aligns his family

with Israel in a way that will hold this bond of belonging into Glykon's indefinite future. This bond with Israel is cemented outside of the land of Israel; Glykon lives in Hierapolis, in Asia Minor, not in Roman Palestine. He is a Judean in diaspora.

Glykon also declares his Romanness, by his status as a Roman citizen with his three names, Publius Aelius Glykon—a definitive marker of his citizenship—and by leaving money to recognize Kalends. Glykon's identity is also local. He is part of the Greek urban context of Hierapolis, given his interaction with the local associations of purple-dyers and carpet-weavers. Here, then, we see a significant level of interaction and integration: Judean, Greek, and Roman all intertwine as important terms of identity. Glykon located himself and his family within Judean, Greek, and Roman modes of belonging.

Glykon's inscription on his tomb points to the complicated, variable, and even seemingly contradictory ways in which people found belonging in the first two centuries. Prior to the Roman Empire, the essential mode of belonging in the ancient Mediterranean was nation, one's "people." The contemporary word "ethnic" derives from the ancient Greek word for nation/people, *ethnos*. Belonging to a people meant also belonging to a particular place, a geographical space. It likewise meant honoring the gods of that place, even outside the boundaries of geography.

The Roman Empire, however, compelled a reimagining of these ties to nation and people, requiring honors to the new god, the emperor. Belonging to the Roman Empire meant weakening local ties and affiliations over time as nations were brought into the cosmopolis of Rome. The fundamental belonging to people, however, did not just disappear. Glykon's presentation of his social and spatial identities testifies to the importance of people, of physical or local space, and of empire. All kinds of new definitions of belonging were under way during the first two centuries of the Common Era in order for people to learn to live with Rome's effort to amalgamate all nations, all peoples.

Like Glykon, the multiple Jesus peoples and associations identified with the people of Israel. These identifications were expressed in different ways, but there was no clearer agreement among the followers of the Anointed in the first two centuries than this: "We belong to Israel, even if we weren't born into Israel. We are people of Israel." Even as the conquered people of a former nation in Asia Minor or North Africa, and despite Rome's claim that

all were barbarians compared with Rome, the adherents of the Anointed belonged to the small, defeated nation of Israel, as did the Anointed, the Savior, Jesus.

ISRAEL AND “JEWS” IN THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

Who was who in Israel during the first two centuries was decisively different from the way it is in the twenty-first century. Today, being a “Jew” or “Jewish” can mean being a member of the Jewish religion, the Jewish state, or both. But in the first century both those words were rarely used for referring to national or religious identities.



Coin issued by Emperor Vespasian celebrating the defeat of the Judeans.

Classical Numismatic Group, Wikimedia Commons

In the first two centuries, saying that you belonged to Israel or identifying as Judean were the clearest ways to say who you were. These statements of belonging were also the main ways one identified oneself even when one did not live in geographical Israel, as was the case for the majority of Judeans. At that time “Israel” was more “all the people of Israel,” no matter where they lived.

The word for “Judean,” typically translated in our twenty-first-century language as “Jewish,” was the first-century way many people in southern Israel identified and also the way for some people who identified religiously or politically with southern Israel. The identification is primarily of people,

rather than geography. Since this is a very particular title for people of southern Israel in the first century, scholars now use the word “Judean” (rather than “Jewish”) for this group. In the mid-to-late second century, more people of Israel were switching to calling themselves “Jews” or “Jewish,” as the reality of a nation of Israel faded because of Rome defeating it twice. This was the same word as “Judean” but by the end of the second century it had a broader meaning than referring to someone from southern Israel.

In ancient Greek, the language that all these people spoke, the term *Ioudaios* was the most common word used to reference a person who belonged to Israel, or a Judean. In this book, we have translated *Ioudaios* as Judean. *Ioudaios* includes the overlapping meanings explained above.

Six primary groups of people or individuals identified themselves in three major ways at various times and places:

- The non-Greek people who lived in geographical Israel: “people of Israel”
- The people who worshipped Israel’s God but did not live in Israel: “people of Israel”
- The historical Jesus: “people of Israel”
- Most non-Greek people who lived in southern Israel during the first century: “Judeans”
- More and more people in the second century who worshipped Israel’s God: “Jews”
- Paul, who lived in Asia Minor during the first century: “people of Israel”

PAUL AND BELONGING TO ISRAEL

Paul is the earliest writer interested in finding a place for his clubs of Jesus followers in the early Roman Empire. Paul consistently gives the Jesus followers a new, stronger sense of identity through modeling his sense of ethnicity, of peoplehood, of ties to land, tradition, and practice. In many of his letters, Paul identifies himself using ethnic/geographic descriptors for Judea: Judean, Israelite, Israel, and Hebrew. “Are they Hebrews? So am I!” Paul asserts in 2 Corinthians 11:22, in the face of competition from other

envoys of good news. “Are they Israelites? So am I! Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I!” Similarly, in Philippians 3:4–6, Paul declares:

. . . though I, too, have confidence in [my] body. If anyone else seems to have confidence in their body, I have more: circumcision on the eighth day; of the people of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew (born) of Hebrews; according to the Law, a Pharisee; according to zeal [or “honor,” potentially, or “rivalry”], one persecuting the assembly [of Jesus followers]; according to righteousness under the Law, one becomes faultless.

Throughout the letters Paul writes to different clubs in Asia Minor and Rome, whose identities have been shattered by Roman violence, he invites these people to follow Jesus and become a part of the people of Israel now scattered all over the world. Many take him up on this invitation. Like Paul, they listen to the stories of Israel in its holy writings and claim the lineage of Abraham and hold on to the writings of Isaiah, Genesis, and Exodus. They take seriously the invitation in Isaiah that all the people of the world are welcomed to be a part of that nation of Israel.

In our contemporary contexts we no longer understand the ancient world as the collection of nations/peoples to which Paul refers forty-five times in his letters. We have lost this sense of people or nation in our reading of Paul, and in our reading of how people figured out their identities under empire more broadly. This situation is most unfortunate, given Paul’s frequent reference to the idea. The word “nation,” *ethnos*, in the first two centuries, when those nations had been subsumed by the Roman Empire, still means “nation.” But Paul knows that it also means the sense of ethnicity, of peoplehood, of ties to land, tradition, and practice. We should not lose sight of these dynamics of belonging in Paul’s letters.

The Greek word *ethnos* in New Testament translations is often rendered “gentile,” often capitalized (“Gentile”). In this sense it refers to a person of non-Jewish faith. In later interpretations of writings of early Jesus peoples, it took on the sense of being a Christian, that is, not a Jew. This sense is wholly missing from the first two centuries. Normally in Greek the word refers to a nation or people, and this is its usage in the Greek writings of the first two centuries. It carries no sense of distinguishing those who follow Jesus from those who do not, and much less any such anachronistic understanding of “Christian” versus “Jew.”

Paul works to identify himself and others using ethnic descriptors, specifically, the Judean national identity. When we encounter these identifications in Paul, our aim as readers is to consider what is behind

them. When Paul identifies himself or others as belonging to peoples, ethnic groups, or devastated nations, how does he position these peoples, in relation to one another, and what might this positioning tell us about belonging? For those who lost their nation to Rome, the word now also has the meanings of adherence to Paul's Anointed groups and to other clubs on the ground in the first-century Mediterranean basin.

Paul's implications when he asserts his Hebrew or Israelite identities are clear: he is not to be considered as inferior to his competitors, belonging to some lesser national heritage than Greece or Rome—no indeed! He is of the nation of Israel, of the people of Judea. Look again at his words from Philippians quoted above: "If anyone else seems to have confidence in their body, I have more: circumcision on the eighth day; of the people of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin." But his next move in this letter places this primary identification in a new context: "But whatever gains these were to me, because of the Anointed, I now consider loss" (Phil. 3:7). The social advantage Paul claims because of his national identity becomes intertwined with what he calls "the knowing of the Anointed Jesus" in Philippians 3:8. This "knowing" also appears to take precedence over the honor brought through national identity. Philippians presents us with an interesting dynamic of group identity. How should we understand Paul's model of belonging? What is the relationship between belonging to a nation and belonging to an association of the Anointed?

These verses from Philippians voice a certain tension in what belonging means under the power of the Roman Empire. In the first-century Mediterranean, tensions developed between the loss of nationhood for many people and the new reality of a universal power everywhere one looked. Empire produced a sense of both location and dislocation. The continued pull toward national affiliation struggled with the push toward primary affiliation with Rome. Philippians makes clear that nation still exerted a significant amount of pull. National belonging was a central experience of ancient social life. Members of associations of the Anointed found this belonging in Israel. More or less, all first- and second-century writings related to Jesus or the Anointed honored various traditions of Israel. As people began to identify with Jesus and/or the Anointed, including many people not related by blood with Israel, they also began to understand that they belonged to greater Israel.

Usually, Paul emphasizes that participation in associations of the Anointed involves adoption of the God of Israel, an ethnic or national God, and the rejection of other ethnic forms of worship or cultural practices. Belonging to Paul's groups involves "turning to God from idols, to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). In Paul's view, before membership in Paul's groups, people served the wrong gods, or honored gods in incorrect ways: "You know that when you were among the nations," Paul reminds his addressees in 1 Corinthians 12:2, "being diverted, you were led to idols without speech." Learning to be a part of the greater Israel that had spread around the Mediterranean basin involved proper connection to the God of Israel.

In Paul's writings, consistently, the Judean "nation" also appears at the top of an ethnic ladder of peoples.² The ladder is relatively short: Israel, Israelites, or Judea at the top, and all others together at the bottom. Paul offers a simple Judeans-and-others dichotomy. He adopts the perspective of the superior ethnic group, the top of the ladder: belonging to Israel is best, followed by Greek identity, perhaps, but basically by everyone else. Rome is definitely not at the top of this ladder. These ethnic identifications imply the superiority of the people of Israel over inferior "peoples" or "nations"; out of these inferior nations, though, some have turned to this superior God, and the superior national belonging, of Israel.

Belonging to Israel is at the top of Paul's world.³ Those peoples who turned to the God of Israel became associated with Israel through shared cultural practice, despite their origins among other peoples. Paul indicates that belonging to Israel is something groups can do, through the proper honor of the God of Israel, regardless of origin. Paul has this capacity for belonging in mind in his famous statement in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Judean nor Greek, there is neither enslaved nor free, there is neither 'male and female,' for all of you are one in the Anointed Jesus." This is not a statement about belief, about what it means to believe in the Anointed Jesus. Neither is this a statement about a fundamental equality, an erasure of human difference or some kind of reformation of contemporary "Judaism," such that everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, might adhere to the God of Israel through faith.

In its specific context, this statement follows from Paul's strategic attempt to persuade his audience from the nations that they do not need to adopt Torah regulations concerning practice, especially the practice of

circumcision. Since everyone can belong to the God of Israel, the claim to belong to different nations no longer holds. There is no difference between Judean and Greek in that both can be equally saved or condemned. Participation in the national identity of Israel on the basis of honoring God: this form of belonging is open to all.

Affiliation with Paul's group is about connection, about belonging, but about belonging in the midst of difference. Identification with the Anointed involves belonging to Israel, being in relationship to Israel. This vocabulary is not about religious beliefs, but about the making and remaking of group identities through practice. This is a vocabulary for figuring out and defining group belonging.

What kind of belonging is Paul working toward here? Again, most first- and second-century literature about Jesus or the Anointed honored the traditions of Israel. Identification with the nation of Judea, with the people of Israel, was key to Anointed-belonging. This more national mode of belonging, though, existed in a context of the loss and erasure of national belonging under empire. The issue here is not about belief, about dogmatic concerns, but rather about redefining group belonging amidst the destruction of conventional ways of thinking about one's identity.

On the one hand, for Paul, belonging to larger Israel identifies and defines who the members of his Jesus associations are. Members of Paul's clubs are not necessarily ethnically or nationally Judean, but they are children of Israel. In Paul's context, we are dealing with two primary dynamics of human geography: First, there are many birthright people of Israel who have been displaced from the territory of Israel. Many thousands of people from Israel now live in Egypt, Syria, Greece, and Asia Minor. There is already a new model for who can belong to Israel: an Israel in diaspora.⁴ Second, Rome has intentionally displaced many of the nations it conquered. The many nations who used to exist now are scattered around a Mediterranean ruled by the empire. Because this displacement often happened violently, these displaced peoples do not accept the possibilities of becoming Roman or living under Roman governance. Many people in the first two centuries are looking for a new kind of national belonging.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul claims a space for his gospel that closely resembles the Roman "inhabited world," or *oikoumene*, the space of empire (see [Chapter 4](#)): "For I will not venture to speak of anything except what the Anointed has accomplished through me to win obedience from the

nations, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of the Anointed” (Rom. 15:18–19). This statement has a clear imperial context and consequence. As the Roman emperors triumphed over the inhabited world with the permission and support of the gods, so Paul’s gospel, his good news of the Anointed, triumphed over this same space, with the permission of the God of Israel.

Consideration of nation in Paul’s writings enables us to understand that his use of words like “Israel” did not mean he was participating in an ideological disagreement about abstract entities but was trying to help associations of the Anointed feel like they were in shared or adopted national/ethnic space.⁵ Paul uses both the idea of “nation” and that of “empire”—the two main group affiliations of the time. These affiliations existed in tension. Paul’s intention is not opposition to the larger people of Israel, nor is it the creation of a universal religion. Neither is it an eradication of difference. At issue in Paul’s writings is the matter of identification, the matter of struggle, clash, and claim at issue in belonging.

Israel was not the only place where those who had lost their nation could find a new sense of belonging. In the first two centuries members of other former nations also found belonging in new ways. Some groups claimed community in stories and rituals of the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis and her brother Osiris. Not unlike the fascination with Israel, in Isis and Osiris there were also stories of remaking oneself that found resonance across Asia Minor, Greece, and Syria. In one primary ancient story Isis found the dismembered body of her brother Osiris and put it back together into a living whole. No wonder defeated nations joined clubs honoring the Egyptian glory of Isis and Osiris. Likewise, in North Africa, Macedonia, and Greece, the loss of so many different national practices sparked all kinds of clubs that rebirthed older stories and retooled practices of Eleusis and Dionysos to claim new ways of belonging.

It makes sense that new clubs with practices originating in Greece and Egypt provided a new kind of reassurance for the national identities that Rome assaulted. Greece and Egypt were historic and legendary powerhouses in the ancient world. Even though in the first two centuries Rome controlled both nations, everyone in the Mediterranean knew how famous, honored, and ancient the Egyptians and Greeks were. Their

civilizations had been known for their architecture, literature, religion, and politics for many centuries, or—in the case of Egypt—for millennia. For nationalities crushed by Rome to associate their new identities with reimagined parts of Egypt or Greece was far more attractive than remaking one's self as part of Israel. Israel was a small nation that hardly ever conquered anything and instead was often conquered. Why then did so many groups turn to belonging to Israel in the first two centuries?

MODELING ONE'S SELF AFTER ISRAEL

Bringing nation or people (*ethnos*) into our Jesus-group vocabulary helps us to see important dynamics of belonging in and to the Roman Empire. Being part of the empire means finding ways to deal with the disruption and rethinking previously meaningful ethnic ties and national affiliations. The mechanism some used to deal with this disruption across diverse communities of the Anointed was to identify as children of Israel.

There are three main attributes these peoples find in Israel. First, Israel has only one God, and it is a God that claims to rule the world with goodness. This first honor does not come without some argument and second thoughts. What proof does one have that Israel's God rules the earth? After all, the Roman emperors look more powerful than Israel's God. But honoring one God began to make more sense to those who lived in the Mediterranean basin in the first two centuries. Before the Roman Empire, the world seemed smaller. Most nations had relatively small gods that moved in smaller circles. When the people of Israel praised the One God and everything that God had made, first- and second-century philosophers paid some attention. It seemed to make more sense that the bigger world, which one had come to know in the large empire, would have one divine ruler. The philosophers of this enlarging world noticed that the Roman emperor was sometimes too stupid, often too cruel, and occasionally too inattentive to effectively rule an increasingly large world. When the Greek and Roman philosophers heard about one God that created all things and demanded goodness and justice from all people, they saw something in Israel that they admired, even if Israel did not win many battles.

Second, as the Roman Empire grew and the people of Israel spread to almost all parts of the Mediterranean, people talked more about the curious

long list of commandments to do good that the people of Israel tried to follow. Both ordinary people and philosophers noticed that Israel's law of five books, the Torah, had quite high standards for ethics and behavior. Indeed, people of non-Israel ethnicity around the empire started going to synagogues to learn more about these commandments. They were surprised that the Israel people in the synagogues did not require non-Israel people to follow all their rules. As non-Israel people also learned of the teachings of Jesus and Jesus movements, they assumed that this also belonged to Israel's God and Israel's high ethical standards.

Third, Israel's holy writings—those stories about the creation of the world, the ways the national God saved and punished the people of Israel, and the long list of commandments—became more familiar to different groups in the Roman Empire. Israel's writings repeatedly commanded Israel to honor other peoples and to feed them when they were hungry. Teachers of groups of the Anointed that included mostly non-Israel people joining Israel engaged in discussions about God's goodness and the behavior Israel's God required. Other peoples considered Israel's writings as important gifts to the larger world, and the wisdom literature of Israel celebrated broad swaths of other peoples' wisdom writings.

Although Rome had humiliated Israel as a people in ways similar to the other nations, its long history and engagement in the world resulted in some part from the larger Mediterranean world acknowledging Israel's gifts, strengths, and wisdom. Biblical scholar and author Burton Mack has pointed to the deep connections between Israel and the other Mediterranean peoples:

The Jews thought in terms of creation . . . How to find the key that would make it possible to see the world as a whole again, account for the human diversity and cosmic expanse that had come into view and understand all the powers that had been unleashed as capable of working together for human well-being? . . . The story of Noah, also, was a good place to reflect on the standing of the nations in the eyes of the God of Israel. The rainbow's promise was not the private property of the Jews . . . What about the way God treated Abraham as a sign that the gentiles must be welcomed into the family of God?⁶

It was this dynamic in the larger Roman world that found those overwhelmed nations and ethnicities discovering new possibilities in belonging to or being connected to Israel.

A MESSY BLEND

A sense of the first two centuries as producing a joining of the broken nations following their Jesus-related companions into a larger Israel is emerging in historical research among both Jewish and Christian scholars. Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin played a key role in the Seminar's study of these two hundred years of blended Israel, fractured nations, and Jesus movements.⁷ Boyarin has argued that for at least the first four centuries, there was no “parting of the ways” between what has been mistakenly understood as two different religions—Judaism and Christianity. The first two centuries were mostly an intermingling and cohabitation of Jesus peoples and Israel.

Boyarin encourages us to discard a “parting of the ways” model in favor of an understanding of nation, people of the Anointed, and people of Israel, in their own diverse forms and varied collectives, as participating in a series of complex encounters with empire—specifically with the imperial reality of triumph over nation and people. When we recover the sense of nation in the writings of the Jesus movements in the first and second centuries of the Common Era, we get a much stronger picture of the situation on the ground, a picture of the significance of belonging to Israel. Being an adherent of the Anointed, following Jesus, meant identification with larger Israel—part of a complex dance of national and imperial belonging.

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Harland, Philip A. “Climbing the Ethnic Ladder: A Portrait of Interactions Between Judeans and Other Peoples.” Fall 2016.

Kotrosits, Maia. “Devising Collectives: Losing the Nation in the Story of Judaism and Christianity: A Response to Daniel Boyarin’s *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* and *A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonia Talmud as Diaspora*.” Fall 2016.

Livesey, Nina. “Difference and Similarity: A Review of Daniel Boyarin’s *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* and *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*.” Fall 2016.

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Marshall, John. “Judean War and Judean Diaspora: Class and Networks.” Fall 2015.

Experimental Families

Fairly early on in the writing we now know as Gospel of Matthew, Jesus stands outside, teaching a mixed crowd. As he teaches, his mother and brothers arrive on the scene and ask to speak to him. Told of their arrival, Jesus rejects them, asking, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Gesturing to his students, he states that his true family members, his chosen kin, are those who “do the will of God,” named as Jesus’s “father in the sky,” his celestial or divine father (Matt. 12:48–50).

Jesus’s apparent rejection of his mother, brothers, and sisters in Matthew is a radical move. The family was the heart of social, economic, religious, and political life in the first two centuries, and rejecting this heart would have put Jesus at enormous social risk. Jesus appears to alleviate this particular social risk, however, in choosing his family members for himself: his students are his true, chosen family.

Jesus’s rejection of his kin is even more dramatic, and surprising, given that the entire Gospel is presented as the story of Jesus’s family. The opening line of Matthew reads, “An account of the family of Jesus the Anointed son of David son of Abraham” (1:1). After this opening comes a long list of fathers and sons—forty-two generations in all. The final generation offers a puzzle: “And Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Anointed” (1:16). Is Jesus related to Joseph? No other birth announcement is presented this way. This final puzzle aside (for now), the Gospel writer makes it clear that Jesus’s family, his long line of ancestors, is the ultimate point of this story. This is a story about family. Yet later in the story, he rejects his closest family.

The complicated family story that is the Gospel of Matthew is just one of many complicated family stories we find in the writings of the early communities of the Anointed. When these writings are approached with ancient families in mind, family dynamics pop into view just about everywhere. Family was central to the founding and shaping of Jesus groups and schools in the first two centuries. Paul often refers to an assembly or association formed around a household: Aquila and Prisca, “together with the assembly at their house,” send greetings to Chloe’s people in Corinth (1 Cor. 16:19); Paul asks those belonging to the Anointed in Rome to send greetings to this same assembly at Prisca and Aquila’s house as well (Rom. 16:5). Paul’s Letter to Philemon, as it is typically titled, is not just written to Philemon, but also to Apphia, whom Paul names as his sister; to a man named Archippus; and to the whole assembly in Philemon’s house (Philem. 2). Colossians, a letter attributed to Paul, mentions the assembly in the house of a woman named Nympha (Col. 4:15).

Acts of the Apostles highlights the centrality of the household to the growth of early Jesus groups. When a prominent local figure belongs to the Anointed, that person’s whole household tends to belong along with them. Successful local businesswoman Lydia is initiated into an association of the Anointed, and her whole household is then initiated as well (Acts 16:15). Paul and Silas tell a prison guard that if he trusts Jesus, “you will be kept safe, you and your household.” The guard takes them to his house, cleans the wounds they sustained in prison, “and he was initiated at once, with all those belonging to him, and he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and he rejoiced, with all his household, that he had trusted God” (Acts 16:31–34). In Acts 18:8, Crispus, a local leader of a synagogue, trusts the Anointed, “together with all his household.” The affiliation of a head of a household with an association of the Anointed often, though not always, implies the affiliation of everyone in that household with that same association.

The language of family is used in many different writings of the first two centuries to identify group members, though these group members are not factual kin. Paul often refers to God as the father of a Jesus club and to the members of that club as siblings (for example, in 1 Thess. 1:3–4). Similarly, in Gospel of Thomas, Jesus teaches his students, “When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will

realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father” (3), and later, “The one who knows the father and the mother will be called the child of a whore” (105). Although the members of these communities are not formally related by blood, the language of family indicates a status as chosen family.

The language of family is also used to break or to challenge factual and conventional bonds. Jesus’s challenge in Matthew was reproduced from the earlier Gospel of Mark. Though Mark’s account is not as specific as Matthew’s, Jesus’s claim envelops the crowd as a whole in Mark, rather than the students alone (Mark 3:31–34). In Acts of Paul and Thecla, the heroine, Thecla, is first introduced by listing her family connections: she is a virgin, the daughter of Theocleia, and engaged to Thamyras. She gives up all family and household connections to follow Paul. The reader hears that upon her disconnection, “those who were in the house wept bitterly, Thamyras for the loss of a wife, Theocleia for that of a child, and the maidservants for that of a mistress. And there was a great outpouring of lamentation in the house” (ch. 10).¹ In order to follow Paul, Thecla breaks all the social bonds that characterized life in the ancient world: her roles as daughter, future wife, and slave owner are denied. Throughout her story, Thecla takes on new, independent social roles: she becomes a teacher, leader, and healer.

Households are joined and abandoned; familial bonds are created and destroyed. Clearly, family structures were extremely important to group being and belonging. Less clear, however, are how and why family structures were so important. Family is the central point of intersection of a complex network of social experiments. What made the family, specifically the ancient Roman concept of the household, such an important tool for belonging in the first two centuries?

THE ANCIENT HOUSEHOLD

This chapter uses the word “family” to refer to the social arrangement that lay at the center of ancient Mediterranean life, but family had a very different set of meanings in the ancient world than now. The fourth-century BCE Greek philosopher Aristotle’s description of family summarizes the ideal model for that world. He discusses the family, more accurately called

the household, in his work *Politics*; even before reading further, the context suggests that family is connected to politics:



Archaeological evidence speaks of the importance of groups that pushed the boundaries of the conventional Roman household. This funeral monument from the first century depicts a chosen household of freed people: three women and two men, freed from the household of the Furiii. The man on the right is a freedperson from the household of the Sulpicii. The personal names of these individuals are not given—only their identifications with the households in which they were formerly enslaved. While their relationships to one another are unclear, their representation together on this monument shows that they belonged with and to one another.

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And now that it is clear what are the component parts of the state, we have first of all to discuss household management; for every state is composed of households . . . the household in its perfect form consists of enslaved and freemen. The investigation of everything should begin with its smallest parts, and the primary and smallest parts of the household are master and enslaved, husband and wife, father and children. (I.ii.1253b)²

Aristotle states that the structure and running of a household is a microcosm for the effective running of the state. The philosopher then names enslaved and freed people as central to the household before naming any other role or figure. A family, then, is not made up simply, or even primarily, of kin or blood relations. Aristotle breaks the household down into three sets of relationships: master and enslaved, husband and wife, father and children. Each of these three relationships revolve around one central figure: the male head of the household, who is a slave owner, a husband, and a father.

Though from an earlier time, Aristotle's depiction of the family, the household, is representative of the elite male ideal of family that heavily

influenced cultural thought and practice under the Roman Empire. The household was a network of people and property in relation to one another, of both membership and ownership. Mark 10:29–30 offers a succinct portrait of this network: “Jesus said, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who, having left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands because of me and because of the proclamation, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands.’” House and land are an integral part of this view of family and, in this case, connect to an image of subsistence living that characterized life for the vast majority of people in rural areas of the empire.

House, land, wife, and children, as well as enslaved and freed people, dependent workers, clients and even members of the same trade or local occupation in attached shops and workrooms, property, enslaved and free laborers, kin—all existed in hierarchical relationship to one person: the male head of the household, or in Latin, the *paterfamilias*. The *paterfamilias*, dominating social space and social activity, subjected all to his power. Westar Institute scholar Susan M. (Elli) Elliott describes how the Roman household was an enactment of the honor and virtue of the *paterfamilias* in her book *Family Empires, Roman and Christian*. Walking past the front entrance of a wealthy household, a passerby would see the *paterfamilias* in a central officelike space, granting or prohibiting access to himself. Clients, including formerly enslaved people who, though legally free, still existed in subordination to the *paterfamilias*, mingled in a wide-open space in front of the him, waiting to pay him honor. The enslaved bustled about this space working, looking for a corner in which to rest, trying to carry on their own relationships when these relationships received no recognition under the law. Children, enslaved and free, played together on the floor. The household’s deities held a prominent place in a shrine where they received adornments of flowers and food offerings as devotions from household members. The funeral masks of ancestors peered down from the walls, still present and observant.³

The *paterfamilias* was his own kind of household god, and gods filled the Roman household, overseeing every act and aspect. The *paterfamilias*, taking the role of household priest, led the household in performing devotion to the various gods of the family and ensuring prosperity, household honor, and the continuation of the family line.

The *paterfamilias* was in charge of the maintenance of the moral order of the household. Each member of the household was required to perform specific virtues, virtues we find reflected in writings of some communities of the Anointed. Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Timothy, and 1 Peter contain “household codes,” definitions of proper virtue through relationship. The household codes still follow the threefold pattern of Aristotle: master and enslaved, husband and wife, and father and child: “Wives, belong to your husbands as to the lord, for the husband is the head of the wife just as the Anointed is the head of the assembly” (Eph. 5:22–23). “Children, obey your parents, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ this is the first command with a promise, ‘that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth’” (Eph. 6:1–3). The *paterfamilias* is to rule the social hub of the household with honor, duty, justice, and mercy. Wives should perform virtues of modesty, proper shame, and obedience; children should be dutiful; and the enslaved are to be obedient. These virtues were all directed toward the maintenance of proper, stable social relations.

The primary importance of the household was as social model, as Elliott points out. It gave the ancient world a particular shape, describing an ordered social world. This shape was used to justify larger social institutions, including the empire itself.

If the household was the microcosm of larger political structures, the empire was the household played out in its largest, most dramatic form. When Nero became emperor in 54 CE, he sent out a proclamation, the good news of his accession, still preserved on a papyrus text found in ancient Egypt:

Owed to the forefathers, the revealed god Caesar has gone to them. And the one for whom the entire inhabited world looked and hoped, the Emperor, has been proclaimed; the good divine power of the inhabited world and the source of all things good, Nero Caesar, has been proclaimed. Wherefore we should all give thanks to all the gods, wearing wreaths and sacrificing oxen. Year one of Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, the 21st of the month of Neus Sebastus.⁴

Dynamics of family shape this proclamation. Nero first honors the former Emperor Claudius, “the revealed god Caesar,” in the context of his ancestors. Most interestingly, Nero presents himself as “the good divine power of the inhabited world.” He names himself the guardian and guiding god of the empire. Nero is the ultimate *paterfamilias*: the head of the household of empire.

HOUSEHOLD OF THE ANOINTED

Those belonging to the Anointed used the primary building block of social life, the household, to define what this belonging essentially meant. Almost every writing we have from these diverse communities presents family in some way and thus necessitates a reading through a household lens.⁵ For example, Elliott's careful reading of Paul's letter to the Jesus association at Philemon's house helps us to see the complex ways in which even a single association both relied on and pushed back against the norms of family.⁶ The letter is short and can be summarized succinctly: while in prison, Paul wrote to an association of the Anointed Jesus in the household of Philemon, a *paterfamilias*. Paul has met Onesimus, an enslaved person in Philemon's household. The circumstances of the meeting are ambiguous: how they met, why they met—we have none of those details. Paul is sending Onesimus back to the household in the hope that Philemon will change his behavior toward Onesimus, or perhaps his fundamental relationship with Onesimus. Again, what this change involves is not specified.

From the very beginning the audience of this letter is drawn into a complex network of relationships. Although this writing is typically called the Letter of Paul to Philemon, from the perspective of the ancient household, this title is misleading. First, Paul is a co-sender of this letter; Timothy is also named in the letter's opening and is named as Paul's chosen brother: "Paul, a prisoner because I serve the Anointed Jesus, and Timothy our brother" (Philem. 1). Paul could be making a claim as a *paterfamilias* here himself; as Elliott suggests, "Paul uses his imprisonment for the cause of the Anointed/Christ as a credential in a way that appeals to basic Roman values, displaying the *virtus* (manliness, courage, self-sacrifice) that was an essential part of Roman identity and a virtue expected of a *paterfamilias*."⁷ Even though he is not the head of the household, Paul seems to be asserting himself through his command of virtues that should be more readily attributed to Philemon.

Philemon is also not the sole addressee. The letter is written "to our beloved coworker Philemon and sister Apphia and our co-soldier Archippus and to the assembly in your house" (Philem. 2). Already, our household lens reveals more complexity than we might otherwise be able to see. Philemon is named as a *paterfamilias*, certainly. He is the head of the household where the Jesus association meets. The "your house" here is singular,

referring to the household of not several, but one: the house is Philemon's. The relationship of Apphia and Archippus to this house, however, is unclear. Apphia is not addressed as Philemon's wife. Their address on equal terms with Philemon suggests that they are also leaders of this group for the Anointed Jesus. Philemon could be the patron of this association, allowing members to meet within his house but not exercising sole authority over them. All of these members were meant to receive and hear this letter.

Philemon may be a *paterfamilias*, patron and co-leader with Apphia and Archippus, but he is not the ultimate authority; he is not the master of this assembly. He is subject to a household himself. In verse 3 of the letter, Paul names God as the father of the association: "Grace to you and peace from God our father and the lord, Anointed Jesus." The reference to God as father is a not-so-subtle challenge to Philemon's concept of his own social power, and also a challenge to the emperor as father. God is the ultimate *paterfamilias*. Paul reminds Philemon that they are of shared association and purpose, members of the same intentional community. They are chosen family.

The focus of the letter is Onesimus, enslaved in Philemon's household. We never hear Onesimus himself. The voices of the enslaved are hidden in these ancient writings. We never hear how or why Onesimus leaves Philemon's household to find Paul in prison, and we need to be careful to avoid the trend in the history of interpretation that reads Onesimus as a "runaway slave"—this reading privileges the voices of slaveholders.⁸ Paul refers to Onesimus as his child in the letter, and to himself as Onesimus's father: "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, the one whose father I became in prison" (Philem. 10). Paul actually says that he "begot" Onesimus. If Onesimus is Paul's son, his relationship to Philemon's household is contested.

The Letter to Philemon, though only twenty-five verses long, is full of plays with, against, through, and toward power. Paul frames these power plays in the language of family: Who is the *paterfamilias*? Where does authority really lie? Ultimately, for Paul and for many of the schools of the Savior in the first two centuries, the true *paterfamilias* is God. Even the household codes of Colossians and Ephesians—two writings later attributed to Paul, but of unknown authorship, after Paul's time—while upholding the dominant social values of slaveholding, marriage, and fatherhood, subordinate existing social relationships to God as *paterfamilias*: "So then

you are no longer refugees and migrants, but you are citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the messengers and prophets, the Anointed Jesus being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:19–20). People and property, a house and its members.

Household is subordinate to counterhousehold. Here, that counterhousehold refers to the household of a different deity. The model is not new: the Roman household was a hierarchy under the gods. The emperor, as god, was the ultimate head of household and of empire-as-household during these first two centuries. In these associations of the Anointed, a god is still the *paterfamilias*. But this god is no longer the Roman emperor. Ephesians in particular describes an alternative household empire structured very much like the Roman household empire, under a different god.

The experiment with family expressed in Philemon is subtler than others we find among the schools, associations, and parties of the Savior. We need to remember that there were many non-father-based groups in the greater set of groups and families. The teacher Paul also was known as an opponent of some versions of the *paterfamilias* model. Women like Chloe and Thecla led family groups and (in the case of Thecla) family movements without a *paterfamilias* playing a role at all. As is laid out in a number of chapters in the present book, a major contribution of the many early Jesus movements was their rejection of father-led families.

CHOSEN FAMILY

The writings of the Jesus peoples in the first two centuries tell stories of family. These stories describe factual and chosen households, holding cultural and countercultural modes of belonging in tension. The language of family declares both social legitimacy and social nonconformity.

This language of family was so important to the ways in which early communities of the Anointed experimented with their relationships to one another because it was the same language people used to think about and experience social life under empire as a whole. Calling the leader of a Jesus association “father,” as many associations did, had specific social consequences: Was that father a *paterfamilias*, a head of a household, or was this new chosen father standing in tension with the standard

understanding of a *paterfamilias*? Paul’s greetings to various Jesus associations at the conclusion of his Letter to the Romans suggests that some associations met in households in which the *paterfamilias* was not a member of the group. How did that situation work itself out? In the midst of their earthly push-and-pull, these associations consistently displaced the ultimate patriarch, the Emperor-God, with the God of the Judeans. The writer of Ephesians calls God “the father from whom every fatherhood of the sky and on earth is named” (3:14–15). The displacement of emperor also would not have gone without social consequence.

The Tenuous Role of Women in the Family Unit

Family is a thorny, ever-changing concept. It is everywhere, though, in the writings of the communities of the Anointed, and we cannot understand the experiments in group belonging these communities undertook without it. The Gospel of Matthew, again, offers an insightful example. As we have seen, Matthew is a story about family—Jesus’s family. The audience is given this context in the very first line: “An account of the family of Jesus the Anointed” (1:1). What follows is a list of forty-two generations from Abraham, the “father of many nations,” through David, ancient Israel’s definitive king, to Jesus. It is easy for the eye to skip through these generations—the long list of “so-and-so was the father of so-and-so,” et cetera. If we read each name one by one, however, we find five unusual, unexpected ancestors in Jesus’s epic history—five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah), and Mary:

- ... and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar (v. 3)
- ... and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab (v. 5)
- ... and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth (v. 5)
- ... and David the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah (v. 6)
- ... and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Anointed One (v. 16)

These five women are named as being pivotal to Jesus’s ancestry, as foundational to the story of Jesus’s family. According to the conventions of genealogies, their names were not necessary; the father-son line was the important one to preserve. Most of the generations listed in Matthew follow the simple father-son paradigm, “and so-and-so the father of so-and-so.” Who were these women? What makes them of central importance to this account of the family of Jesus?

These mothers and grandmothers of Jesus share one thing in common: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary were all forced to engage in very risky sexual activity in order to ensure their survival. These risks were conditioned by their patriarchal surroundings: survival under the systemic violence of patriarchy meant that they had to behave in ways that their societies defined as being indecent, immoral, disreputable, impure, and unholy. Tamar dresses herself as a sex worker and sleeps with her father-in-law, Judah, in order to find safety and security for herself in a world that had made these promises and taken them away from her (Gen. 38). In Joshua, sex worker and property owner Rahab, both because of and in spite of her marginal status as sex worker and foreigner, aligns herself with the God of Israel, ensuring her family's future by saving Israelite spies (Josh. 2:1–24; 6:15–25). Ruth, an immigrant and a widow, chooses to live with and provide for her mother-in-law, Naomi, in Israel. She has two ways of living available to her: agriculture or marriage. She risks everything by sleeping with Boaz, who has the freedom and independence to decide to marry her (Ruth 1–4). Bathsheba is identified in Matthew's genealogy not by name, but as the property of her husband, Uriah. Bathsheba seems to be at the mercy of powerful men around her: David saw her bathing and “sent messengers to get her” (2 Sam. 11:4). David ensures her husband's death, and then takes Bathsheba for himself. Bathsheba is portrayed only in her vulnerability to male power.

Mary has no voice in Matthew, though as scholar Marika Rose argues, her presence in Jesus's genealogy is “most disruptive . . . Mary's role is to ensure that the one who (for Matthew) fulfills that line belongs there only by adoption.”⁹ Mary is pregnant with a child outside of her engagement to Joseph. Joseph marries her and so ensures her (highly) relative safety—a social status of respectability—within patriarchy. Mary's child is Joseph's by adoption (it should be noted that most of the Roman emperors were adopted into the line of succession!) and thus is part of the ancestral line of Israel by adoption. Jesus, according to Rose, “is more truly the child of these scandalous women than he is of the respectable patriarchs.” Rose continues, “Like so many of these holy mothers, [Jesus] has no property but his own body, which he puts at risk in order to secure the future of those he loves; and the fatal violation of his body on the cross is the realization of the threat of death which lurks more or less explicitly in the background of each woman's story.”¹⁰

While Mary is only spoken to in Matthew, her endurance of risk, her fundamental insecurity, forms the basis for the entire story of this early Gospel.

CONCLUSION

Under a household lens, Gospel of Matthew can and must be read as an ultimate experiment with family, an experiment that in many ways challenges the prevailing social model of the *paterfamilias* and of patriarchal descent. Jesus is an adopted son. His mother and his adoptive grandmothers were women who had to endure social violence, take risks, and express vulnerability to survive, and only four of these women are named, five recognized. This writing, itself adopted by different Jesus groups, would have had a profound impact on group belonging and organization. It is just one example of many forms of experimental family we find across the diverse communities of the Anointed and related groups in the first two centuries.

Chapter consultant:

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Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Elliott, Susan M. (Elli). "Introduction: Family, Religion, and Politics—Then and Now." Spring 2016.

———. "Transforming Family Relationships—Paul's Letters." Spring 2016.

Larsen, Lillian. "Re-defining Monastic 'Solitude': Fictive (and/or Factual) Family." Spring 2016.

11

Join the Club

Chosen family was one way in which Jesus groups organized themselves. Another prominent organizational form was the association or club. Belonging to an association was a crucial way for people to find security, safety, and social place, especially for members of the under-heard: the enslaved, day laborers, and migrants from across the empire, among others. Exploring what these clubs were, how they were created, and how they functioned in the first and second centuries of the Common Era will help us to understand how Paul established his Anointed associations in particular.

THE SITUATION AT CORINTH

The ancient city of Corinth was located at the entrance of the Greek Peloponnesus, a peninsula extending from the mainland like an immense four-toed foot. About forty-five miles due west of Athens, Corinth was set astride two major ports, one on either side of a narrow geographical filament holding this foot to mainland Greece. An important commercial city, Corinth during the first and second centuries was a dynamic mix of people and practices—Greek, Roman, and otherwise—and home to impressive temples, baths, marketplaces, and theaters.

As we have seen, this vibrant city was also home to an equally alive Anointed association: Chloe's people. In a letter to this association, Paul remarks that news of the group's activities has been passed along to him by "Chloe's people," naming Chloe as a group leader or patron. "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people," writes Paul, "that there are divisions

among you, my brothers and sisters” (1 Cor. 1:11). Paul wrote to this association at least four times, each letter addressed to a different situation within the community. On this occasion, Chloe’s people report that members of the association are claiming allegiance to competing group leaders and teachers: “I belong to Paul!” some are shouting, and “I belong to Apollo!” or “I belong to Cephas!” Still others cry, “I belong to the Anointed!” (1 Cor. 1:12).

After much discussion of the challenges in this community, many caused by these disorderly factions, Paul counsels what he calls the superior or perfect way forward: love. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,” Paul declares, “I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal . . . If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude . . . So trust, hope, love, these three, stand fast; but the greatest of these is love,” Paul concludes (1 Cor. 13:1, 3–5, 13).

These verses from Paul’s letter to Chloe’s people, some of Paul’s most famous verses, are best known from readings at contemporary wedding ceremonies. “Love is patient, love is kind,” reads a sweaty second cousin to a fidgeting congregation, everyone eager for cocktail hour and the reception. Taken out of their context, apart from the rest of the letter, they do sound like a nice summary of the strength and singular importance of love. Paul’s statements are made in a very specific context, however; earlier in his letter, Paul states that he wishes association members would remain unmarried, as Paul himself has.

Paul’s statements about love are directed toward the activities of the Anointed association as a whole, toward group practice and the ways in which group members are to belong to and with one another. The Greek word Paul uses for love—*agape*—is associated most commonly, especially in the writings of early Anointed communities, with the love of humans for God. If association members approach group activities from the perspective of love for God, if they start with proper honor being paid to God, then their group practice will cohere. The group will come and stick together.

The verses that lead in to this description of love, while left out of readings at weddings, make Paul’s point about love as group belonging clear. Paul states that all group members “are the body of the Anointed and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27); this statement forms the heart of

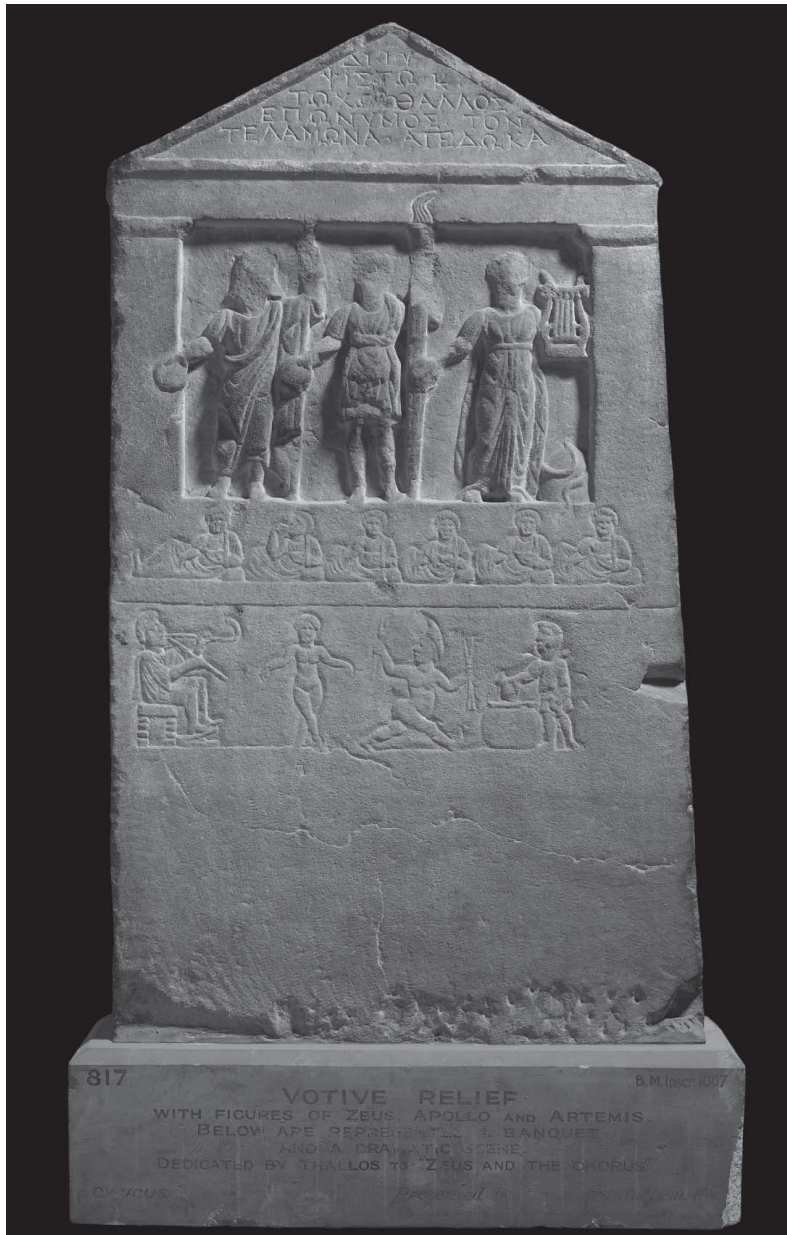
Paul's argument. He then lists various positions within the assembly/association: envoys, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, administrators, and speakers of tongues. Everyone has their proper role to play within the Anointed community; no one can take on all roles. Group survival depends on respect for and observance of proper roles, the desire to play these roles properly.

When Paul talks about membership in the body of the Anointed, he is referring to an association. Many people across the Roman Empire in the first two centuries belonged to an association: a private, unofficial club, guild, or society whose members were organized around a particular neighborhood, a specific trade or occupation, worship of a particular god, a national identity, a household, or a combination of these forms of belonging. Chloe's people, for example, could have been an association structured in and around Chloe's extended household.

FINDING BELONGING IN AN ASSOCIATION

Associations were an essential mode of social belonging in the ancient world. The ancient words for "association" demonstrate the centrality of group belonging and activity: *collegium* is the standard Latin term, with the sense of colleague, collegiality, or fellowship. *Koinonia*, one of the most common Greek words for an association, means fellowship, partnership, or communion. Other words used to identify associations include "assembly," "meeting" or "company" (*synodos*), "fellow workers" (*synergasia*), and "a bringing together" or "assembling" (*synagogē*). These latter three club designations start with *syn*, Greek for "with," signaling the essential "with-ness" at the heart of these groups. This "with-ness" or bringing together usually involved eating together: club members met regularly for banquets, to celebrate festivals and observances for their club god or gods, to host burials for deceased members, to honor group officials and patrons, and to simply meet and network together. Meals were so important to these clubs that often they were named dining, banquet, or supper clubs, or the club itself was referred to with the Greek word for meal. Members were often required to pay club dues in support of these varied activities and were expected to follow certain rules of behavior.

The rules for membership in these clubs were varied. Some groups were exclusive to men; others were exclusive to women. A club record from Lanuvium in Italy recognizes the patronage of a man, Gaius Sulpicius Victor, toward a “women’s assembly.”¹ Women also served as benefactors of male and mixed associations; a marble slab from second-century Histria, a Greek colony on the Danube, records that a woman named Aba paid for feasts, prayers, and processions and gave members from a number of male associations—a club of local craftsmen, a neighborhood club, a club of doctors, and a club devoted to the hero-god Herakles—wine and money, “something which had never been done by anyone else before.”²



A man named Thallos dedicated this monument to the god Zeus the Highest, and to his association. This marble monument, dating from between 150–30 BCE and found in modern-day Turkey, offers a vivid portrait of club religious and social life.
British Museum

Women were also leaders of various associations. A second- or third-century CE grave inscription from Smyrna, a city on the coast of modern Turkey, highlights the association leadership of a woman named Rufina:

Rufina, Judean head of the synagogue, prepared the burial niche for her freedmen and the enslaved in her house. No one else has the authority to bury anyone else here. Now if anyone dares to do so, he will pay fifteen hundred denarii to the most holy treasury and one thousand denarii to the people (ethne) of the Judeans. A copy of this inscription was stored in the archives.³

Many Judean associations in the first two centuries were called *synagogē*: clubs organized around the honor of the Judean God and the particular Judean national/ethnic identity. The term was not exclusive to Judean clubs, however; records of synagogues of barbers, small-wares dealers, and shippers honoring the sea god Poseidon show that the term in the early centuries simply meant “a bringing together.”

Clubs sometimes included the enslaved among their membership; enslaved members could belong to a club’s household, if the association was formed out of someone’s house, but household affiliation was not always relevant. Another record from a Lanuvium club, inscribed on a marble plaque in the second century CE, states:

It was voted further that if an enslaved member of this association dies and his master or mistress unreasonably refuses to relinquish the body for burial, and he has not left written instruction, a funeral with an image of him will be held . . . It was voted further that if any enslaved member becomes free, he must give an amphora of good wine.⁴

These club votes suggest that enslaved people, apart from the households in which they were considered property, were full club members, honored equally.

As these examples suggest, our knowledge of these clubs comes largely from epigraphic evidence, that is, inscriptions on stone. These inscriptions often record the rules for club activities, procedures for meals or festivals, or recognition for honors given to specific members, among other subjects. They were displayed in club meeting spaces as a reminder of the rules; members were sometimes required to touch the stones before participating in group activities, ensuring that members kept the rules in mind while also displaying their proper conduct to other members. “During the monthly and annual sacrifices,” reads the rules of an association based in the household of a man named Dionysios in the second or early first century BCE, “may those men and women who trust themselves touch this stone on which the instructions of the god [Zeus] have been written, so that those who obey

these instructions, and those who do not obey these instructions, may become evident.”⁵

PAUL AND THE *IOBACCHOI*

We get a sense of association life through an impressive stone inscription from Athens that records a list of club activities. Dating to 164/165 CE, this large, inscribed column would have been placed prominently in the club meeting space. The inscription on the column states that an assembly centered on the worship of the god Bacchus, an assembly calling themselves the *Iobacchoi*, “followers of Bacchus,” met under the leadership of a new vice priest, Claudius Herodes. Herodes read the group statutes for approval by the group priest and the group president. The president announced: “To whomever it seems good that the statutes that have been read out should be ratified and inscribed on a monument, raise your hand!”⁶ All group members raised their hands. This process, itself inscribed on the monument, makes it clear that all group members were responsible for knowing the club statutes.

The inscription goes on to state that all new members must register with the group priest and then be approved by a vote of the *Iobacchoi*, “if he appears to be worthy and suitable for the meeting place of Bacchus.” If voted in, the new member pays an entrance fee, including an extra drink offering if the new member’s father was not part of the group. Household ties play a role in this assembly but are not necessary for membership.

Members meet together, the inscription reads, on the ninth day of every month and for special festivals and feasts for the god Bacchus. Every member must contribute a certain amount of wine each month and “shall speak and act and be zealous for the association.” The next section of the inscription offers a particularly vivid picture of association life:

In the gathering no one is allowed to sing, cause a disturbance, or applaud. Rather, with all order and decorum members shall speak and do their parts, as the priest or the head of the bacchic devotees directs. None of the *Iobacchoi* who has not paid the contributions for either the meetings on the ninth of the month or the annual festival is permitted to enter into the gathering, until it has been decided by the priests whether he should pay the fee or be allowed to enter anyway. Now if anyone begins a fight or is disorderly or sits in someone else’s couch or insults or abuses someone else, the person abused or insulted shall produce two of the *Iobacchoi* as sworn witnesses, testifying that they heard the insult or abuse. The one who committed the insult or the abuse shall pay to the common treasury twenty-five light drachmas, or the one who

was the cause of the fight shall either pay the same twenty-five drachmas or not come to any more meetings of the *Iobacchoi* until he pays. If someone comes to blows, the one who was struck shall file a report with the priest or the vice priest, who shall without fail convene a meeting and the *Iobacchoi* shall judge by a vote with the priest presiding.

Bacchus was the god of wine, fertility, and partying. Clubs dedicated to Bacchus likely had some very good times. These good and drunken times could surely lead to altercations, and the *Iobacchoi* are clear that disorderly behavior will not be tolerated. The extensive discussion of disorderly conduct indicates that it probably happened a lot. This club performed a reenactment of stories about Bacchus as its central practice: the priest told the story of Bacchus, and club members gave a dramatic performance of the story, rotating between roles such as the goddess Aphrodite or Palaimon, a child god of the sea who liked to ride upon a dolphin. Food, specifically the meat from sacrifices, was distributed to group members according to a prescribed protocol.

Paul's instructions to Chloe's people, along with his command that the letter be read out loud, should be understood as performing the same function as the statutes approved by the *Iobacchoi* and set up within their clubhouse. Like the statues, Paul directs that club activities should follow a certain order:

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret . . . If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized." (1 Cor. 14:26–27; 37–38)

Paul lists disorder, fighting, unequal distribution of food at meals, drunkenness, arrogant talk, jealousy, and rivalry among the problems of this club, all stemming from the poor leadership of club officials.

THE ANOINTED'S SUPPER CLUB

Meals are a particularly important facet of establishing who has real or ultimate leadership over club practice. Paul admonishes, "in eating, each goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the

assembly of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (1 Cor. 11:21–22). Paul reminds the association of their proper practice:

I received from the lord the same thing I passed on to you, that on the night when he was handed over, the lord Jesus took bread and after he gave thanks he broke it and said, “This means my body broken for you. Do this to remember me.” And in the same way he took the wine cup after the meal and said, “This cup means the new covenant ratified by my blood. Whenever you drink this, do it to remember me.” So every time you eat this bread and drink this cup you are proclaiming the death of the lord until the day when he returns.

It follows that anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup without considering its meaning will be guilty of demeaning the body and the blood of the lord. A person should think about what he is doing before he eats the bread and drinks from the cup . . . So then, my friends, when you gather to eat, wait on one another. Any of you who thinks only about his own hunger should eat at home, so that your gathering together does not bring condemnation upon you! (1 Cor. 11:23–28, 33–34)⁷

Jesus Anointed is presented in these verses as the initiator and ongoing host of the club banquet, meaning Jesus Anointed is the real leader of this group. Dishonor or insult to a club member is an insult to the club’s divine host.

Paul’s presentation of this divinely hosted banquet runs parallel to association practice more widely. Many clubs celebrated their meals in honor of their club gods and in the assumed presence of their club gods. Club participation, therefore, could put members directly in the presence of, and in relationship to, honored divine beings. Aelius Aristides, a well-known public speaker in the second century, wrote about the Egyptian god Sarapis in terms similar to Paul, emphasizing partnership with the host deity:

People make this god [Sarapis] alone a full partner in sacrifices, inviting him to the meal and making him both chief guest and host. So while different gods contribute to different club feasts, he is the one who completes all feasts and has the rank of leader of the banquet for those who assemble at times . . . He is a participant in the libations and the one who receives the libations. He comes to the celebration and invites those celebrating, who perform a dance under his direction. (*Orations* 45.27–28)⁸

Sarapis plays a very similar role, in club suppers, as the Anointed plays at the feast of Chloe’s people. The Anointed invites those celebrating and leads the supper and the association, both participating in the supper and being the one honored at the supper. Celebration with gods and heroes was certainly an important strategy in encouraging group belonging.

The participation of gods in association meals is represented on a monument from sometime in the first century BCE to the second century CE, now in the British Museum and depicted earlier in this chapter. At the top of the monument, an inscription reads that a man named Thallos, a club official, dedicated the monument to Zeus the Highest and to his club. Below the inscription stand three large gods: Zeus, Artemis, and Apollo. Each of the gods holds out a bowl in which they are to receive offerings of wine. Beneath the gods a row of club members recline on couches to eat a meal, as was customary. The bottom row of the monument depicts the meal's entertainment: two musicians, a dancer, and a man mixing the wine. Again, the meal both honors these gods and depicts them as participants, reaching out to drink the wine alongside the reclining banqueters.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

The *Iobacchoi* inscription goes on to state that anyone causing a disturbance during a meal, if they refuse to leave on their own accord, will be thrown out by “horses,” a euphemism for bouncers:

The officer in charge of order shall be chosen by lot or be appointed by the priest, bearing the wand of the god for anyone who is disorderly or creates a disturbance. Now if the wand is laid on anyone . . . the one who made the disturbance shall leave the banquet hall. If he refuses, those who have been appointed by the priests as “horses” shall take him outside of the door.

These details, read alongside the rules for group membership and for required and prohibited behaviors, speak to an essential benefit of belonging to a club: safety. Club officials carefully vetted new members, who were often approved by a club vote. Club practice demanded that members uphold standards of behavior, such as not causing fights or disturbances, not sleeping with other people's spouses, not wishing one another harm, or not participating in club activities knowing of any deceit or ill will toward any group member. Those causing disturbances will be thrown out of meals; those knowing of or guilty of any deceit will be thrown out of the association. Official bouncers and watchmen guard club space.

Among the benefits of club membership—lively meals, networking, the honor of acting as a priest or official—safety, group trust, was of top rank. Scholar Andrew Monson calls associations “trust networks,” groups bonded

by norms of safety and shared expectation: “By joining an association,” Monson writes, “members signal to others that they are trustworthy and share the values of their peers. The rules of associations represent agreed norms of ethical behavior and embody shared values.”⁹ Members could trust one another to behave properly, but more than that, to provide one another with tangible forms of support: an equal share at meals, protection from cruel heads of household, assurance that their bodies would be properly honored after death, and protection from the gods. This form of trust, of support, was no small thing, given the precarious character of life during the first two centuries. Safety through group belonging made life less threatening and more livable.

Understood as a trust network, Paul’s charge that Chloe’s people love one another makes perfect sense. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,” he writes, “I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal . . . Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor. 13:1; 14:1). Paul speaks of love in the context of the important group practices of prophecy and speaking in tongues. Love is about the unity of the body of the Anointed. If club members try to perform these activities but their underlying trust network is broken, none of the practices will work properly. Paul’s lines about love speak to the issues fracturing club life: jealousy, arrogance, disrespect. As a trust network, the association will dissolve if these issues are not checked. This letter to Chloe’s people speaks to the kind of trust, of mutual belonging, required for association life. Clubs were meant to be a refuge, a safe haven in precarious circumstance. Clubs were meant to be unified, not fractured, bodies.

The importance of trust to these groups found expression in the language they often used for one another. Many associations were structured as chosen families, calling themselves “brotherhoods” and referring to members as siblings and adopted siblings. Association leaders could also be called mothers or fathers. While clubs were often formed out of particular households, the use of the language of family often did not relate to actual family members. An association of immigrants in what is now southern Turkey called one another brothers; a club devoted to “the Highest God” named each other adopted brothers; a man who donated several rooms, including a dining room, to a Judean bringing-together was called the father of the synagogue.

Other clubs used the language of friendship, calling one another friends or companions. In the same way, Paul uses the language of chosen family—members are called brothers and siblings, God is named as father—throughout this letter to Chloe’s people, and in his letters to other Anointed associations as well. This language reflects the strength of this form of belonging, the social surety that association membership could provide.

CONCLUSION

Club members understood their voices to be temporary, heard only by their friends. While clubs might receive an occasional letter from an emperor recognizing impressive club honors paid to him or his imperial cult, clubs operated unofficially and mostly locally. Clubs gave voice to women, to the enslaved, to rag dealers, clothing cleaners, basket weavers, and grave diggers. Their statutes were often inscribed on stone, but they were for use by club members only, set up inside their meeting places or memorialized on a tomb, papyrus copies filed and lost in local archives. They were not meant for a master narrative. Outside of their clubs, the voices of rag dealers were not expected to be heard.

When we explore the evidence from clubs in our reading of first- and second-century Anointed associations, we keep our experiment on track. History tends to preserve only the voices it wants to hear. The voices that remain are intentional, almost always those of the powerful, those with access to resources, the elites. These winning voices also look backward, validating events and their interpretations, speaking to a constructed historical master narrative. That they should win was inevitable.

As records of the voices of the under-heard, such a wide, diverse cross section of ancient society, association rules, and registers provides us with a more reliable picture of first- and second-century Mediterranean life than what we find in the writings or histories of the social elite—writings from a narrow minority, free, fully resourced, and from an almost entirely male perspective. Reading Paul alongside association records gives us a much clearer understanding of what was happening in the associations of the Lord Jesus Anointed and why. Not every Anointed community was an association, to be sure. But undoubtedly, many Anointed communities structured themselves on this form of belonging, a belonging prioritizing

group trust and social safety. Evidence from Paul's letters to the community at Thessalonica suggests that this group was also structured as an Anointed association. Such associations and early Judean synagogues also find their place among the varied, vibrant lives of ancient supper clubs, fellowships, and bringings-together.

12

Feasting and Bathing

THE SPIRIT AND PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FEASTING

In the Gospel of Thomas, Salome says to Jesus, “Who are you mister? You have climbed onto my couch and eaten from my table” (61:2).¹ For modern readers, these words of Salome, one of Jesus’s woman companions, may say more about the first two centuries of Jesus peoples than almost any other writing.

Her words present a graphic picture of the long and boisterous meals these people shared together. And, shocking for most of us, they lay down together as they ate, drank, talked, and feasted. The Gospel of John’s description of this Mediterranean practice is vivid: “While at dinner, the student Jesus loved leaned back on Jesus’s breast” (John 21:20).

These meals were the heart of all the gatherings of groups associated with Jesus Anointed. They were lush, entertaining, full of conversation, expressive, long, and embodied. Recognizing that members of these groups spent most of their time together at meal gatherings helps us understand what they stood for, how they thought of themselves, and what their core values were. The one thing that unified all the groups of this movement was that they regularly dined with each other.

Reclining: Meals on the Couch

This story from Gospel of Thomas can tell us even more. Both men and women attended these meals. While some groups insisted that women sit rather than recline, it was most common for women to recline, as in the

Gospel of Thomas story of Salome. Salome is surprised that Jesus reclines at dinner with her, and challenges him: “Who are you mister?” This challenge is telling, since most reclining groups separated women and men on different couches and encouraged women to recline with women and men with men, as Jesus did with his favorite student in the Gospel of John.

Salome’s attitude of challenging a man, especially in a semipublic situation, is less normal for that time, yet the way their conversation unfolds indicates that both are comfortable with conflict and real exchange. This story signals that the larger situation of these meals may have included regular substantive conflict and lively conversation among the meal community and between men and women.

The exchange between Salome and Jesus in Gospel of Thomas can tell us even more about how these meals provided the context for exploring the possibilities of stronger communication, community building, and complex gender relationships. What follows Salome’s initial challenge to Jesus about his eating her food and lying on her dining couch illuminates new possibilities:

Jesus said to her: I derive from the One who is connected to all. I was given some of the things of my Father.

(Salome:) I am your follower.

(Jesus:) Because of this, I say: When one becomes whole, one will be full of light. When one is in parts, one will be full of darkness. (61:2, 3)

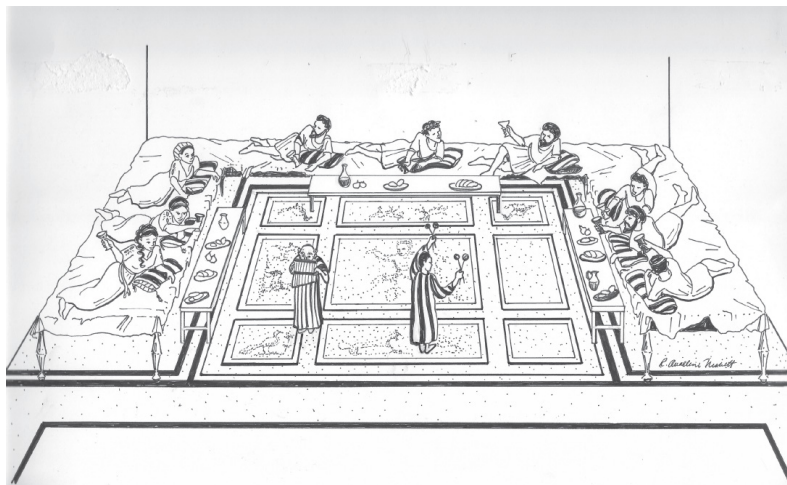
This exchange deepens the tension of living in community, of connecting to one’s meal group, of experiencing oneself as both women and men together, of joining oneself to the One who is connected to everything.

The tension between Salome’s challenge to Jesus as he climbs upon her couch and Salome’s status as one of Jesus’s followers remains. Jesus’s connection to the One who is connected to the All underscores the development of community at meals. And Jesus being given “some” (not all) of the things of the Father makes the relationship between Salome and Jesus more human. In this scene and this gospel writing, Jesus does share divinity with God, but not nearly as much as in the writings of the Gospel of John or the Gospel of Truth. This relationship to divinity opens up between Salome and Jesus a space shared by both humans and God. In all this connectivity, tension remains concerning whether the individuals and

the meal community itself are “in parts” or “becoming whole.” In this example of meal community in Gospel of Thomas, the connectivity is understood as practice. Everyone reclining together—and in this case, Jesus climbing up on Salome’s couch—is a normal part of the practice of being in community. This practice is an analogue to a deeper experience of being one with “the One who is connected to all.”

The exchange between Jesus and Salome demonstrates several kinds of practice. The back-and-forth about who can do what as Salome and Jesus challenge each other within the meal group expands traditional sexual and teacher-student roles. The meal also gives them real practice with new models for how women and men relate. Eating together invites practice in learning what it means to come from a larger oneness. As the back-and-forth makes a whole out of Jesus and Salome, Jesus says the result is reclining fully “in light” together.

This story from Gospel of Thomas enables modern readers to view practices of these Jesus clubs, schools, and communities from the early centuries that are very different from those of today.



A typical Mediterranean meal of the first and second centuries.
Romney Oualline Nesbitt, copyright © 2002 Romney Oualline Nesbitt and Dennis E. Smith

Feasting in the Mediterranean

Mediterranean people in general intentionally exaggerated the importance of relaxation and ease when they ate together. They took their time to enjoy their food and wine. Joyful celebration was foundational, even in the midst

of the tension of life under empire. Although research indicates these early groups of Jesus peoples had exuberant and jubilant meals, as the conversation between Salome and Jesus shows, it was not always sweetness and light. Fierce arguments, as well as shortages of food, were well known.

Other groups besides Jesus peoples gathered and acted in a similar way: reclining, drinking, singing, discussing, and arguing. Members of extended families and neighborhood groups; workers such as carpenters, shipbuilders, and bricklayers; and members of various religious groups shared meals as a regular practice. Associations and clubs of various types hosted such meals.



The diners belonging to Chloe's people, parties of the Anointed, and the Order of Melchizedek reclined around the room, and as they ate they threw their food remains on the ground in the center of the room. Mostly at mid-course, volunteer servers let dogs into the room to eat the scraps. This mosaic (a Roman copy of a Greek original) depicts the leavings from such a meal.

Alf van Beem

So important was dining in the first and second centuries that it was defining for most people. Reclining while eating expressed the significance of leisure and ease. The Greeks, who began this style of feasting centuries before, insisted that the meal expressed equality. Initially, equality found expression only among wealthy, free Greek males. By the first century, however, the enslaved, women, and other ethnicities also could be full participants, although full participation was often a matter of principle rather than of practice. This participation became an inherent principle of the communities of the Anointed.

Many Jesus movements expanded what it meant to recline together and share food equally. While these meals did have a set of general rules, many gatherings elaborated what they did, how they did it, and what it meant. In this way, their identities emerged through participating in their festive meals.

More Kinds of Meals

The picture in Gospel of Thomas of such meals illustrates the broad pattern of Mediterranean meals in general and among Jesus communities. Two other kinds of meals among Jesus peoples show how different the basic reclining communities could be, and how different the various Jesus-related communities' ideas and constituents were.

Levi's Feast for Jesus

Different communal emphases emerge in different writings. Although the basic framework for these meals is the same, the focus shifts. Gospel of Thomas focuses on spiritual oneness, learning from gender tensions, and what Jesus and his followers have in common.

A story in the Gospel of Luke has a different tenor. This story should not be understood simply as being about the historical Jesus, but about how this particular community emerged in the second century.

And Levi gave Jesus a great banquet in Levi's house, and a large group of toll collectors and others were dining with them.

The Pharisees and their scholars would complain to his followers: "Why do you people eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

In response Jesus said to them, "Since when do the healthy need a doctor? It's the sick who do. I have not come to enlist religious folks to change their hearts, but sinners." (5:29–32)²

The drama in this story revolves around what happens at meals when a group experiences being shunned or mocked. Many other writings make this same point: good things happen when people alienated from one another eat together. Meaning and benefit emerge in meals when those of different classes, ethnicities, and social standing eat together.

However, this attractive and compelling practice of diversity by groups of the Anointed had some problematic examples as well: women were sometimes silenced or not allowed to recline; enslaved peoples might be

denied complete equal status; festive meals sometimes provoked clashes between ethnicities. This meal story in Gospel of Luke holds up an interaction with despised people, while the meal story in Gospel of Thomas deals with a oneness of spirit and a focus on getting to know one another across gender.

Synagogue of the Womb of All That Grows

In the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, a small document called *Prayer of Thanksgiving* illustrates an even wider range of what people can learn from meals during this period. It is highly likely that the group who used this prayer had a significant relationship to Jesus peoples, because this document was found in a collection of writings that belonged to Jesus groups. This document presents a prayer that might be said at a meal much like the meals in Thomas and in Luke. How many groups, or what size communities, prayed this meal prayer is unknown, but the fact that the fifty-two documents found along with this prayer were probably stored in a later Christian desert monastery suggests that many groups did so.

Prayers such as *Prayer of Thanksgiving* are best described as “prayers of larger Israel.” More or less all Jesus peoples of the first and second centuries thought of themselves as belonging to greater Israel, even when they did not have parents of descent from Israel (see [Chapter 9](#)).

As we have seen elsewhere in this book, during this time conquered nations experienced difficulty and sorrow around who they were. *Prayer of Thanksgiving* is a prayer of defeated Israel, regardless of the group’s composition. Celene Lillie translates the prayer as follows:

We give thanks to you, every life and heart stretches toward you,

O name untroubled, honored with the name of God, praised with the name of Father.

To everyone and everything, comes the kindness of the Father, and love and desire.

And if there is sweet and simple teaching, it gives us mind, word, and knowledge; mind that we may understand you; word that we may interpret you; knowledge that we may know you.

We rejoice and are enlightened by your knowledge.

We rejoice that you have taught us about yourself.

We rejoice that in the body you have made us divine through your knowledge.

The thanksgiving of the human who reaches you is this alone: that we know you.

We have known you, O light of mind.

O light of life, we have known you.

O womb of all that grows, we have known you.

O womb pregnant with the nature of the Father, we have known you.

O never-ending endurance of the Father who gives birth, so we worship your goodness.

One wish we ask: we wish to be protected in knowledge.

One protection we desire: that we not stumble in this life.³

Following the prayer is this line: “When they said these things in prayer, they welcomed one another, and they went to eat their holy food, which had no blood in it.” The reference to “no blood” in the holy food suggests that this group followed procedures held by early Judean synagogues. Many synagogues in the first two centuries were not buildings, but groups, since the word “synagogue” is a transliteration of the Greek word that means “meeting.” As in Thomas and in Luke, going to a synagogue and belonging to Israel can be applied to most of the groups we have encountered in this book. Understanding this group as belonging to the people of Israel is standard for the Jesus peoples of the first two centuries.

This prayer exhibits a range of social inventiveness, visionary spirituality, and theology. Its openness and imagination are part of a signature innovation of broader Israel and the energy of the larger meal movements in the first and second centuries.

Its energy of receiving the “kindness,” “love,” and “desire” of God in “everyone and everything” fits well with the concerns of Israel, as represented by Jesus or Philo, a first-century Judean philosopher from Alexandria. The prayer’s praise for the “light of life” and the “womb of all that grows” overflows with vitality and fertility. That this document proclaims “every life and heart stretches toward you, / O name untroubled” indicates deep receptivity to a large world and a generous and open-ended divinity. Its courageous resistance to violence and its joyfulness are at home within the encouragement of leisure, social openness, debate, and embrace of diverse peoples that meals of the Anointed expressed.

Feasting with God

Even though these examples of meals have a similar shape and interest in Jesus, they exhibit very different causes and values and produced different kinds of communities and movements. Even more variety of festive meals existed among other Jesus peoples, synagogues, clubs, and schools of the Anointed than we can explore. These widely different meals created an

extraordinarily creative set of cultures in the first two centuries—ones that were resistant, lively, and innovative.

Key to the present book's larger understanding is that groups gathered regularly for communal meals. The first two hundred years after Jesus are unintelligible without these vigorous and intense gatherings at meals. The broad differences between the meal portraits we have explored also begin to show that such meals both held these many differences together and also encouraged a great variety of ideas and expressions.

The Decline of Vibrant Meals

For most of the first two centuries of the Common Era, the many different types of groups associated with the Anointed had meals as their primary gathering. So when did the shift in practice move to other forms of communal eating?

This work has unfolded relatively slowly but since about 2015 has resulted in a series of key conclusions. Andrew McGowan sketches out a clear portrait of the first four hundred years of the Common Era in his paper "Changing Courses: Eucharistic Origins":

1. The only known practice of Jesus communities for the first ninety years was the festive meal. It was perhaps one of the most profound dimensions of those early movements.
2. All of those groups continued to meet around meals for something like the first 235 years of the Common Era. Everyone participated in these meals. But in some places, probably beginning in the early second century, a minority of groups and clubs had occasional larger early morning gatherings in town halls. These morning meetings were too large to achieve the intimacy of the communal meals, but there was often a mini-meal at those morning meetings. The mini-meals were understood to be subsidiary to the regular and ongoing evening meals. Regular reclining meals remained the primary practice of these groups.
3. McGowan tends to think that many meals groups continued through the 200s and into the 300s, but sometime in the third century some groups discontinued the evening meals because their groups were too large for them.

4. Probably by the mid-fourth century only a minority of these groups shared meals anymore; by this time, most of them thought of themselves as “Christian.”
5. By the sixth century the vast majority of Christians worshipped in churches without anything but a token piece of bread and a cup of wine to eat and drink.⁴

So ended the central dynamic—the festive communal meal—of the communities of Jesus Anointed in the first two centuries.

THE SPIRIT AND PRACTICE OF BATHING

Not nearly as regularly but just as expressively as the meals, most Jesus-related groups practiced bathing as a part of their life together. The joy of bathing ran deep alongside the joy of feasting.

We know most about bathing practices connected to the people of Israel who lived all around the Mediterranean. Stories about Jesus bathing with others are found throughout the diverse writings of these clubs and groups. Acts of the Apostles has ten different stories that make direct reference to Judean-like bathing outside of geographical Israel. However, especially in Acts, these bathings are mistakenly translated “baptism” and take on the meaning of being a Christian ritual associated with becoming a Christian. This imposes a later Christian meaning on the practice of bathing by the communities of Jesus Anointed.

Roman emperors always listed baths as one of their great gifts to the people of the empire. By the end of the second century, the city of Rome had more than three hundred baths. Imperial baths were large complexes with three main rooms: a central atrium, a hot bathing room, and a cold one. These were places not only for bathing but also for socializing.

Since baths needed lots of water, the emperors built large aqueducts to supply cities with water. The ruins of some of these enormous stone engineering projects dominate landscapes to this date. There was no real practical need for all the stonework; it was part of Roman propaganda. The baths and aqueducts demonstrated concretely Roman ownership, power, and stability. The empire was here to stay.

The common meaning of the Greek word *baptizo* (baptism) is “bathing,” “washing,” “immersing,” or “thoroughly dipping.” It is an ordinary word, used to describe ordinary washing and bathing of both objects and people. Ordinary usage of the words *baptizo* and *baptisma* do not refer to ritual.

To make basic sense of the references to “*baptizo*-ing” in the writings of the groups of the Anointed of the first and second centuries, it is best to use the basic meaning of washing and bathing. To call these events “baptisms” is inappropriate for two reasons. First, it is not a translation but a transliteration. Like the word “Christian,” the English word “baptism” imposes a later Christian meaning on the practice of bathing by the communities of Jesus Anointed. The proper translation for the word in all writings of the Jesus communities of the first two centuries is “bathing” or “washing.”

Not unlike the communal meals we have just examined, these bathings were often social and relaxed. The late second-century Jesus movement writer Tertullian listed the places such bathing could happen as “in a sea or a pool, a stream or a fount, a lake or a trough” (*On Baptism* 4).⁵ Archaeological digs have revealed that many neighborhoods in Israel had small baths next to, and often almost as large as, houses. Pools were often found between houses in neighborhoods. People from various households bathed together (the men and the women at separate times). Besides these Judean baths, many other groups in the empire engaged in this practice: Isis cults and Mithraic, Bacchic, and Eleusian groups also held regular or occasional washings as a part of their group life.

Ritual was a major aspect of ordinary, daily life. Social bathing took on a variety of meanings, rooted in the importance of cleaning oneself. Metaphorically, bathing became a sign of moral cleanness and purity of heart and mind, differentiating the bathers from corruption in its many forms. People washed themselves regularly of such physical, moral, attitudinal, and social “dirtiness.”

Since most bathing was social, a variety of different types of uncleanness would be present. Some bathers had minor regrets and worries; others needed to recuperate from dirty or humiliating work; still others were experiencing significant pain or only needed to wash their bodies. Bathing events involved group reflection, small talk, silence, joy, ponderings, prayers, and storytelling. They mixed losses and wounds with

relaxation, comfort, social give-and-take, and the sensuousness of water. There was also a sense of release, lamentation, and long-term resolve. The first-century historian Josephus wrote of washings by “John the Bather,” whom we more traditionally know as John the Baptist, that were “a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour,” meaning that those who bathed were committed to “lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism” (*Antiquities* 18.117).⁶

One special occasion was when a washing of one’s past life as a person became intentionally part of a new way of life. Both non-Israel women and men bathed upon the occasion of joining the community of Israel, with its new demands and reliefs. Although men also were circumcised as a part of joining the community of Israel, the washing—again, always with a group—was the pivotal moment for women becoming a part of the people of Israel. This washing away of losses, uncleanness, and indignity formed the basis for membership in greater Israel.

This snapshot of ancient Mediterranean bathing offers a chance to rethink the logic of so-called baptism during the first two centuries. While this practice resembles many similar bathings of Mediterranean peoples, its more immediate antecedent was the washing practices in Israel and more specifically in Galilee where Jesus movements first existed.

John the Bather aka John the Baptist

The stories associated with the first-century Israel leader called John the Bather show us how bathing in different Jesus groups became a crucial practice. The context for John’s practice was that the people of Israel needed to be cleansed from the humiliation, anger, and pain resulting from Rome’s violent conquest and occupation of Israel; they also needed to be bathed clean of their collaboration with their Roman occupiers.

Rome’s client king of Israel built Roman baths during the early occupation of Jerusalem. The building of these baths around the Jerusalem Temple as a part of a Roman renovation of the Temple met with protests by devotees of the Temple. The Roman bathing pools around the Temple were deemed especially offensive, because many experienced Roman rule as sullyng Israel’s sense of purity before God. The stories about John the

Bather indicate or imply his joining the protests and setting up a competing bathing away from the corrupt Roman baths around the Temple.

Setting up these alternate bathings was a brilliant spiritual and political move on the part of John the Bather. Gospel stories tell of John leading hundreds of people from Jerusalem to the fabled Jordan River at the edge of the desert, a several days' walk from the city. There they bathed in the fresh running water to cleanse themselves of the dirty military occupation of their land, and to avoid the sullied bathing pools around Jerusalem's Temple. Not unlike Israel's march to the Jordan twelve hundred years before to claim the land as its home, these stories portray the people walking to wash themselves clean of ordinary uncleanness, the dirty business of Roman rule, and the brokenness of Israel's identity. John's teaching and washing enabled them to make deep changes in their actions and thinking.

The drama of this bathing carried with it emotional and spiritual comfort, release, and community. Tens or maybe hundreds of people bathing together in the mother river of the land of Israel brought a sense of safety, belonging, and renewal to the traumatized people in Jerusalem and surrounding areas. Perhaps most of all, this bathing washed away at least some of the humiliation, pain, and loss of people living under a relentlessly cruel and arrogant tyrant. On all these levels, the bathing poured over the pilgrims the salve of healing in free-flowing water.

Sorting out the details of John the Bather's story is difficult. Maybe only seventy-five people or maybe more than a thousand went to the Jordan River. Maybe it's just a story. In any case, he became so beloved by the people of Israel that Gospel of Matthew has Jesus saying, "Among those born of women no one greater than John the Bather has appeared" (11:11). The Romans, however, hated him, and inevitably ordered his death.

Downstream in the Second Century

More than half of all the accounts of bathings in the New Testament appear in the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts, most likely a second-century document, bathing was done as a part of people being washed clean of their faults and failures and celebrating this major change in their lives. In at least twelve different stories in Acts, after someone changes their way of life and resolves to lead a better one, bathing marks, as Josephus wrote, "a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour." Both Israel's practice of ordinary washings

and the dramatic elaborations of such washings by John the Bather shaped the bathings narrated in Acts. The pictures and stories of washing in Acts are stories of people who change their way of life by practicing an Israel-based and John-the-Bather-based innovation in the name of Jesus Anointed.

Bathing Practices in the Second Century

Thus we can understand, in its proper context, the courageous, renewing, and imaginative practice of a besieged people through a retooling of a routine practice. What, then, about later Christian baptisms and how Israel's bathings relate to them? A number of questions remain open and unsolved.

It is now clear that ordinary ritual bathing practices and John the Bather's experimental practices were practices of occupied Israel. In the second century, however, these bathing practices of Jesus groups moved beyond celebrations of people's resistance to Roman violence. The mid-second century, after the Bar Kokhba War of 132–136 CE, was marked by people's gradual increasing loyalty to various schools, clubs, and movements associated with Jesus, and the bathings increasingly express intentional membership in specific groups or movements. The bathing celebration focused more on membership and loyalty. Of course, there was very little or no talk of "Christian" or "Christianity"; but there was an increasing attention to declaring one's loyalty to Jesus, the God of Israel, and particular communities during the bathings. What remains to be sorted out is exactly how and when the shift from bathings to Christian baptism occurred.

CONCLUSION

Both bathing and communal eating practices of Jesus groups during the first two centuries of the Common Era were important community activities. The bathing practices in particular had a strong effect across broad swaths of these communities as people strove against imperial pressure. Both of these practices healed and energized otherwise broken people and relationships, providing them with a sense of belonging to a safe community.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Al-Suadi, Soham. "The Ritual of the Hellenistic Meal: Early Christian Everyday Practice as an Exegetical Challenge." Fall 2017.

Larsen, Lillian. "Monastic Meal Rituals." Fall 2017.

McGowan, Andrew. "Changing Courses: Eucharistic Origins." Fall 2017.

Patterson, Stephen J. "Baptism: A Pre-History." Fall 2017.

Smith, Dennis. "In the Beginning Was the House: How Social and Identity Formation of Early Christ Groups Took Place." Spring 2016.

Taussig, Hal. "Washing Dogma Off Baptismal Practices of the First Two Centuries." Fall 2017.

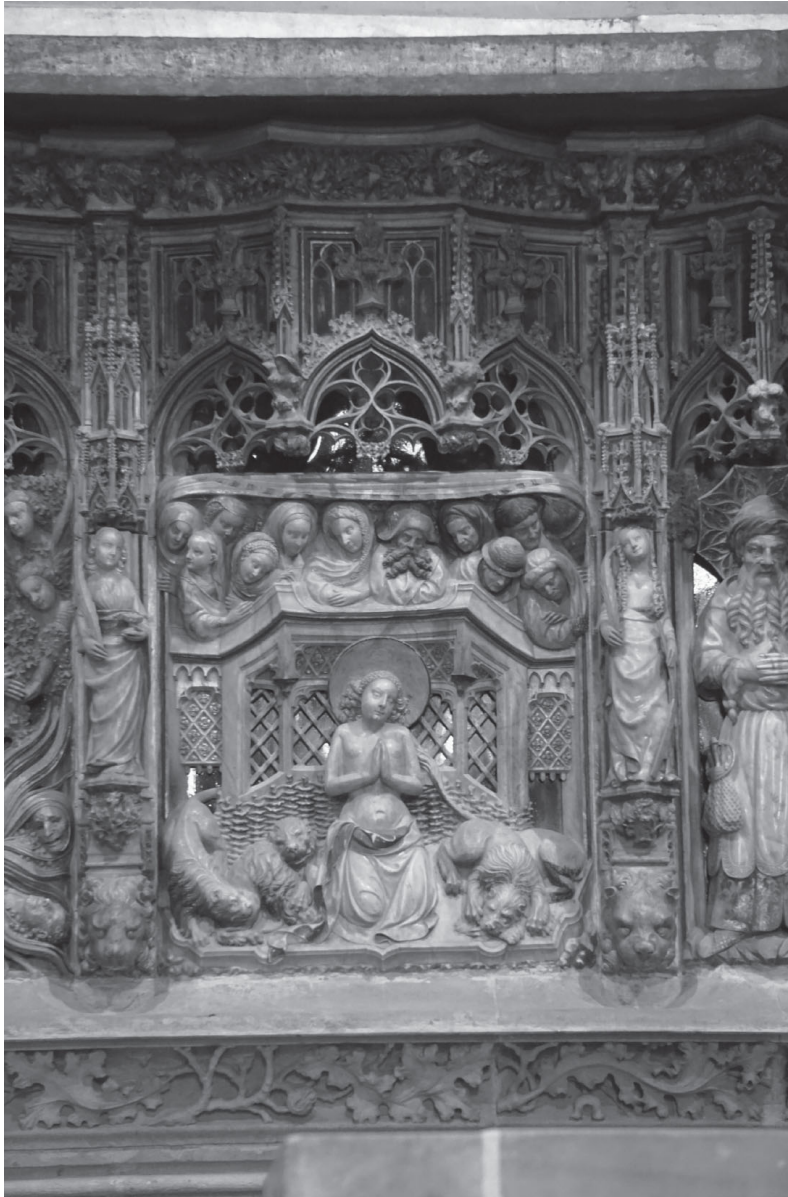
Part III

Real Variety, Fictional Unity

Inventing Orthodoxy Through Heresy

To call someone a heretic is a very grave insult and accusation. Why? Simply put, because it puts that person outside of the bounds of the group, indicating that he or she has deviated from the group's true beliefs. Originally a religious term, and today even a Christian term, it has spread its tentacles from the religious sphere into a variety of other aspects of modern life. Politics is a great example. Republicans whom other Republicans deem insufficiently "Republican" are called "RINOs," or Republican in Name Only—a contemporary kind of heretic.

There is an irony here. How did the Jesus movement, which was open to the varied elements of the Roman world and all different peoples, move to exclude that diversity in favor of orthodoxy—that is, so-called proper belief that excluded many? Orthodoxy told this story as the exclusion of heresy that corrupted the purity of original teachings. The fourth-century church historian Eusebius used this as his main narrative line.



The teacher Thecla of the group the Enslaved of God was continually arrested for being a single public woman teacher who refused to be married. Her teaching was never stopped, and she died of old age. Here she prays among the beasts in the arena.

Sarah Sexton Crossan

THE ORIGINS OF HERESY

The English word “heresy” is a transliteration of the Greek *hairesis*, whose basic meaning is “choice,” particularly intellectual choice. Often it refers to

teachings of the Greek philosophical schools or to those who follow a particular school or system of thought, with the common translation of “party” or, more negatively, “faction.” The Acts of the Apostles uses this term in precisely this way: “But the high priest rose up and all who were with him, that is the party [*hairesis*] of the Sadducees” (5:17). This could just as easily be translated as “school” or “philosophy.” This is precisely the way the first-century Judean historian Josephus uses this word in describing the four schools or philosophies of first-century Israel.¹

Paul, the envoy of the Anointed, uses *hairesis* in a slightly different fashion, although well within standard usage. “First of all, I hear that when you meet as a community there are divisions [*hairesis*] among you and to some extent I believe it” (1 Cor. 11:18). The context indicates that Paul views this as negative, so “divisions” is an acceptable translation. The sense is that Paul fears the Corinthian community is dividing into schools. There is no indication, however, that he thinks one of the schools or divisions should be excluded from the community.

The sense of *hairesis* as intellectual choice or school remained dominant through most of the second century. The strong negative sense of “heresy” becomes evident only in the late second century in the writing of the north African teacher Tertullian called *Concerning the Prescription of Heretics*: “The heretic is no longer considered a member of the party of *Christus*” (16.2). Now the heretic is excluded from the community and identified with those who follow false gods and Judeans.

When writers in later centuries, including even modern scholars until recently, looked back on those writers before Tertullian, they anachronistically read earlier usage as identical with Tertullian’s. Translations also reflect this anachronistic reading of the second-century writers. This is very clear in the writings of the Greek bishop Irenaeus. Markus Vinzent in his paper for the Christianity Seminar pointed out how translation can change the meaning of a writing. If one translates *hairesis* as “heresy,” as has been traditionally done, the sense is very different from the sense one gets if one uses “school” instead. This makes a big difference in our understanding of Irenaeus, an important teacher in the mid-second century, in his writing:

Many offshoots of numerous schools (heresies) have already been formed from those schoolmasters (heretics) we have described. This arises from the fact that numbers of them—indeed, we may say all—desire themselves to be teachers, and to break off from the particular

school (heresy) in which they have been involved. Forming another teaching out of another opinion, and then another from another, they insist upon teaching something new, declaring themselves the inventors of an opinion which they may have been able to call into existence.

(*Against Heresies* 1.28.1)²

The context clearly indicates that Irenaeus is dealing with schools of thought and the dynamic of how schools and teachers operate. They inherently create competition for new teachings. Like Paul, Irenaeus finds these schools and teachings problematic, but he does not appear to view them as outside the group, as Tertullian does at a later period. Their error needs to be exposed and corrected. This is indicated in the complete title of Irenaeus's book: *On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Knowledge*. The traditional English title, *Against Heresies* (from the Latin title *Adversus Haereses*), was formulated several centuries after the work's composition after the debate between teachers and schools at the time of Irenaeus had escalated into expulsion from the church of those who disagreed with the developing orthodoxy. In this much later period, the Greek *hairesis* was transliterated into Latin as *haereses* and subsequently into English as "heresy." This transliteration process almost guarantees an anachronistic reading of earlier authors. (See [Chapter 2](#) for how this plays out with the word "Christian.")

RIVALRY IN PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS

The way forward is to reject the either/or of heresy versus orthodoxy, the creation of later centuries, and look at the evidence from the first two centuries without prejudice as to a predetermined outcome. Where did these different teachings come from?

The significance of philosophical schools as the primary social environment for the development of teachings in the early Jesus movements is often overlooked.³ Such schools had a long tradition in Greek and Roman culture. Plato's academy existed well into the first century BCE. Schools in this context did not have formal curricula but were an informal grouping of teachers and students who shared a common interest.

Israel also had well-established schools. The Judaeen historian Josephus refers to the four schools of Israel. The Pharisees were one of those schools, and the later rabbis, especially after the Bar Kokhba War (132–136 CE),

reorganized the life of Israel around Torah and its study. Jesus in the gospels is often called a teacher, and his followers are referred to as students, or in church-speak as “disciples.” The Gospel of Matthew ends with the resurrected Jesus telling his students, “You shall go and make students of the nations . . . Teach them to observe everything I have commanded you” (28:19, 20). This Gospel understands the task of Jesus’s followers to be a school task. The various writings associated with John would also appear to be the product of a school. Thus, the school model goes back to the very beginning of the Jesus movements.

Following the Bar Kokhba War, the rise of schools within the movement became much more evident. The continuous interaction and debate between rival schools highlighted the difference in teachings between schools and teachers. This, of course, was normal school practice. These differences in teachings would in time escalate to differences in doctrine, an ecclesiastical word for “teachings.” In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr addresses Marcion in a now lost work titled *To Marcion*, indicating that it is a conversation between two teachers, a conversation in which according to the rules of rhetoric, Justin will try to persuade Marcion. Tellingly, the fourth-century church historian Eusebius knows this is the title of Justin’s work, but oftentimes when not quoting from it, he refers to it as *Against Marcion*, reflecting the heresy-orthodoxy divide of his time. In Justin’s later *First Apology* and *Second Apology* he turned more decisively against Marcion, but it still remained a serious and critical debate among teachers.

Even later in the second century, Irenaeus writes of the many different and lively schools within the Jesus movement. He argues that schools break up and divide out of the desire of students to become teachers themselves. This desire led to the rise of new teachings. Thus, the internal dynamics of the schools, the competition between different teachers, and the desire of students to become teachers gave rise to new teachings and new schools supporting those teachings. The schools and their teachers were a driving force in a dynamic movement creating difference within the movement, according to Irenaeus.

Significantly, the interschool debates about teachings arose not from theological issues, like the oneness of God, but from the actual practices of the communities of the Anointed. This should not be surprising, as the Jesus movement, just like the Judean movement, was more about correct practice

(orthopraxis) than correct belief (orthodoxy). What unified both movements was practice. On the road to Christianity in the third and fourth centuries, that relationship would reverse. As illustrations of this dynamic, we look at two issues: death at the hands of the Roman officials and gender.

Self-Mastery and Noble Death

To understand the “noble death” (see [Chapter 6](#)), it’s important to understand that a major goal of Greek and Roman education was training in self-control or self-mastery—control of the passions. The emphasis was not on abstract knowledge, but control of the self that ensured integrity and overall character. This goal was held in common by many followers of the Anointed who adapted it to their own needs. Paul in Galatians 3:24 refers to the law as a teacher for the nations. The purpose of the law was to teach the nations mastery of their passions. His whole understanding of the purpose of the law for the nations in his Letter to the Romans is undergirded by the notions of self-mastery. For Paul, the efforts of the nations to employ the law as a method of self-mastery of the passions led to a misuse of the law. They became invested in doing the law, what Paul calls “works of the law.” For Paul, self-mastery is achieved by emulating the assurance of Jesus.

In Favor of Seeking a Noble Death

In the second century, the notion arose that a noble death at the hands of Roman officials ensured eternal health and salvation for the soul and body’s fleshly resurrection (see [Chapter 18](#)). The value of suffering was in its ability to control the passions. Deborah Saxon traces this process in her paper for the Seminar “What’s at Stake When ‘Heresy’ Sells?”

According to Saxon, *1 Clement*, written in the second century, holds up the deaths of the envoys Peter and Paul as examples for the Corinthian community:

We should set before our eyes the good apostles. There is Peter, who because of unjust jealousy bore up under hardships not just once or twice, but many times; and having thus borne his witness he went to the place of glory that he deserved. Because of jealousy and strife Paul pointed the way to the prize for endurance. (*1 Clem.* 5:3–5)⁴

Just as jealousy led to the execution of the envoys, so will it undermine the Corinthian community. But the envoys’ patient endurance demonstrated in their deaths their self-control, which will win out with eternal reward, as

stated of Paul further along in *1 Clement*: “He taught righteousness to the whole world, and came to the limits of the West, bearing his witness before the rulers. And so he was set free from this world and transported up to the holy place, having become the greatest example of endurance” (5:7).

Ignatius, writing about the same time as Clement, plays with the same themes. He sees his upcoming execution as a training in self-control:

For even though I have been bound in the Name, I have not yet been perfected in Jesus Anointed. For now I have merely begun to be a student, and I speak to you as my fellow learners. For I need to be trained by you in faith, instruction, endurance, and patience. (*To the Ephesians* 3.1)⁵

He uses the school language of a student in training. All this suffering is so that he can be perfected in the virtues of self-mastery.

In this model, execution and those who followed the executed attained all virtues. Execution by Rome validated the truth of their position. Their opponents were accused of disloyalty and lack of courage for avoiding execution. Irenaeus clearly makes this argument:

Some of these men have proceeded to such a degree of temerity, that they even pour contempt upon the witnesses, and vituperate those who are slain on account of the confession of the Lord, and who suffer all things predicted by the Lord, and who in this respect strive to follow the footsteps of the Lord’s passion, having become martyrs of the suffering One. (*Against Heresies* 3.18.5)⁶

This becomes the standard argument, repeated over and over, from the second century until, well, almost forever. The position of this “pro-execution” group is that suffering teaches patience, which controls desire, thereby producing self-mastery.

Suspicious of Seeking Execution

This attack on those suspicious of dying in the arena is, of course, from the point of view of their opponents. What, then, is the contrary argument?

A second- or early third-century CE writing known now as *Testimony of Truth* helps us to understand this alternative position. *Testimony of Truth* came to light among the Nag Hammadi manuscript discoveries of 1945. Although this manuscript was seriously damaged, what remains is very interesting, including its retelling of the Garden of Eden story from the perspective of Eden’s snake. The modern editors assigned the present title

on the basis of its contents, which emphasizes truth and truth-telling: “This therefore is the true testimony. When man knows himself and God who is over the truth, he will be saved and he will be crowned with the crown unfading.”⁷

This statement can serve as a summary of the author of the *Testimony*’s position. Saxon’s work is key in identifying how this writing crafts a self-mastery counterargument to those favoring dying as a witness. Salvation is knowledge, not theoretical knowledge, but knowledge as experience that engages with self-control. That will win the athlete’s crown, the same crown associated with the witness. All those involved in this debate agree that self-mastery is the goal, and they basically agree on what constitutes self-control: the traditional stoic control of the passions. The debate in the *Testimony* is over how that is achieved:

And this is what the Son of Man reveals to us: It is fitting for you (pl.) to receive the word of truth. If one will receive it perfectly—. But as for one who is [in] ignorance, it is difficult for him to diminish his works of [darkness] which he has done. Those who have [known] Imperishability, [however,] have been able to struggle against [passions].

Just as the witness is perfected by suffering, the knower is perfected by the word of truth, knowing “Imperishability” (God). The knower will win the struggle with the passions. In the hand of the opponents, the knower becomes a gnostic and identified with the modern invention of Gnosticism (see [Chapter 14](#)). The author of *Testimony of Truth* attacks those who seek execution by quoting the martyr’s confession:

The foolish, thinking [in] their heart [that] if they confess, “We are Christians,” in word only (but) not with power, while giving themselves over to ignorance, to a human death, not knowing where they are going nor who the Anointed is, thinking that they will live, when they are (really) in error, hasten towards the principalities and the authorities. They fall into their clutches because of the ignorance that is in them.

This is a remarkable passage. The witnesses are foolish and have completely misunderstood how salvation is achieved. They are ignorant and the victims of ignorance. This in turn leads to a denial of the resurrection of flesh: “[Do not] expect, therefore, [the] carnal resurrection, which [is] destruction.”

Both sides in this argument agree on the goal—salvation as defined by self-control—but they disagree on how this is achieved. For one group it is through suffering, which builds endurance and patience and controls desire.

The witness is the archetype. On the other side, the knower achieves these same goals reached by knowledge through the revelation of the Word, experiencing God. That knowledge brings control of the passions. By the end of the second century this divide became explicit, whereas it had been more fluid through the mid-second century.

Gender in Acts of Paul and Thecla

The title Acts of Paul and Thecla tells so much. Although Paul's name in first place indicates his priority as a male over a female, Thecla actually dominates the story. She is its true hero. As so often, things are not as they appear. A recently discovered fresco in Ephesus epitomizes the problem. It pictures Thecla's mother and Paul making the sign of preaching to Thecla in a burning house. But some later vandal, thinking that this indicates that Paul and a female are equal, has scratched out the eyes of the female character, attempting to disappear her, just as orthodoxy has attempted to scratch out heresy along with her. But the real story is more complex. Tertullian is the first author to remark on Thecla's story only to attack it, while Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century withdrew to her tomb for three years of prayer. (Thecla remained a popular saint whose tomb in Seleucia was venerated until well into the sixth century.)

The dating of Acts of Paul and Thecla is difficult to ferret out, but the text surely was in widespread circulation in Asia Minor by the mid-second century. In form it is a romance tale with high interest in legendary and miraculous details. Men are always falling in love with the beautiful virgin Thecla. It contains the first existing description of Paul: "a man small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, of noble mien, with eyebrows meeting, rather hood-nosed, full of grace" (Thecla 3).⁸

Bearing witness before the Roman officials is neither praised nor criticized in the narrative, but it is part of the story's subtext. Very early in the story Paul's message is summarized as "the word of God about abstinence and resurrection" (Thecla 5). One has to wonder whether the author of these Acts had actually read or even knew Paul's letters (see [Chapter 15](#)). Both abstinence and resurrection are strongly connected to a noble death. Abstinence is an example of self-mastery, overcoming the passions and desire, while resurrection is the reward for dying as a witness.

When Thamyras, who is engaged to Thecla, denounces Paul before the proconsul, he accuses Paul of making "virgins averse to marriage." When

the proconsul questions Paul, he responds, “The living God . . . has sent me that I may rescue them from corruption and uncleanness and all pleasure, and from death, that they may sin no more” (Thecla 17)—all of which call for self-control. But when Thecla, remaining faithful to Paul’s teaching about virginity, refuses to marry Thamyris, the proconsul condemns her to die by fire. Thecla maintains her self-mastery despite her sentence, not requiring the vision sent to her of the Lord as Paul to shore up her resolve: “As if I were unable to endure, Paul has come to look after me” (Thecla 21). When Thecla is brought naked before the proconsul to be burned, the procounsel “wept and admired the power that was in her” (Thecla 22). She is not defeated; she is not a victim. When the fire threatens to consume her, God causes a great thunderstorm to swamp the theater, so that Thecla is saved, and the spectators are threatened with drowning.

After her miraculous deliverance, Paul continues to worry about her purity: “Times are evil and you are beautiful. I am afraid lest another temptation come upon you worse than the first and that you do not withstand it but become mad after men” (Thecla 25). Right on cue, Alexander, one of the chief men of Antioch, sees Thecla and falls madly in love with her. He forces himself on her, but she strongly resists and makes a laughingstock of him in public. He brings her before yet another Roman official who condemns her to die with the beasts:

Thecla . . . was stripped . . . and was thrown into the arena. And lions and bears were let loose upon her. And a fierce lioness ran up and lay down at her feet . . . And a bear ran upon her, but the lioness went to meet it and tore the bear to pieces. (Thecla 33)

As the beasts keep coming, Thecla sees a pit of water and says, “Now it is time to wash myself.” So she throws herself in the water, saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself on my last day” (Thecla 34).

This remarkable self-baptism demonstrates how totally in control Thecla is. Paul should have had no need to worry about her purity. Her self-control over her passions and desires is complete. The purpose of dying in the arena was to purify the soul for immortal life. In Thecla’s case this is modified because she is not executed. But her miraculously prevented death testifies to her purity, and she acknowledges that this is her last day. So, this formula combines both the position of those who see suffering as the way of purification and the knowers who see revelation and wisdom as the way.

She both suffers and sees a vision. She does not have to die but will go on to preach the word of God.

The women in the crowd, seeing Thecla enter the pit of water, worry that she is going to drown herself.

She then threw herself into the water in the name of Jesus Christ, but the seals, having seen a flash of lightning, floated dead on the surface. And there was round her a cloud of fire so that neither could the beasts touch her nor could she be seen naked. (Thecla 34)

Like a true knower, only Thecla can see what is really happening. Everyone else sees dead seals and her nakedness obscured. Her purity remains protected.

The tale of Thecla is a marvelous antidote to the debates raging in the schools of the Anointed and wisdom circles in the second century. Both sides can find something of worth in her story, which probably accounts for its popularity and longevity. Her self-mastery is complete. She is not afraid and speaks boldly. She never appears as a passive victim. She even at one point dresses as a man (Thecla 40). She resists the power of the empire, both in the presence of its officials and in its effort to destroy her in public spectacles of violence. The emphasis on her virginity and refusal to marry wellborn men rejects the empire's "family values," in which marriage and bearing children was a requirement of wellborn women. Yet she becomes a substitute daughter to her wellborn matron Tryphaena. She does not desire execution nor resist it. Her deliverance twice from death is interpreted as proof of her purity and her resurrection even before her baptism. Baptism and resurrection (the last day) are elided in this tale. The tale has all the earmarks of a witness story but without the execution. At story's end she converts her mother and "enlightened many by the word of God; then she rested in a glorious sleep" (Thecla 43).

Yet even though Paul plays a minor role in her story, seemingly lurking in the background to pop out at the appropriate moment, he is the one at the end who commissions her: "Go and teach the word of God" (Thecla 41). Just as the author of Acts subordinated its hero Paul to the twelve in Jerusalem, so this tale puts Thecla in that same apostolic line through a commission from Paul. But that self-baptism or washing continues to unsettle the story, pointing to the fluidity and experimentation so characteristic of the early stages of the Jesus movement.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the first and second centuries, we see not only a great deal of diversity, but also fluidity and experimentation in all aspects of the life of the communities of the Jesus movements.

Members of early Jesus communities grew up within greater Israel and identified with Israel's tradition. Israel had long dealt with its diversity by orthopraxy, not orthodoxy, that is, by correct practice and not correct teaching. The Jesus groups initially followed in this tradition. But competition between teachers for new teachings created new schools and began to shift the balance more toward teachings than practice. Irenaeus is a good example of the shift as he begins to sift through various teachers and schools. By the time of Tertullian at the end of the second century, the teachers he does not agree with are being excluded. Now we are on the way to the anathemas of the creeds. Heresy is a Christian invention. Significantly, Judaism and the rabbis, faced with the same conditions, did not take the same route.

We have seen how *hairesis*, which means choice, and by extension school, shifts from a neutral term to an indication of division to finally a negative term that excludes the other. But as categories, heresy and orthodoxy, false teaching versus true teaching, obscure our understanding of the first two centuries. In this period, the two categories are anachronistic and read the future into the past. The real situation is more complex and calls for a more radical solution. The categories themselves need to disappear. The real situation is fluid, exhibiting a great deal of experimentation. We do not have heresy and orthodoxy in competition but a whole series of schools and teachers engaged and interacting in conversation, debate, and experimentation. Only toward the end of the second century did things begin to settle out, and then only tentatively.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Iricinschi, Eduard. "How Gullible Were the Women of Late-Antique Rhone and Asia Minor?"

Redescribing the Valentinian Marcosians in Irenaeus of Lyon's *Against the Heresies*." Fall 2019.

Miller, Robert J. "Prophecy, Christology, and Anti-Judaism in Justin Martyr." Spring 2017.

Niederer Saxon, Deborah. "What's at Stake When 'Heresy' Sells?" Fall 2019.

Toft Rosland, Kristine. "A New Beginning: Reading the *Apocryphon of John* as *Genesis* Fanfiction." Fall 2019.

Vinzent, Markus. "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Misnomers and Misnamers." Fall 2019.

Wilhite, David E. Is Jesus YHWH? Two De-Judaizing Trajectories of Marcion and Justin.” Spring 2019.

Demolishing Gnosticism

On November 16, 1953, the preservation of an ancient collection of documents related to early Jesus peoples made the front page of the *New York Times*. “Gnostic Gospels of 150 A.D. Found,” read the title of journalist Michael L. Hoffman’s article, with the sub-headline, “Throw Light on Early Christianity.” Hoffman’s article discussed a “book” of writings found in the Nag Hammadi collection of manuscripts in the Egyptian desert. This collection was a library, of sorts, preserved for almost two thousand years and found accidentally when a man went digging for fertilizer. Instead, he turned up a red clay jar full of papyri: fifty-two texts, collected inside thirteen leather-bound volumes. The tale of discovery is thrilling: it involves four-thousand-year-old gravesites, illegal smuggling, fire, suppression, revenge, and even murder.

Hoffman’s *New York Times* article is particularly interesting because of how it frames this collection. Hoffman starts his report with two very basic categories, categories that seem to be decidedly distinguished from one another: Gnosticism and Christianity. On first read, the article seems clear that Gnosticism and Christianity were separate phenomena, though they existed in the same space and time. Hoffman describes Gnosticism in a short paragraph in brackets as a kind of explanatory aside: “Gnosticism was a mystic religious movement that existed side by side with early Christianity and was influenced by it. It reached its height in the second century.” This “mystic religious movement” was not Christian, though Christianity affected this movement. The statement implies that Christianity was not likewise influenced by Gnosticism; the influence was one way.

A reread of Hoffman's article is confusing, however. The article starts by saying that "a book of early Christian writings, some of which date from about 150 A.D.," was found. So, a Christian collection. The next sentence, though, states that the book "is one of thirteen volumes of Gnostic manuscripts containing forty-eight texts or Gospels." This statement expresses some judgment about these texts as not being Christian, given the hesitancy here to call them "Gospels," and the title of "Gnostic." So, *not* a Christian collection.

Next, readers find that definition of Gnosticism in brackets, one that clearly separates Gnosticism from Christianity. Later, though, Hoffman references early Christians "who followed this line of spiritual development"—that is, Christians who located themselves within a "Gnostic experience." We're left asking whether these newly discovered texts are Christian or (g)not? What, exactly, is the relationship of these so-called Gnostic writings to Christian gospels? Of Gnosticism to Christianity? Can one be Christian and Gnostic, or are they separate? If separate, did one influence the other, or is evidence of mutual influence to be found?

The Gnosticism-Christianity questions raised by Hoffman's front-page *New York Times* article are the questions that have preoccupied scholarship on early Christianity for the past two centuries. It isn't surprising, then, to find these questions between the lines of this news article. While these categories sometimes blur together, it is apparent that Gnosticism is *bad*, signaled in the article by the word "unorthodox," and contrasts with Christianity, *good* and, of course, "orthodox." He points out first that scholars know little about the manuscripts found at Nag Hammadi, though scholars immediately labeled these writings as Gnostic. Second, to quote Hoffman, scholars know little about ancient Gnosticism itself in any kind of "original and pure form." Why was the Nag Hammadi collection called Gnostic, when scholars knew so little either about the writings or about Gnosticism? What made, and continues to make, Gnosticism an important category of scholarship on the first two centuries of the Jesus movements? Finally, and most important, *if we don't know what Gnosticism is, why are we so sure that it was important?*

THE MYTH OF GNOSTICISM

A lot has changed since 1953, of course. Many of the writings from the Nag Hammadi find are now available not just to scholars, but also to the public, in a variety of online forms and forums. A lot has *not* changed, however. It seems like, at this point, we should at least know what Gnosticism is. Strangely, even since the publication of the manuscripts discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, our understanding of Gnosticism has not substantially advanced.

We continue to rely on some basic stereotypes about Gnosticism, stereotypes that have not changed or been proved. These stereotypes include claims that Gnosticism is a religion of body-haters, people who believe that material existence is evil, and that God cannot be known through the body. It is a religion of social deviance born of cosmic duality: this visible world, created by a lower god, is bad, devoid of beauty, order, true ethics, anything that reveals true divinity. Our human task is to escape this world through the acquisition of knowledge. Specifically, we must know our true divine essence; this knowledge of our true selves will free us from our gross natural flesh. These stereotypes of Gnosticism form an intact myth. Discussion of Gnosticism in both scholarly and popular contexts has combined these stereotypes into a seemingly coherent narrative—the myth of Gnosticism.

Here we encounter a major problem: while different scholars, writing some sixteen to nineteen centuries after the Gnostic phenomenon, have discussed this narrative of Gnosticism as if it existed for some people in the first centuries of the Common Era, there are no documents that verify the story. This myth of Gnosticism does not actually exist. It's like a myth of a myth. On a theoretical level, the myth exists. We can look up "Gnosticism" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and find our Gnostic stereotypes, neatly packaged. Gnosticism has been made to exist, has been made a *thing*, a category. It exists, and has existed, as a tool with which to think.

Gnosticism is impossible to find in any practical way, however. The writings we have called Gnostic might contain some of the elements of the myth, to some degree, but never all of them, and never in the same way. You can't find this myth in any given so-called Gnostic writing. For example, a commonly cited element in the Gnostic myth is world hating: the world in which we live was created by a lower, generally mean divinity, and because of that bad start, the world is a fundamentally bad place. The

powers of this world are unequivocally evil; our own material bodies are evil. The world is a dark prison from which we need to escape.

When we start to look at actual Gnostic writings, however, this fundamental pessimism is not there. The writings really do not seem to be all that different from other writings of the time period that were also interested in the workings of power in the world: the evils of power, the negotiation of power, possibilities of power as and for good. The more individual writings called Gnostic are examined, the more they seem to reflect commonly shared values and concerns, questions and desires, reflection on and struggle with human morality. Even the word itself, Gnosticism, does not seem to have been used until the time of theologian Henry More, in the seventeenth century—more than a millennium after the apparent existence of the phenomenon.

The nonexistence of the Gnostic myth in the ancient world should be deeply disturbing. Why have we insisted on the existence of this monster, if this monster has never, not once, fully crawled out of the water, never heaved its ancient body onto the reedy banks to stretch out its head in the heat of a summer sun? None of our evidence suggests that there was an actual, historical phenomenon any time in the first through the third centuries of the Common Era called Gnosticism. Let's explore why it has been used as a scholarly category and why we invented Gnosticism.

THE LIMITS OF CATEGORIES

We invented Gnosticism not because it was a “thing” that we observed, but rather because it was a word that we used to think with. Specifically, it helped us make distinctions. Gnosticism became important as a powerful word to help us create categories and boundaries, not to describe an objective reality. At its core, it was a word used, in the eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries, to create an “other” over against the self of Christianity.

Biblical scholarship is just beginning to see this significance of Gnosticism, not as an objective, historical phenomenon but as a category of language used to think with. Karen L. King in her book *What Is Gnosticism?* challenges the category of Gnosticism and traces the history of the use of the word “gnostic” from its first use by Irenaeus, the second-

century bishop of Lyons, to modern times.¹ Irenaeus was interested in promoting the unity of a “church” over against the divisiveness of “others,” of schools or what are later called “heretics” (see [Chapter 13](#)). He calls people “Gnostics,” but we do not find people calling themselves “Gnostics,” in the same way that we do not find people calling themselves “Christian.” Irenaeus never used the word “Gnosticism.” The term becomes significant in biblical scholarship from the nineteenth century onward, when Gnosticism is used as a substitute term, in scholarly discourse, for heresy.

Scholars examining the histories of religions became interested in the idea of Gnosticism, looking to trace its origins—the origins of a “thing” that scholars identified as an “it,” and therefore an “it” with a beginning—against the more perfect Christianity. King is clear about the impact of this work when she states, “The fixation on origins has tended to distort the actual social and historical processes of literary productions because the purpose of determining the origin of Gnosticism is less historical than rhetorical . . . it is aimed at delimiting the normative boundaries and definition of Christianity.”²

King’s revelation in *What Is Gnosticism?* is this acknowledgment of Gnosticism as a kind of Shakespearean tragedy—a King Lear, an idea lurching wildly, not without discipline or insight so much as tortured by fatally flawed assumptions. Scholars have made a thing where no such thing existed, building off later categories of orthodoxy and heresy, in order to continue to produce a narrative of “Christianity.” These later categories—categories created by the historical “winners,” those who got to define “right” and “wrong” belief, and “Christianity” itself, in future historical periods—miss the messiness of the first two centuries. The term, and the category, no longer works; it obscures much more than it clarifies and presumes agreement, a sameness, where no such sameness existed. There was a great deal more dynamism, a great deal more variability and diversity in the first two centuries, than the category allows. What do we call “it,” if not Gnosticism, then?

A NEW APPROACH

Help with this question of categories comes from an unexpected source: fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin. Included in her 2012 compilation of short stories *The Unreal and the Real* is an imitation of scholarly research and writing, a parody of academic work Le Guin titled “The Author of the Acacia Seeds, and Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*.”³ This fictitious journal is situated in a (sadly) fictitious academic discipline; “therolinguistics” refers to the study of animal languages.

Le Guin first walks us through a research project on Ant, a language more written than spoken, and mainly written on seeds. Then a fictitious scholar announces an expedition to Cape Crozier in the Antarctic, inviting colleagues interested in the study of penguin languages to join. Penguin, it seems, has a great deal of potential as a field of study. This potential opened up when scholars shifted away from comparing Penguin to Dolphin languages, toward a comparison between Penguin and the script of a goose, the Low Greylag. Penguin seemed to resemble Dolphin in form; both languages were written in water, through the movement of groups of flipper-based writers. Both “scripts” are movement-based and collective. The long-standing parallel to Dolphin never made much sense of the content of Penguin “sea writings,” however, and scholars had all but abandoned study of Penguin script.

The fictitious Professor DUBY then shakes up the study of Penguin entirely, asking what would happen if Penguin were studied not from the perspective of Dolphin, or other mammals of similar habitats, like seals, but from the perspective of Bird? A shift in category, from sea mammal, to bird, changes the type and quality of evidence available about the object of study (the penguin) dramatically.

Le Guin’s story poses a wonderful “what if” question: What if we think about Penguin from a new perspective, in the context of a totally different—but not at all shocking—category? Le Guin’s imaginary history of scholarship, though, never thought about Penguin as Bird. The comparison to Dolphin seemed to work, as the *form* of the “script” was similar (water writing, through the movements of a group), but we never learned much about *content*.

The story offers a helpful corrective for our approach to so-called Gnostic writings, inviting us to ask our own “what if?” From the moment of their discovery in 1945, the Nag Hammadi collection was called Gnostic,

but what if they are not Gnostic at all, but simply part of the diverse literature of the early Jesus movement in the second and third centuries? What if we released them from their Gnostic category and thought of them from an entirely new category?

The imposition of the label or category of Gnostic on the Nag Hammadi writings and other previously discovered writings has impeded, blocked, and caricatured our attempts to make these writings meaningful. These documents offer important information about the many different Jesus movements, Wisdom schools, and adherents of the Anointed in the second century. The writings are much more complex, much more diverse, than that category allows. We need to allow ourselves a big “what if?” with these texts. What if they are not, have never been, could not be, Gnostic? How would we read them then? What would we learn, what would we see? What knowledge could we produce, as a result?

IF NOT GNOSTIC, WHAT?

What if these texts are not Gnostic, but . . . what, exactly? Le Guin’s story offered a corrective category for Dolphin: Bird. Penguins are birds, after all. It is not clear, though, if we have such a corrective category in our case. If the category Gnostic has impeded our study of these various first- and second-century texts, it is not obvious that “Jesus peoples” should be the corrective. It is difficult to frame a comparative statement, “Bird is to Dolphin as ___ is to Gnostic.” How to fill in the blank?

Perhaps we do not need to fill in the blank at all. Perhaps we can retrain ourselves to think without categories, without the almost knee-jerk reaction of placing things within boxes so that we might therefore come to know them. We will have to come to know things differently. That new way of knowing will be a huge challenge, given our current intellectual habits.

When we reject, or at least test, our boundary-based ways of thinking, so much potential for meaning opens up—we can come to know differently, to see and know a totally new range of possibilities. If there are no constants, no essences, no unchanging forms, we can appreciate variability. We might consider Charles Darwin here, the “father” of evolutionary biology: Darwin rejected constants and unchanging forms, seeing, instead, variability within populations. He didn’t assume he knew what a finch was,

in some unchanging form, as a species, an essence; he saw populations full of diversity, variability. No two finches are exactly the same.

King is proposing a model for approaching these writings—previously-known-as-Gnostic on the basis of population thinking, specifically as a population of writings. This population displays a great deal of similarity, but seldom, if ever, sameness. At its edges, we find a great deal of difference. We need to approach these members of the population one by one, study them on their own terms. As King contends in the introduction to her book *The Secret Revelation of John*:

I think initially we need to refer to individual texts. That is, rather than generalize about what Gnostics believe . . . —especially as opposed to what Christians believe—I think it best to talk about particular texts. The goal is not to create the perfect category (an impossibility in any case), but to make these texts available for critical and constructive work, whether in historical reconstruction or theology.⁴

In setting aside categories like Gnostic and Christian, these first- and second-century shadows without forms, the writings will be allowed to speak for themselves, without preconception. It is challenging work, this un-learning. But given the dangers of maintaining our categories, our task is clear: we need to start, restart, by *not knowing* these writings at all.

The primary means of not knowing this diverse group of Jesus- or Anointed-referencing writings from the first and second centuries is to set aside the name of Gnostic, this category that has given scholarship on the writings its fundamental shape. In this chapter, then, we have done to Gnosticism in the first and second centuries what our first two chapters did to Christianity in these same two centuries. In both cases we have decided to learn about these two centuries without the made-up twinned words “Christianity” and “Gnosticism.”

By designating the writings found at Nag Hammadi as Gnostic, these writings were also considered to be “bad,” erroneous, because Gnostic was oppositional to Christian. The writings would just be examples of error, of heresy, of false forms of Christianity. We know, though, that Gnosticism is not an adequate category for the analysis of early Anointed movements. Setting aside the Gnostic name allows us to see that these writings really resist any easy categorization, easy naming or definition. All the Nag Hammadi writings have in common, at their core, is that they were found in the same jar in the Egyptian desert.

GNOSTIC VERSUS WHAT?

King's work on the Nag Hammadi text called *The Secret Revelation of John* has allowed us to see how important it is to get rid of the term Gnostic. This writing was popular in the ancient world, as it has survived in multiple copies; the Nag Hammadi collection itself included three. It is often discussed as a primary example of Gnosticism. How do we know *The Secret Revelation of John* is really Gnostic if we have never had the opportunity to see it as anything else?

King's work offers the first comprehensive study of a supposed Gnostic writing that does not make Gnosticizing assumptions. The [Gnostic] *Secret Revelation of John* is very different from *The Secret Revelation of John*. Not surprisingly, when our approach to the writing is left blank, unconditioned, we can know this writing in entirely new ways and understand much more of the writing itself.

Reading afresh, *The Secret Revelation* might strike us as familiar or resonate with us in a particular way. King translates the first lines of this writing as follows:

Now it happened one day when John the brother of James, the sons of Zebedee, was going up to the temple, a Pharisee named Arimanios approached him. And he said to him, "Where is your teacher, the one whom you used to follow?" He said to him, "He returned to the place from which he came." The Pharisee said to me, "This Nazorene deceived you with error. He filled your ears with lies, and he shut your hearts. He turned you from the traditions of your fathers." When I heard these things, I turned from the temple to the mountain which was a place of desert. And I grieved greatly in my heart, saying, "How was the Savior appointed? Why was he sent into the world by his father who sent him? Who is his father? And of what sort is that aeon to which we will go? He told us that the aeon is modeled on that indestructible aeon, but he did not teach us about what sort the latter is."⁵

This scene seems reasonably conventional: we have a conversation between a Pharisee (Arimanios) and a follower of the Savior (John). We find a lot of debates with Pharisees in the canonical Gospels, so nothing about that context seems unusual.

We also have a lot of references to people and nation in this passage: Nazareth, the Jerusalem Temple, "traditions of your fathers." Nazareth was not considered an honorable place, so Arimanios is starting with a strong put-down here in calling Jesus, here identified as "the Savior," "this Nazorene." Arimanios is really challenging John's sense of belonging, his sense of place within the collectivity of Israel. It starts, geographically, at

the Temple in Jerusalem, which did not exist after its destruction in 70 CE. We don't know why John is going up to the Temple, but Arimanius stops him in his tracks, and his accusations cause John to lose his certainty, to turn from the Temple and retreat to the desert. John then asks questions about origins and belonging: "How was the Savior appointed? Why was he sent into the world by his father who sent him? Who is his father?" The crisis of Jesus's death, followed by Arimanius's attack, destroys John's confidence.

The writing is framed as working through the uncertainty of belonging to the people of Israel. After the Judean-Roman War and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the meaning of belonging to Israel was in a state of crisis. The Secret Revelation of John could be read as a response to this crisis, a way to work through the question of belonging to Israel when Israel, as a geographic or physical place, a homeland, was devastated. A reading of these opening lines without any decided category, without any prereading, as it were, offers rich meaning relating to social belonging. How do I belong, John asks, when my conventional ways of belonging have been shaken up, destroyed?

In response to his anxiety about belonging, John receives a vision in which he is offered a mode of counterbelonging, a location of community in a "world above." An interesting Father-Mother-Son trinity tells John:

"[The Unity] is a monarchy with nothing ruling over it. It is the God and Father of the All, the holy, the invisible, who exists over the All, the one who [. . . there is a gap in the text here] in corruption, existing as pure light, into which it is not possible for any light of the eye to gaze. It is the Spirit. It is not appropriate to think about It as God or that It is something similar. For It surpasses divinity. It is a dominion having nothing to rule over it. (Secret Revelation 4:2–5)⁶

A monarchy, a dominion, *with nothing ruling over it*. In the context of the Roman Empire, that mode of belonging, that kind of belonging "upward" or location of sovereignty in a world above, would definitely have sounded appealing.

This vision of a monarchy with nothing ruling over it in the Secret Revelation belongs to a literature of belonging, writings that work through what it means to identify with a particular group once old or familiar boundaries have been erased—writings like the book of Revelation, for example, and the Letter to the Hebrews in the Bible. King's reading of the Secret Revelation refuses conventional classifications. It does not present us

with some kind of mystical, inaccessible sort of treatise, but with a relatable consideration of how to understand our social lives and location in the face of a violent, imperfect, sometimes dark world.

This meaning is not apparent if we hold on to our Gnostic category. King's work enables us to understand The Secret Revelation of John in its own world, a world of lived experience. Instead of Gnosticism, we see these poignant expressions of power negotiation in the face of dominance and crises of belonging, the working out of what belonging means, specifically belonging to Israel, in a situation where it might have felt like God had abandoned the people. We see this vital, urgent, complex wrestling with human experience, experience of power, history, commitment. Reading without the categories—it is a totally new, exciting way of knowing this text.

CONCLUSION

The movement of Gnosticism to the scholarly sidelines removes a confusing category from our ongoing work of rethinking the history of early Jesus schools and associations. We are moving from an idea that Gnosticism was a real force, the primary “heresy” that threatened the “pure” trajectory of Christianity, to the actuality, on the basis of evidence for the absence, the nonexistence, of Gnosticism. We must rethink the entire assumption that a unified heretical Gnosticism played a primary role in how the first two centuries unfolded. Using Gnosticism as an analytical category seems to hide more than it reveals, and if we really want to understand the writing called Gnostic, we need to set aside that designation.

A lot changes when we do this. For one thing, without this falsely constructed version of a crucial battle in the second and third centuries between early orthodox Christians and fiercely competitive and heretical Gnostic Christians, the picture of orthodoxy versus heresy becomes a much shakier enterprise. The Anointed groups of the first two centuries are no longer about a pure church based on a preordained belief system, over and against sneaky, corrupting Gnosticism.

Second, the wealth of Nag Hammadi documents and other writings previously labeled as Gnostic provides a wealth of new stories to both the public and scholarship. These writings offer important information on the

second century to a broad reach of readers from very different perspectives. King's reading of *The Secret Revelation of John* begins to show us what might happen when we integrate these documents into a more diverse and complex description of emerging phenomena. It is essential that we not impose categories on these writings, so that they can start to speak for themselves.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Brakke, David. *The Gospel of Judas, 'Gnostics,' and 'Sethians': An Emendation to My Argument in The Gnostics*. Fall 2014.

Kotrosits, Maia. "But What Do We Call It?: 'The Secret Revelation of John and Crises of Categories.'" Fall 2014.

Scott, Brandon. "What Categories Are Left?" Fall 2014.

Taussig, Hal. "Questioning the Category of Gnosticism." Fall 2014.

Williams, Michael. "Are You, or Have You Ever Been, a Gnostic?" Fall 2014.

Paul Obscured

Paul dominates the New Testament. He is credited as the author of as many as fourteen letters and is the hero of the second half of the book of Acts. Many of the core debates over Christian doctrine revolve around interpreting Paul: faith versus works, free will versus grace, letter versus spirit. So, if one thinks of the New Testament as a record of the beginnings of Christianity, one naturally assumes that Paul's voice and authority held center stage right from the start.

But that assumption is wrong. Paul's own letters show that he struggled to find an audience and had trouble holding on to supporters. A former persecutor of Anointed followers, he proved to be a quarrelsome thorn in their side when he joined their ranks. Although he had never known Jesus "in the flesh," he claimed a superior intimacy with the Anointed through his personal call. At the time of his death, Paul might have had good reason to feel alone and abandoned, with many Jesus followers having turned their backs on him. What is more, a long silence follows his life when Paul was all but forgotten, except in a handful of communities that remembered him as their founder. Nearly a hundred years after his death, in the mid-second century, he began to be name-checked by an aggressive group of partisans who had rediscovered his legacy. But others reacted either with hostility or with relative indifference to this obscure character from the past.

Paul's place in the New Testament has led the public, theologians, and biblical scholars in the past to imagine his influence everywhere in the period between his life and the later formation of the New Testament. Pick up popular or scholarly books on the Apostolic Fathers or other second-century authors from the nineteenth century forward, and you will see

scores of references to Paul. But once we realize that the New Testament did not yet exist in the second century, we can begin to see that the words attributed to Paul's influence usually are nothing more than short turns of phrase, stock metaphors, or popular images both Paul and the other authors draw from the culture around them. When we search these other second-century writings for Paul's substantive or distinctive ideas, we typically do not find them.

Even those who knew of Paul and mentioned him may not have known his writings. Acts purports to tell Paul's story but, notoriously, never once mentions him writing letters. Our tendency is to think that everyone in these religious circles read Paul, especially those who, like the author of Acts, thought highly of him. But the absence of engagement with Paul's big ideas in many of the writers suggests either that they did not know his letters or, even more intriguingly, did not think his letters mattered much to communities other than the ones to which they were addressed.

Writings in the ancient world did not have the wide distribution and circulation that they have today, and this was especially true of letters that were not composed with a larger audience in mind. Paul's reputation as a heroic envoy and community founder had wider circulation than his writings, which after all were directed to the occasional affairs of individual communities. Special circumstances and motives had to intervene to collect and "publish" those letters as something worth the attention of a wider audience.

COMMUNITY FOUNDER

Most second-century writings by those belonging to communities of the Anointed do not mention Paul. It may be that such silence is not particularly significant in compositions such as the *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, *Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a good number of the apologists, and the letters of John, 1 Peter, or Hebrews.

Three writers dated to the mid-second century do mention Paul explicitly: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna. Since so many second-century writings make no reference to Paul, it is important to take a closer look at what these writers do say about him. And perhaps more to the point, what they do not say about him.



The trio of teachers Thecla, Paul, and Theocleia, Thecla's mother.

Sarah Sexton Crossan

Clement of Rome

Clement, an early leader in the Roman community, sees Peter and Paul together as famous martyrs in the memory of his own Roman community. But Paul alone gives him a connection to his Corinthian compatriots, since Paul founded their community and therefore had authority for them. Since Clement seeks leverage with the Corinthians, he explicitly cites and endorses statements of Paul that serve this purpose. He has a copy of 1 Corinthians, probably not because Paul's letters were in wide circulation as a collection, but because, as Clement tells us, he has been approached by a group of Corinthian leaders seeking his intervention. Apparently, they gave Clement a copy of Paul's letter to their community as a useful reference point for him to use in his own correspondence. Clement alludes to no other letter of Paul's besides the one to Clement's own Roman community, and his presentation of ideas and ideals of that Roman community shows little influence from Paul. Clement refers to Paul, but only to confirm the relationship between the Corinthians and himself.

Ignatius of Antioch

Although scholars recently have doubted the integrity or even authenticity of Ignatius's letters, they do provide some useful evidence of Paul. As with Clement, Ignatius acknowledges Paul without making substantial use of him. He refers to Paul explicitly only twice. Like Clement, he knows of Paul in tandem with Peter, as a pair of martyrs associated with the

community at Rome (*To the Romans* 4.3). He refers to Paul alone when writing to the community of followers at Ephesus, which he thinks was founded by Paul. He calls them “fellow initiates of Paul, (a man) sanctified, approved, worthy of blessing, in whose steps may it be mine to be found when I reach God, who in every letter remembers you in the Anointed Jesus” (*To the Ephesians* 12.2).¹ On the basis of the last remark, Ignatius seems to know that Paul wrote letters to the communities he founded, which he may have learned of as he was passing through territory where many of these communities resided. Yet it is unlikely that Ignatius had read Paul’s letters, since he mistakenly says that Paul mentioned Ephesus “in every letter.” For Ignatius, therefore, Paul, known as a community founder of the revered past, appears to be primarily a famous name to drop.

Further supposed influence of Paul on Ignatius’s thought takes the form merely of a common stock of phrases that we have every reason to think were not unique to Paul (“inherit the kingdom of God,” “not to please men, but to please God,” “not through human beings, but through God”). Phrases like “fighting wild beasts,” “things visible and invisible,” “every tongue testify” are found even as part of the discourse of other groups besides the followers of Jesus. Paul-like phrasing turns up also in other authors who never mention Paul by name (the cross as a “scandal,” becoming a “new human being,” or “Jews and Gentiles in one body”). Paul does not represent a significant influence on Ignatius, or a special authority for him. Consistently with what we observed in the case of Clement, Ignatius brings Paul up when writing to the one community, of the six he addresses, that Paul himself founded.

Polycarp of Smyrna

When writing to the community of Jesus Anointed in the city of Philippi founded by Paul, Polycarp, like Ignatius and Clement, has good reason to cite the authority of Paul. He is “their” envoy of the Anointed, and his letter to them is the one that provides some of Polycarp’s ideas and phrasing, even though he appears to know that Paul wrote other letters, too (*To the Philippians* 3.1–2).

A Pattern

A clear pattern therefore emerges among the three principal identifiable authors who recognize Paul as an authority before 180 CE. These authors

cite Paul when writing to communities he founded. This citation honors the founding figure of the local association. But how do we know that Paul was an authority for Clement or Ignatius or Polycarp in other circumstances? Did Polycarp, for example, refer to Paul or use his ideas in letters that he wrote to communities that did not have Paul as their founder?

Writing a generation later, Irenaeus mentions in his letter to Florinus that Polycarp wrote multiple letters. The fact that only this one letter was preserved draws our attention to how later church leaders chose what to preserve. This one letter of Polycarp, widely regarded as a not particularly scintillating piece of writing, may have been preserved and valued precisely because it happened to refer to Paul. Polycarp's other letters possibly contained no further reference to him. Perhaps they even contained elements that did not align with later orthodoxy and could serve no useful purpose for those who were choosing what to copy from earlier literature.

By looking only at what later orthodox collectors allow to slip past, we are misled in our reconstructions of the period. In that way we may have been overgeneralizing from a few isolated scraps that later church leaders found to be useful. When we consider how much of early writings are lost, we must recognize how skewed our picture is by preservation that might have been inclined to save anything with positive reference to Paul. They are far from Paul in their thinking, and they treat him primarily as a founding figure, not as a theologian. They handle his letters as charter documents for specific communities, mined mostly for encouraging words, not for core doctrines, and certainly they do not treat them as "scripture."

PAUL AS A PROBLEM

Other second-century writings grapple in varying degrees with Paul. Several of these writings were later included in the New Testament.

The author of 2 Peter famously grabs the bull by the horns and refers to the difficulty of understanding Paul. This is a polite way of saying that one should not try too hard to do so and should focus instead on his more banal, edifying remarks. Although Paul is not mentioned by name, a convincing case can be made that this author levels subtle criticism at Paul for some of his more radical statements, by alluding to and refuting specific passages in Paul's letters. James takes a broader swipe at faith/belief as a sufficient

basis for righteousness; and James 2:20–23 plays a different Abraham story off against the one Paul uses in Galatians and Romans. Both of these writers know Paul as a writer of letters but find the content of his letters problematic.

Writing in the name of Paul, the writers of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus clearly promote Paul, but only by tampering with his image in a way that makes him more palatable. Third Corinthians, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistle of the Apostles follow the same path. Those writers all make Paul stand out from the disciples of Jesus as a special case and the ultimate hero toward which the trajectory of the early tradition heads. Yet at the same time, they strip Paul of his major distinctive ideas and conform him to the image of a generic moralizing preacher. In fact, they go out of their way to emphasize that he is neither original nor independent from the twelve disciples. His dependence on them is particularly stressed in 3 Corinthians, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistle of the Apostles. These works, like Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp, celebrate Paul primarily as the founder of communities and as a martyr.

The Epistle of the Apostles follows this strategy with a heavier hand than the other writings. Paul's origins as an enemy of Jesus's followers are discussed at much greater length than in Acts, and his dependence on the instruction of the disciples is emphasized much more. His independent inspiration by Jesus, which was of paramount importance to Paul, is all but erased. The Acts of the Apostles handles this issue more subtly but yields the same result. Paul's visionary relationship with Jesus is effectively reduced to a single call and, in direct contradiction to Paul's own testimony in Galatians, is followed by instruction at the feet of the Jerusalem disciples.

The question is, why would these second-century promoters of Paul feel they had to redeem him from himself? What was offensive in Paul as he presented himself in his own letters? And who was the audience for whom they needed to make Paul more palatable by reducing him to a figurehead who mouths words that have nothing to do with the historical Paul? The answers must be sought in the traces that have survived of two other views of Paul: the zealously anti-Paul groups on one side and the zealously pro-Paul followers of Marcion on the other.

Anti-Paul Voices

Many writings attack Paul, both in fiction and in direct debate. One author who perhaps slipped through later censorship of overtly anti-Pauline writings was Hegessippus, who journeyed to Israel to collect traditions of Judean followers of Jesus. Their communities had been decimated by the Romans during the Bar Kokhba War (in the 130s CE). While not mentioning Paul by name, Hegessippus appears to directly reject a statement matching Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:9 as "twisted" and contrary to a saying of Jesus.

Other voices of this anti-Paulinism slipped past later Christian censorship by being incorporated into a popular spiritual novel, surviving in two alternative fourth-century editions. In this fictionalized story of the adventurous missionary work of early followers of Jesus, the hero Peter joins repeated verbal battle with an opponent named Simon Magus, the arch-heretic, whom the reader easily recognizes to be a thinly disguised Paul. In the end, Peter emerges triumphant, with the Paul-like opponent defeated and discredited.

For those represented in the novel by Peter, Paul represents a dangerous corruptor trying to lead the faithful astray. The image of Paul offered in several of the second-century compositions discussed before are tailor-made to win such an audience over to a more favorable opinion of him. Rather than the Paul in Galatians, who openly brags about telling Peter off to his face, the authors of the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle of the Apostles offer a Paul who follows Peter's lead at every step. Rather than the Paul of 2 Corinthians who boasts of his independent authority through visions, they offer a Paul who receives authorization from Jesus's disciples. Rather than the Paul who has unique things to say, they depict a Paul whose words are indistinguishable from any of the disciples of Jesus. By this dramatic makeover, they salvage the figure of Paul at the cost of anything recognizable of the man who wrote the authentic letters of Paul.

Pro-Paul Voices

Marcion (about 90–160 CE) is the earliest figure to have treated Paul's Epistles as authoritative (see also [Chapter 16](#)). Marcion places Paul's letters in a definitive collection, with a specific order, and uses them as "scripture." He is the earliest witness to the existence of 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon, as well as their Pauline authorship. Finally, he is the only writer before Irenaeus and

Tertullian to make extensive, rather than superficial, use of Paul's own words and ideas.

The network of Marcion's Jesus clubs that stretched across the Roman Empire testify to his success as a community organizer. But he also provoked controversy. Many communities resisted his attempts to unify the movement under a consistent set of beliefs and practices. Paul's letters had an integral role in those attempts, as an important set of documents from the previous century. Marcion used Paul to establish the rules for gaining and maintaining membership, conducting club ritual and social activities, and knowing what to expect in this life and the next.

For some, rejecting Marcion's version of what it meant to follow Jesus also meant rejecting Paul. That would include others who might not have had such strong objections to Paul himself, if he were not so closely associated with Marcion. Unfortunately, and suspiciously, what individuals of the latter type had to say has not survived.

Since Justin Martyr, a major writer among mid-second-century communities of the Anointed, explicitly mentions his opposition to Marcion multiple times, what should we make of Justin's complete silence on Paul in his surviving work? In some of that work, for example his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Paul would have served as a useful ally, since Paul interprets Israel's scriptures concerning the Messiah in a similar way.

Remarkably, many anti-Marcionite tracts no longer exist, and one must wonder why. Did they perhaps go too far in some of their remarks, and attack not only Marcion but his chief authority figure Paul? If that were the case, that would explain why tracts against Marcion may have been considered largely worthless to later generations, and why those generations stopped copying and circulating them.

REHABILITATING PAUL'S LEGACY

A century after his death Paul held an ambiguous or even ambivalent status. The impression is not of an ancient and well-established authority stretching back to his own time, but rather of a recent introduction that various leaders feel compelled to stage-manage and resolve. The flurry of literary activity, all dated approximately to the mid-second century, bears witness to a significant adjustment of traditions to make room for Paul.

Outside of Marcion's circles, those who want to make room for Paul value him as a legendary founder of non-Judean communities a century earlier, not as a theologian. His Epistles are understood as a chronicle of his work of founding communities; only Marcion shows much interest in Paul as a theological witness. This legendary Paul is featured in the Acts of Paul and a few other apocryphal acts. But even this figure of Paul is debated. The Acts of Paul pictures him as socially radical, rejecting family and marriage and traditional gender roles, while the Pastoral Epistles support social conservatism.

This abstracted memory of Paul of the mid-second century almost certainly results from the aftermath of Rome's Bar Kokhba War against Israel. This war marked a devastating setback for Israel and heightened prejudice and persecution beyond the homeland. In these circumstances, non-Judean followers of Jesus found themselves separated and often alienated from their Judean associates by various forces.

Two paths of adaptation emerged in the mid-second century. Marcion took up the cause of Paul, the envoy of the Anointed to the nations, and projected the separation from Israel back to the very beginnings of the Jesus movement, as something intended from the start. The message of Jesus, Marcion argued, had always been outside of Israel's religion.

Other Jesus groups, however, including the dominant group in Rome, chose a different path. They appropriated Israel's tradition and arrogated it to themselves as True Israel, spiritual Israelites replacing ethnic Israelites. Leaders such as Justin Martyr developed the argument that the Judeans were not entitled to their own tradition, as it was predestined for the nations. This theme of God's rejection of Israel, of course, would be utterly abhorrent to Paul (Rom. 11:26). Yet it becomes the plot of Acts (see especially Acts 13:46–47, as it recounts, in the person of Paul no less, the transfer of the message of Jesus from Israel to the nations).

In this new synthesis, Paul retains his status as the founding "Envoy of the Anointed to the Nations," reflecting Paul's missionary work and the communities that traced their origins back to him. These non-Judean communities, probably a minority among Jesus followers before the Bar Kokhba War, in its aftermath looked more and more to be its future. Paul now took on greater importance, as hindsight made him the advance scout for a way that only now took center stage. The Epistle of the Apostles seems to encapsulate this transition. The twelve disciples become the

revered spiritual ancestors from an exotic Judean culture who sanction in advance its appropriation by the nations. Paul is not allowed to be original even in the mission to non-Judeans, as he is anointed for the task by Peter himself. This new synthesis of traditions found fixed expression in the dual stories of the deaths of Peter and Paul. Their joint portrait was copied almost as an emblem of the new Roman orthodoxy, and their connected mention in Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp belongs to this same promotional project.

Why did these domesticators of Paul retain his Epistles? What the two sides had in common was the status of the Epistles as foundational charter documents of a non-Israel religion of Jesus among the nations. Since there were no other documents from the first generations of the movement that proposed such a shift from Israel to the nations, Paul's writings must suffice. Whether it was specifically Marcion's activity that demanded a response or the historical circumstances that these writers shared with Marcion, the result was a flurry of activity in the mid-second century to address, champion, domesticate, or reject Paul.

The result of these shifts can be seen in the first two authors who treat Paul's letters as something approximating "scripture"—Irenaeus and Tertullian, writing two and three generations later than Marcion, respectively. They accept Paul as an important authority when they can quote him in support of their views. But neither of them works with a set and sequence of the Epistles. Irenaeus undertakes no analysis of Paul's letters, which remain an amorphous, undefined set of resources for his theology. Tertullian brings to its culmination the domestication of Paul, by reading the figure from Acts and other mid-second-century rehabilitative efforts into selected passages from the Epistles.

We probably owe to Marcion, therefore, the prominence of Paul in the later Christian tradition. Marcion's opponents had incorporated Paul within the broader group of apostles, remembering him as an early community founder and martyr. His letters were treated as edifying correspondence documenting his organizational work and relations with his communities. In those communities, no doubt the Epistles were treasured as charter documents, kept in the community bookchest and taken out for consultation to settle issues of community governance and practice. That is where "letters of a just man named Paul" were kept by the community at Scillium in North Africa in 180 CE.

To make use of Paul and reclaim him from the Marcionites, other communities could not simply dismiss his Epistles, once they became aware of them and confirmed that other communities revered them as their charters. But they made Paul more palatable and usable by adding previously unknown “private” letters to Paul’s communities. The Pastoral Epistles (I Timothy, II Timothy, and Titus) conveniently aligned Paul more closely with their own brand of the Jesus movement. The Pastorals, unknown to Marcion, are first clearly referenced by Irenaeus, two generations after Marcion. They were either composed or added to the corpus of Paul’s letters for the express purpose of countering Marcion and domesticating Paul from radical interpretation. The emerging authority of Paul led, therefore, to the creation of different collections of his Epistles, varying in content and adapted to the needs of different concerns within the Jesus movements.

Paul’s association with the controversial Marcion did not drive others away from Paul, for the simple reason that those others needed him as the “envoy of the Anointed to the nations,” who had created a distinctive form of following Jesus that grew in significance after Israel and those associated with Israel suffered violent setback after setback. He was the founder of key communities with which they wished to be in communion and also an “ancient” authority dating back to the first generation of the movement, few of whose participants put quill to papyrus. Finally, his heroic reputation as a martyr already had a life of its own, separate from a reputation as a writer and theologian. Paul was destined to become “all things to all people,” used in various ways as needed, read in light of other ways of following Jesus than his own.

In the end we are confronted with a variety of Pauls. The Paul who emerges from a reading of his own letters, and the one taken by scholars and theologians alike to be the “real” Paul, was an accidental Paul—a Paul of specific circumstances and moments in a career that certainly had much more to it. Despite many of the second century either not knowing Paul or viewing him as a problem associated with problematic ideas and practices, some reinvested his letters with authority and reinterpreted those letters. Paul was controversial in his own day and remained so. Opinions varied about Paul in his own day, in the second century, and would continue to vary in the future.

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Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

BeDuhn, Jason. "The Contested Authority of Paul in the Second Century." Fall 2017.

Jesus by Many Other Names

The second century represents a wide and at times wild variety and diversity of angles on the figure of Jesus, some that clearly extend images originating in the first century and others that create entirely new views. What it lacks is a unified image. The organization of this chapter reflects that very diversity. To present an overly organized, unified picture would betray the multiplicity of the second century.

FIRST-CENTURY PORTRAITS OF JESUS: GENDER-BENDER

Among the most interesting portraits of Jesus and Jesus's teachings are those focused on gender. The parables of Jesus, as characteristic of Jesus's style of teaching, especially in the gospel writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Thomas, come as close to Jesus's perspective of himself as we can reasonably get. Although the parables are not generally read in terms of gender, several of these stories raise provocative questions about male and female roles. In the Parable of the Lost Coin, a woman loses one of ten silver coins and searches her house to find it. Recovering the coin, she throws a neighborhood party. In this story, a woman's role conforms to female expectations. What is unusual here is the casting of a woman in a lead role, especially a woman doing an ordinary thing. The lead role in stories of the time should really be played by a king, as indicated in many rabbinic parables. In that time period, a woman was an inappropriate image for the Empire of God, or any empire for that matter.

Parables may appear simple, but many explore gender in a provocative fashion. The Parable of the Leaven, a story told in a single line—“The empire of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour, until all of it was leavened” (Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:21)—ups the ante. It compares the empire of heaven to a woman and leaven, a symbol of moral corruption. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), the father, who is the real star of the show, runs to greet his lost son, a betrayal of his male dignity. In the confrontation with his elder son, the father refuses to stand up to the elder’s broadside attack. Instead, he refers to his oldest son as “child,” a word usually associated with the infant of a nursing mother. His male-father dignity is so undercut that he “becomes” a mother. Real gender-bending is going on here.

The Q Gospel, a group of sayings that provided source material for Luke and Matthew, combines the Parable of the Lost Coin with the Parable of the Lost Sheep, a story in which a man leaves ninety-nine sheep behind to find one that is lost. Like the woman upon finding her coin, when he returns home he celebrates the finding of the sheep with friends. Gender pairing in parables like this appear in several first- and second-century writings. While both figures play typically gendered social roles in the parables—a woman at home, a shepherd in a field—their juxtaposition implies their equality. If we can see Jesus in these stories, this Jesus is one who challenged gender roles.

Gender pairing also appears in the writings of Paul and later in the Gospel of John. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul makes a series of radical pairings that have gone almost unremarked upon. “But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband,” Paul declares (1 Cor. 7:2).¹ In the ancient world, a husband owns his wife; she is his property. That relationship is clearly reflected in the first part of this pairing. The second part, however, challenges male ownership of the female in saying that the wife also owns her husband. No other writer in the ancient world says anything that radical about marriage. That this is Paul’s intention is made clear in verse 4: “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” Again, male claims to exclusive authority are undone.

Paul’s declarations about gender roles in 1 Corinthians find reflection in the body of Jesus as presented in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. In this letter,

Paul famously states, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one [in the Anointed Jesus]” (Gal. 3:28).² Judean, Greek, enslaved, free, male, and female are all integrated in the body of the Anointed Jesus. Jesus’s body merges with and becomes these things, according to Galatians. Jesus’s body, in this writing, is both male and female. Paul plays off of Genesis 1:27 in this letter, reversing the creation of “male and female” by incorporating them into one body. Galatians undoes the binary gender pairing and presents Jesus as this undoing.

Another overlooked gender pairing occurs in John 20. After the student whom Jesus loved and Peter go to the tomb and find it empty, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene in the garden. She thinks he is the gardener, but when he speaks, she recognizes him. The risen Jesus then commissions her to announce his resurrection to “my brothers.” She tells the good news to them with a phrase associated with resurrection appearances, “I have seen the Lord” (v. 18). This puts her on the same level as all the other students, giving her an apostolic claim. She proclaims the resurrection to the students, upending the male hierarchical order.

The late second-century writing *2 Clement* cites “the Lord himself” making a bi-gendered connection explicit:

When “the two are one,” we are speaking truth among ourselves. The “outside of ourselves” is the body, whereas the inside is the soul. The body is therefore no longer the basic factor establishing one’s identity. Rather our soul, then, should be made manifest by our good works. In that way, it makes sense that when a brother sees a sister, he doesn’t think of her as a female, and that a sister seeing a brother wouldn’t think of him as a male. This is what ushers in the Father’s realm. (*2 Clem.* 12:3, 5, 6)³

Paul also had a very similar saying. In his Letter to the Galatians he connected the idea of gender blending to the ancient Hebrew scripture Genesis 1:27: “So God created humankind in his image, . . . male and female he created them.” Paul affirmed for the Galatians that indeed, there was no longer a division between male and female. The body of the Anointed, so prominent in 1 Corinthians, is viewed by Paul as both male and female.

The Gospel of Thomas, written in the late first or early second century, follows along this same female-male pattern with a saying (no. 22) nearly identical to that of *2 Clement*. Jesus, seeing some nursing infants, tells his students that the nursing infants are like those who gain entrance to the

empire of heaven. Jesus lists a series of inversions: two becoming one, upper becoming lower, the inside as the outside, and male and female being a single one. This inverted and collapsing view of male and female is well established from Paul into the late second century.

Contradictory influences also developed, even while other gender-bending depictions persisted. When Paul's followers conceived Jesus's body as "male and female," they saw it as a reflection of ideas from Genesis. This ideal was understood, after all, to be a divine image in Hebrew scriptures. However, Rome's patriarchal domination, operating at all levels of society, seeped gradually into the images of Jesus. The gender bending in the parables went unseen, and the author of Ephesians wrote "Wives, be subject to your husbands" (5:22), reinstating the patriarchal order. Mary Magdalene disappeared as the one who proclaimed the resurrection to the students. Her presence was there to be seen, but it gradually disappeared.

SECOND-CENTURY PORTRAITS OF JESUS

Savior as True Human

The second century accommodated many and contradictory ideas, sometimes in direct conflict, sometimes in coexistence, some creatively new, and some from the earliest followers of Jesus. The Gospel of Mary, written in the first half of the second century, was discovered at the end of the nineteenth century. It combines the first-century tradition of Jesus as a teacher of wisdom with a strong dose of popular Greek philosophy. The focus of that mixture turns on the Savior's teachings about life beyond the body and the soul that moves beyond the body. The Greek philosopher Plato had made a clear distinction between the eternal and immutable and the finite, mutable world, and the Savior in this gospel appears mostly to agree. Although the first several pages are missing in the surviving Coptic text, the gospel picks up with Jesus teaching that the material sense of things would dissolve back into its own proper root, and that the soul and the mind would be found as the entities with ultimate spiritual value. Significantly, the Gospel of Mary does not use the name "Jesus" at all, but only "Savior."



Ancient pages from The Secret Revelation of John describing Jesus: “And behold a child appeared to me. Then he . . . changed into the form of an old man . . . I did not understand this wonder, whether it was a woman having many forms (who) said to me I am the Father, the Mother, and the Son.” (3:4–8, 12)

Wikimedia Commons

The meaning of gender is woven neatly into the fabric of this story also with the absence of the male patriarchal model. First, God is not identified by a male name such as Father but is recognized more distinctly as the Good. Second, the maleness of the Savior’s body becomes either irrelevant or disappears, even though his authority predominates.

In the Gospel of Mary—which is presented as a postdeath story—the Savior turns the attention of the students from the nature of his resurrected body to the care of the soul and mind, either of men or of women. The nongendered soul, while it moves toward its complete freedom, explains to the people that “you (those who are learning) mistook the garment I wore for my true self” (Gos. Mary 9:2).⁴ This garment that is shed while the soul is progressing upward appears to present only an outward image of gender and identity. It is the outer garment that distorts the true image of the soul.

When the Savior finishes teaching his students and leaves them, the students “were distressed and wept greatly. ‘How are we going to go out to the rest of the world to announce the good news about the Realm of the child of true Humanity? . . . ‘If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?’” (Gos. Mary 5:1, 2).

Then a woman steps forward to comfort and take a leadership role. Mary (representing one of the first-century Marys—most likely Mary Magdalene) speaks with the authority of a second-century man, addressing the students’ fear of Roman violence: “Do not weep and be pained, nor doubt . . . But rather let us praise his greatness for he has prepared us and made us Humans” (Gos. Mary 5:6, 7). In the face of her confidence, some of the men are offended (see [Chapter 7](#)).

Two of the male students represent two conflicting reactions to the idea of female leadership. Peter, representing the patriarchal norm, is annoyed that Jesus would have trusted his greatest spiritual teachings to a woman. But Levi recognizes the obstruction that the gender role has caused in the mission entrusted to them through the Savior. “Rather,” he exclaims, “we should be ashamed and, once we have clothed ourselves with the perfect Human, we should do what we were commanded” (Gos. Mary 10:11, 12). That perfect human seems more similar to the “neither male nor female, but also male *and* female” ideal than the socially constructed gender Peter was reacting to.

The Rescuer

The Letter of Peter to Philip, a document written by an anonymous second-century writer, envisions the crucifixion of Jesus as a way of helping those who feared their own crucifixions. To gain legitimacy and authority, the author used two highly respected envoys to present a new image of Jesus. The goal was to make sense of the ongoing violence of the Roman Empire in the face of no realistic hope. Peter writes a letter to Philip, who had become estranged from the envoys after the Savior’s death. Peter begs Philip to return to fellowship, because they urgently need each other. Keenly aware of Roman rulers’ willingness to kill them, just as they had killed Jesus, this group of envoys turns to the Lord in prayer for answers.

This pointed story of the envoys for Jesus being fearful of being killed can be understood clearly only in the Roman context. As we explored in [Part I](#) of this book, violence was an everyday occurrence in the Roman

Empire. The cruelty and aftermath of atrocities formed the backdrop for everyday life. Stories of a good and faithful teacher of Israel who had been brutally and unjustly crucified resonated in many corners of the Mediterranean world. The senseless world of torture, humiliation, enslavement, and random crucifixions continued to stoke the Roman power engine several generations after Jesus's death.

The shame and humiliation of crucifixion were as intentional and intense as its cruel physical torture. But Jesus's crucifixion ironically triggered the opposite of Roman intentions. The Romans' anticipated destruction of both the body and memory of Jesus failed. Instead of silencing him, his death resulted in stories and songs of hope, inspiration, and a commitment to remembering him throughout the Mediterranean area. People who needed an expression of their own devastation found stories of Jesus filling those needs. These stories of Jesus—crucified and resurrected in body and spirit—opened up the possibilities of his divine, saving, guiding, healing, encouraging presence existing and comforting people more than a century after his death.

Others who took hope from Jesus's story created very different images. Here was a hero who came to terms with death but *without* total victory. These were people who continued to experience injustice and violence but whose reshaping of Jesus's story gave them hope when no end to the suffering was in sight. Some conceived this crucified and resurrected Jesus as the one divinity to be revered. Others respected him as a teacher and healer. Not everybody thought he was the most important character of the time, because his death by crucifixion was one of thousands during the period. But the images of his memory grew to fit the needs of the time.

The Letter of Peter to Philip aimed to propose a new social cohesion among these key envoys of Jesus the Anointed, who could unite in their response to the violence they faced. The contents of the letter soon shift from a message to Peter to a narrative that reveals new images of the Master. After Philip receives the letter, he departs quickly and joins Peter and his fellow envoys. And as soon as they gather on the Mount of Olives, they pray: "Child of life, Child of immortality, who dwells in the light; the Child, Anointed of immortality, our rescuer, give us your power for they seek to kill us" (134:2–9).

In response to their prayer, Jesus Anointed appears to them as "a great light," and his voice, emanating from the light, explains that they also will

suffer. But he instructs them to participate in the Savior's mission for the whole world. New images of Jesus emerge from this letter: Jesus appears as a great light, with a distinctive voice. He is now "the Savior of the whole world," not just for his people. His counsel to his followers, despite the likelihood that they will suffer just as he did, is to preach and heal, also just as he did.

This portrait draws no particular attention to the Hebrew scriptures, but it is an image of a Savior—"Child of life, Child of immortality, who dwells in the light; Child, Anointed of immortality, our rescuer"—attentive to the dire needs of the day. The writer of the letter imagines Jesus's suggestion that his own suffering and that of these second-century followers were part of the strategy that countered the violence of the Roman rulers, but it was not a mandate to die. The Letter of Peter to Philip ends with Jesus's envoys following Jesus's light-filled instructions to go out into the streets and to the Temple to teach and heal the ordinary people (132:18, 19).

Jesus as Parent

The Gospel of Truth, which like most gospels makes no explicit claim for authorship, provides a frame for yet another kind of image of Jesus from the second century. Although Jesus is present in almost every one of the twenty-six chapters of this gospel, he is called "Jesus" only once, "Jesus Anointed" only once, and "Savior" once. Two extensive chapters lay out the case that "the name of the Father is the Child" (Gos. Truth 23, 24).

From the tone of the Gospel of Truth, we can surmise that the group for whom this "sermon" was written had experienced physical torture and injustice, but Jesus's role as teacher and "Mother" carries special meaning. As a teacher of parables, Jesus is a guide; in a cosmic role, he teaches the correction of the "transgression" that made humanity ignorant. As "the Mother," he fulfills the role of the Word. His death became a means for processing and strategizing about the terrible losses in the lives of the people who knew this gospel:

They nailed him (Jesus) to a tree, and he became the fruit of the Father's knowledge. However, it (the fruit) didn't cause destruction when it was eaten, but those who ate it were given joy in the discovery. He discovered them in himself and they discovered him in themselves. (Gos. Truth 3:5-7)⁵

This figure whose death on a tree makes him into the fruit of the Father is one of the most imaginative second-century portraits. As the “Word,” “Mother,” and “Father,” “His love made a body for the Word . . . and walks in creation as the fruit of (God’s) heart and the face of his love” (Gos. Truth 10:1–5).

Here, the figure suffered an unjust death and overcame the shame and threat to his mission by becoming the fruit of knowledge. Engaging in that fruit brings joy, not death, while sharing in his persecution brings about the discovery of unity with him. In a major difference with the Letter of Peter to Philip, there is hardly any mention of threat or pain in death.

Noble Death

Other second-century writers conceived contrasting and even conflicting images of Jesus that pertained more to Jesus’s unique relationship to God, while still based on the idea of the “noble death” of Jesus (see [Chapter 6](#)).

Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, executed in the early second century, left reflections on the subject of his death. Ignatius’s letters, probably written in the mid-second century, use the simple name of “Jesus” very rarely and the simple name of “the Anointed” hardly at all. His preferred names are the combined “Lord Jesus Anointed” and “Jesus Anointed.” His image of Jesus was personal but fit with the shifting sands of cultural meaning. Jesus’s crucifixion shaped Ignatius’s attitude toward his own impending death and inspired his life purpose to become a “true student of Jesus Anointed.” In his letter *To the Ephesians* he wrote that his “hoped-for success as a witness” would allow him to become a student—and to know his identity as a “self” totally committed to the Anointed (21:2). In his imitation of the Anointed, Ignatius conceived suffering as an opportunity to present his image of the Savior as one who exercised proper self-control under persecution.

Ignatius’s embrace of his own death at the hands of Roman officials represents a major cultural shift of the second century. Not only adherents of the Anointed, but society in general had begun drifting toward the idea of suffering as an identity marker (see [Chapter 19](#)). It is difficult to know when Ignatius’s writings became widely known. But eventually, at least by the beginning of the third century, they formed part of a basis for shifts in the political, social, and religious realms, and the noble death of the witness became a focus of identity as one who suffers.

Ignatius's Lord Jesus Anointed is very different from the Savior of the Gospel of Mary, the Mother and Father of the Gospel of Truth, and the shining light of the Letter of Peter to Philip. Jesus is present in these texts in many different ways.

Enslaved Savior

Another shift in the second-century kaleidoscope produced markedly different images of Jesus. The widely circulated Secret Revelation of John was, as far as we know now, the first writing of the followers of the Savior to incorporate into a single document the nature of God and evil; the origin of the world; and salvation from human sin, suffering, and death. The narrative framework sets out the Savior as the teacher and expounder of wisdom. However, it makes no mention of the Savior's death or any encouragement for martyrdom.

Instead, the Savior is represented as a teacher in a postdeath scene, explaining why a proper understanding of the goodness of God and the fraudulence of evil was necessary for salvation. The bodily image of the Master is somewhat blurry to the second-century author, because in the opening scene, when John (the student of the Savior) is found grieving over Jesus's death, the Savior appears to him in a vision. First, a child appears as the heavens open and the earth quakes. Then the messenger becomes like an old person, and then he appears as enslaved. Nonetheless, John recognizes him as his master, the Savior, and the rest of the book comprises his revealed teaching.

After his lessons on the origin of the world and the distinction between the all-harmonious realm governed by infinite Spirit and the deceiving nature of the counterfeit spirit, John presses the Master to explain how humans can be saved. Salvation in the second century did not deal with God's judgment but was more readily conceived as an escape from fear, disease, chaos, emotional torment, physical danger, and death. The Roman emperor himself was often addressed as "Savior" as he saved the empire from these dangers.

In The Secret Revelation of John, the Master demonstrates the saving power that extends directly from the Mother-Father-God through various representations of a Savior. At times "the Savior" takes on the role of Epinoia, the light who enlightens the deceived sufferer. Sometimes Sophia (Wisdom) and sometimes Pronoia (Foreknowledge) provide what is most

needed. While the name Jesus occurs only in the closing of the document, he is variously called “Nazarene,” “Savior,” “Lord,” “Anointed,” and “Master.”

Spiritual Body

Marcion of Sinope (90–160 CE), one of the most important second-century writers, is known now only through the voice of his opponents. He was a teacher and an excellent organizational leader with a large following. His ideas represent a unique overlap between such writers as Ignatius and the author of *The Secret Revelation of John*.

Marcion came from Pontus on the Black Sea, a backwater in the Roman Empire, far from the main religious scene. Relatively few Judeans lived in Pontus, so he had little access to Judaism or Israel’s scriptures. But Jesus’s crucifixion left a deep impression on him—as it had for Ignatius. However, for Marcion it marked a clean break from the Hebrew world of Jesus’s contemporaries and ushered in a new era.

When Marcion went to Rome, he may have gained greater access to wider views of Jesus. What is more certain, though, is that he derived his image of Jesus from parts of a version of what was later recognized as the Gospel of Luke and Paul’s letters, which writings he considered to be the only legitimate voices of authority. These few resources became the basis of Marcion’s highly ordered teaching system (see [Chapter 15](#)).

According to Marcion, Jesus was the God who descended into the world and was a stranger sent to save those trapped in this imperfect world, similarly as he appeared in *The Secret Revelation of John*. Jesus was crucified and arose from the dead, and in his new spiritual body, he exercised the power to save all who believed in him.

Even more important for Marcion, Jesus was *not* the same as the God of the Hebrew prophets. That “God” had nothing to do with Jesus’s new gospel of God as Love. The prophet Isaiah had proclaimed that God said he created “darkness” and “woe” (Isa. 45:7). Jesus may have belonged to Israel, but Marcion emphasized some differences between Jesus and scriptural understandings of Judeans. Jesus, as Marcion saw him, was breaking with some Judean interpretations of holy writings.

Anointed Lord

A decade or so after Marcion had been in Rome, Justin Martyr (100–165 CE) rose to prominence with yet another, radically different image of Jesus. His picture builds upon the opening of the Gospel of John, announcing that the “Word [Logos] was with God, and the Word [Logos] was God” (John 1:1). For Justin, Jesus was the embodiment of this Word. Since Jesus “was in the beginning with God,” and “All things came into being through him” (John 1:2, 3), for Justin, logically, Jesus would be this God, or “the Lord.”

The Greek word *kyrios* (Lord) was what the Greek translators of Hebrew holy writings used for the Hebrew name of God, represented by the four Hebrew letters *Y, H, W, and H*. From the Greek translation, Justin reasoned that Jesus, the “Lord,” would actually be that Word that *was* God and *with* God, and therefore he was the preexistent God.

Contrary to Marcion, who thought the new idea of God was not at all like the God of the Hebrew writings, Justin thought the Hebrew scriptures made perfect sense. But Judean interpretation had made a major mistake in failing to recognize the presence of God in Jesus Anointed as proclaimed in their own scriptures. In fact, Justin argued, “Anointed” has the same meaning as “Lord” (*kyrios*) as evidenced *throughout* the Hebrew scriptures. Judeans, according to Justin, were missing this key teaching in their own writings.

He turned to one of the Psalms to offer an example. In his book *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin converses with an imagined character named Trypho, a Judean, and explains how the Anointed was the very Lord prophesied throughout the ancient scriptures. He reminds Trypho of Psalm 24:3: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? / And who shall stand in his holy place?”

The Hebrew YHWH is translated into Greek *Kyrios*, Lord. Trypho and his Judean colleagues thought that “Lord” in this case referred to the Hebrew king Solomon, but Justin saw it as clear evidence of prophecy for the coming of the Anointed. The same reasoning works for the last verse: “Who is this King of glory? / The Lord of hosts, / He is the King of glory” (Ps. 24:10).

Again, in Hebrew, the “Lord of hosts” is YHWH, and the Greek translation is *Kyrios tōn dynamōn* (Lord of hosts). From this, Justin concludes that “Lord” refers to Jesus the Anointed. David E. Wilhite, in his paper for the Seminar, concludes that for Justin, the primary person encountered in the Hebrew holy writings named God is Jesus Anointed. He

does not assume that God the Father and God the Son are distinct. In fact, those distinctions, based on the father/son metaphor, were introduced later on the way to a Trinitarian theology to solve the problem created by Justin's *Kyrios* understanding of Jesus Anointed as being identical with God.

People from different cultures and communities within the Roman Empire picked up on different and at times conflicting parts of the story. While Justin differed with Marcion over the "right" way to understand Jesus in light of the Hebrew scriptures, others turned their attention to the meaning of Jesus's teachings and/or death to find meaning in their own lives. And for different reasons, both Justin and Marcion encouraged the separation between people of Israel who were followers of Jesus the Anointed and those who were not followers of Jesus the Anointed.

CONCLUSION

A variety of portraits of Jesus arose during the first and second centuries. Evidence of first-century acknowledgment of the prominence and value of women and the meaning around Jesus's crucifixion engendered novel interpretations and new sources of authority. The image of the second-century Jesus, however, particularly moved in many directions. Unlike historical assumptions of forty years ago, it no longer makes sense to think of the second century as a time in which orthodoxy was establishing itself and what was later thought of as heresy was being dismantled. Nor can the second century's many different ideas about and practices of gender be characterized as headed definitively toward male dominance or gender equality. As [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#) explored, it is best to see second-century Jesus movements, clubs, schools, and groups as offering a full range of gender experiments.

Ignatius and Justin, who in later centuries were identified as the "winners" of various philosophical debates and as two of the "church fathers," did not represent a majority of second-century opinion, but they embodied some of the innovations of the period. Ignatius's promotion of the noble death idea encouraged self-identification with suffering, in contrast to The Secret Revelation of John's awakening to false powers that cause suffering and resistance to them. Justin's conflating the "Lord" of the

Hebrew holy writings with the coming of the Anointed highlighted a dominant male figure who made no room for the worth of women.

The implications from the variety of images of Jesus from the second century surprise us. First, Jesus often was not the dominant figure in the writings and narratives produced by these second-century movements. Second, Jesus's death and its aftermath stirred the imagination more in the second century than his life and ministry. Third, the kaleidoscopic images cannot be confined to a polarity between old and new, right and wrong, orthodox and heresy. The second century was rich with multiple images of Jesus.

Chapter contributor:

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Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Miller, Robert J. "Prophecy, Christology, and Anti-Judaism in Justin Martyr." Spring 2017.

Smith Wilson, Justine. "Gospel of Judas and the Ravenmocker." Spring 2019.

Wilhite, David E. "Is Jesus YHWH? Two De-Judaizing Trajectories of Marcion and Justin." Spring 2019.

Part IV

Falling Into Writing

Hiding in Plain Sight

In [Part I](#) we pointed to how Rome’s violence was a crucial factor in how so many different Jesus peoples, clubs, groups, schools, and movements emerged. How does that key theme and reality of Roman violence on the Jesus peoples fit with everything else we have learned?

The answer in this chapter brings new aspects of the impact of imperial violence forward, beyond what we saw in [Part I](#). First, the clash between Rome’s violence and the clubs, movements, and followers associated with Jesus still defines who these various groups were. Second, there is still no “party line” about Rome among the many communities of the Savior. Certainly, more overt voices become insistent about the damage Rome continues to do. At the same time, complicated ongoing relationships between Roman virtue and violence are emerging.

Third, and most important, during the first two hundred years of the Common Era, one major tactic of resistance to Roman aggression emerged: the hidden transcript—that is, alternative stories that are “hidden” behind a more obvious one.

WHAT ARE HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS?

The way that Jesus groups in the first and second century resisted violence resembles a worldwide pattern of how subjugated populations resist domination. More than a decade’s worth of research shows how many oppressed peoples and groups around the world create “a secret” language

that makes fun of those dominating them and helps them process some of their loss and trauma.

Credit for uncovering these behaviors belongs to political scientist and cultural anthropologist James C. Scott. Scott, the author of *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, has marshaled a wide range of examples of the mockery of oppressive rulers. For instance, the intense interest in spirit possession in many cultures points directly to a hidden transcript occurring as a woman's "spirit talk" in public, and protects her from spousal abuse:

In the case of spirit possession, a woman seized by a spirit can openly make known her grievances against her husband and male relatives, curse them, make demands, and, in general, violate the powerful norms of male dominance. She may, while possessed, cease work, be given gifts, and generally be treated indulgently. Because it is not she who is acting, but rather the spirit that has seized her, she cannot be held responsible for her own words. The result is a kind of oblique protest that dares not speak its own name but that is often acceded to if only because its claims are seen to emanate from a powerful spirit and not from the woman herself.¹

Scott and those who have elaborated on his proposals have found many such examples in carnivals of Europe and Latin America. The festive spirit of the carnival and the chance to wear costumes and masks give oppressed groups an opportunity to express their discontent with and critique of their political reality. Under the cover of masks, costumes, and festivities, they can speak "normally suppressed speech and aggression," as Scott puts it. In a carnival atmosphere, such criticism on one level appears to be just fun and festivity, even while speaking truth to power.

Although many of the early stories and writings about the many Jesus clubs, groups, schools, and movements of the first two centuries portrayed in the previous chapters are read today as "holy" and "solemn" literature, it seems likely that ancient readers saw some of them as comical, irreverent, and resistant hidden transcripts—potentially carnival-like in their disdain for authority.

The differences in many Jesus groups of the first two centuries paint a vibrant kaleidoscope in their approaches to responding to and surviving violence. This multicolored collage does not demonstrate common creeds or ideologies as much as a wide range of hidden transcripts. As a first example, we turn to a hidden transcript (this one twisted and darkly humorous, as hidden transcripts often are) found in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

A MAN GOES CRAZY: *EXORCISM OF THE “DEMONIAC”*

The story begins with a man who is sick and appears to be possessed, so much so that his misery is beyond bearing and he retreats to live among the tombs. His agony is so intense that he is often found smashing himself with rocks, perhaps to distract himself from the terrible pain. The story is set in northern Israel, not far from where a Roman military unit called a legion is stationed. As we will discover, it looks like this man's pain has to do with the thousands of soldiers in his neighborhood and their violent behavior. Perhaps they had beaten him or had killed or maimed his family members, friends, and/or neighbors.

The hidden transcript within this story proposes, subtly, that this man's possession comes mostly from the presence of the occupying Roman army around the Sea of Galilee, where the man lived. Literally, the man says what has driven him crazy is “legion,” the normal word for a large Roman military unit. And indeed—according to the symbolic, fanciful, and analytic way the story unfolds—the man is relieved of his pain when the “spirits” of the occupying army are transferred by a healer from the man to pigs in fields nearby. When those spirits of the occupying army are transferred to the pigs, the man's possession is gone, and the pigs run down a steep bank and drown in a lake.

In this story, the man is, in a way, saved from the violence the army subjected him to when the pigs/soldiers drown in the lake, although the occupying army remains. The man returns to his right mind, although the people of the area are not pleased and fearful. Are they worried that the healer will make trouble for them? Is the formerly possessed man himself a sign of such trouble-making? Somewhat puzzled, but certainly relieved, the receivers of this story wonder about the dead pigs and the real, occupying army that could still make other people crazy and hurt themselves.

The story accurately addresses the profound damage an occupying army can do to the population it controls. It gives such a population a way to think about how to cope, escape some of the pain, express anger, and even laugh a bit when it portrays the similarities between that occupying army and a group of pigs—animals considered unclean in Hebrew writings. Any suspicions Roman authorities might have about the story's strange mix-up of pigs and armies would be hard to prove. The people listening to the story

are not really worried about whether the story is encouraging a calamity in which Roman soldiers run into a lake and drown. Rather, the people under the thumb of the Roman army can tell the story of the pigs drowning and laugh at the way it links pigs and soldiers. The nagging questions about the fact that the army is still ruling the countryside in the middle of the satisfaction of the giggles about pigs/soldiers drowning remind the story's audience that all still is not right. The man is "healed" of this possession, but the real soldiers still occupy the land.

The artful hiddenness of these powerful portraits of loss, trauma, and violence allowed the residents of the Roman Empire to think and feel deeply about their circumstances without getting themselves into trouble, through their stories, with their Roman rulers. The cleverness of these ancient stories was by and large so successful that their subtle meanings and hidden messages about violence are easily lost to the modern reader. In large part, the ingenuity of these ancient experiences and expression has made it difficult for moderns to see the violence at all. Instead, contemporary eyes often see in these ancient writings only modern Sunday school lessons for children, theological treatises, or quaint tales of Roman customs.

The ways modernity has looked past and covered over the deep social and interior ancient work on how to live with heartache and torture is strong enough that we take up here a kaleidoscope of examples in the writings of the first two centuries. The stories may seem unfocused, yet persistent images, stories, worries, and fantasies about violence show up in them. Many do seem to focus on, if only involuntarily, Roman violence, damage, and power. As it turns out, these stories show surprising twists, humor, and melancholy, alongside anger and rawness. They offer practices and participatory theatrics for the many different Jesus groups. Rather than mounting the barricades for social change or erecting buildings for formal ritual, these hidden transcripts are more like songs to sing, stories to tell, and namings of children after their uncle or cousin killed by marauding soldiers.

SWEET FRAGRANCE AND NIGHTMARES: THE GOSPEL OF TRUTH

The first sentence of the mid-second-century Gospel of Truth is “The good news of truth is joy” (1:1).² Discovered in the Egyptian desert, but written with full consciousness of Roman violence, this text surprises in how it lives with pain and loss. At the same time, it fills its readers with joy and beauty. It overflows with a sense of fulfillment and sensuousness, sounding alternately like a poem, a letter, or an ecstatic sermon.

Although the Gospel of Truth reads like a mix of poetry and ecstasy, just under the surface of its lush language are signs of trauma and violence. In the middle of images of beauty, praise of kindness, joy, and leisurely relief, one finds less present but sure signals of nightmares and torture:

. . . as if they were sleeping and found themselves in disturbing dreams—running someplace or powerless while pursued, coming to blows or themselves beaten, falling from heights or flying through air without wings. Or sometimes as if people are trying to kill them or killing their neighbors, smeared with their blood. Those in the midst of all this confusion see nothing for these things are nothing.

. . . the beloved Child . . . spoke new things . . . He did away with torture and torment for they caused those needing compassion, those in transgression and bonds, to stray from his face. He dissolved them with power and reproached them with knowledge. He became a way for those who were ignorant, discovery for those searching and strength for those who were shaken, purity for those who were defiled. (14:12–15; 16:2, 6, 8–10)

On one level, everything in the Gospel of Truth is sweetness and light, but nightmares and torture are not far away. Here the hidden transcript is the imperial violence, silently breathing its threat, through the fragrance of all people and the strength of the beloved Child. “The Father’s children are his fragrance, for they are from the beauty of his face. Because of this, the Father loves his fragrance and discloses it everywhere” (19:4, 5). God’s children are everywhere, and they are the actual fragrance of God and light.

This same combination of over-the-top sensuous goodness with an undertow of haunted violence occurs in what has become the most modernly heralded part of the Gospel of Truth:

Say then from the heart that you are the perfect day and within you dwells the light that never ends. Speak of the truth with those who seek it and of knowledge of those who have sinned through their transgressions. Strengthen the feet of those who stumble and stretch your hands to those who are weak. Feed those who are hungry and give rest to the weary. Raise those who wish to arise and awaken those who sleep—for you all are understanding drawn forth. If strength does these things, strength becomes stronger. (17:10–16)

This passage exhibits one of the most explicit pictures of people reaching out to others in need and working together. The vibrant confidence of this document translates overtly on a communal level and perhaps a societal one. That multiple and different early manuscripts of the Gospel of Truth exist could suggest that this may be one of the most unambiguous statements of social action for goodness. Even in this assertion, this Jesus-related movement is not far from having strong subliminal awareness of social transgression, weakness, and hunger. It gives attention to these broken parts of life, but only in terms of the communities' need to address them.

This gospel blends poetry, sermonizing, songs, and parables and gives voice to a strong social range. Within and across these poems and songs is also a storyline, an implicit narrative. The through-line of this story runs as follows:

He was nailed to a tree and became the fruit of the Father's knowledge.

It did not cause destruction when it was eaten,

But it caused those who ate it to come into being

And find contentment in its discovery.

And he discovered them in himself,

And they discovered him in themselves

—the uncontainable, the unknowable . . . one who is full and made all things.

All things are in that one and all things have need of him.

He came into their midst and spoke a teacher's words . . .

After all these, the little children came . . .

When they had been strengthened . . .

They knew and they were known . . .

The sound walks through creation as the fruit of creation's heart and the face of its love.

This active word bears all things, choosing and receiving all things,

Bringing them back to the Father, the Mother, Jesus of boundless sweetness.

God opens his bosom . . . and reveals a hidden self.

This hidden self is the Child of God,

So that through God's compassion,

The generations learn about God. (4:5–8; 5:8, 10, 11, 12; 10:5, 7, 8)

The Gospel of Truth is one big hidden transcript, reflecting both a larger story and a social vision, but focusing only implicitly on the Roman violence described systematically in the first two chapters of the book. This is almost, but not quite, the same art of resistance to Roman violence as seen in Luke's "The Man Goes Crazy." The hidden transcript of the Gospel of Truth, however, differs from Luke's story in that the transcript is almost doubly hidden: the Gospel of Truth has power and beauty around every corner, and violence is hidden in the past or in dreams. So, as we proceed through four other hidden transcripts of resistance and resourcefulness, we do so suspecting that each social hidden strategy is different. There is no single guiding story against violence. We find instead creative commitments to difference and to communal strength through challenging times.

A SINGER IMAGINES THE DESTRUCTION OF ROME: REVELATION OF JOHN

A song that imagines that Rome is on fire and all its power has been destroyed offers another, very different hidden, though much less hidden, transcript. The song, from the Revelation to John, was probably written several decades after Rome was damaged by a fire set perhaps by those against Roman rule and centuries before Rome was destroyed. Our shortened telling is from [chapters 17](#) and [18](#) of this late first-century vision. Although written near the height of Roman domination, the story is told in far-off Babylon, destroyed and rebuilt repeatedly during the centuries before the Common Era. The composer of this song imagines that Babylon stood on seven hills, just like ancient Rome.

The song can be summarized as follows: one of seven angels takes a dreamer to a lonely place and points out a giant sex worker riding on a monster. The angel says to the dreamer that the giant woman is Babylon the Great and that the seven heads of the monster on which she rides are seven hills. The angel identifies the giant woman as the great city that holds sway over all the rulers of the earth. Then another angel descends from the sky

and sings of how Babylon the Great has fallen. All the wealth that she had now is now destroyed. In a single hour all the ships carrying great commerce have been destroyed. Another voice from the sky announces that God has remembered the cruelty of Babylon in order to destroy it and will reward the dreamer and his people to make up for all the torture and misery they have experienced.

The song rages against the violence of this great city that rules over all the earth. It promises revenge and reward for those who have been tortured and are in misery. The song continues: “She has fallen. She has fallen . . . Alas! Alas! Great city! City clothed in fine linen, and purple and scarlet cloth! City adorned with gold ornaments, and precious stones, and pearls! In a single hour your vast wealth has vanished!” (Rev. 18:2, 16–17). There is little, if any, sign in the late first century that Rome can be destroyed or punished. Only in the eye of this dreamer can the people Rome pillaged be restored. Nevertheless, the song paints a massive tableau in which the reigning city is annihilated and the dreamer’s people are saved.

Indeed, nothing like what the song described happened. How, then, should we interpret this song of the Great City’s destruction and those who heard it? Did anyone sing along? Did the raging song provide catharsis to those who had suffered so much at the hands of Roman imperial power or other violence, as New Testament scholar Adela Yarbro Collins has suggested?³ Was this song a way of escaping the violence—if only in reading, singing, or performing it? In many situations of violence, the anger and fantasy in hidden transcripts help people survive unthinkable damage and loss.

These two chapters in Revelation may be the closest that any writings of the first two centuries come to calling for an attack against Rome. The voice of the dreamer claims that he has been punished for his teachings. On the other hand, the song does not present an explicit attack on Rome but focuses instead on the much more ancient city of Babylon in a faraway time and place. Rather than humor and healing, the response to violence in this writing is anger, fantasy, and outrageous hope. It is a hidden transcript because it calls this imagined destroyed city “Babylon,” but its location on seven hills clearly marks its setting as Rome.

DIVINITY HIDDEN IN RUBBLE—*THE THUNDER: PERFECT MIND*

Our final example of responding to violence with hidden transcripts is a long poem presented in the voice of a divine figure. Not unlike many ancient Mediterranean divine voices from literature of the first and second centuries, this divine figure announces itself in long stanzas full of self-praise. Although only one ancient manuscript exists of this poem called *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, there are many similar long poems in Egyptian literature and the Hebrew scriptures, as well as the somewhat shorter yet clearly similar Gospel of John. The first verses of *The Thunder* are especially similar to these other collections of that time:

I was sent out from power

I came to those pondering me . . .

Look at me . . .

Audience, hear me.

Don't chase me from your sight . . .

I am the first and the last. (1:1–3, 5)⁴

Although found among the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, *The Thunder's* date of composition could be anywhere from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE. Even with this lack of clarity concerning its time of composition, it still falls within the time of the Roman Empire, and its discovery along with many other Jesus-related writings near a fourth-century Christian monastery points in that direction.

The figure introduced in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* has many divine relatives. One specific family tree of the Mediterranean divine family helps make sense of this poem. That tree consists mostly of divine females who give long speeches about how powerful, beautiful, and wise they are. Two examples from that family tree are Isis and Wisdom/Sophia.

The ancient Egyptian goddess Isis also became very popular during the first two centuries in Greece, North Africa, and Rome. The North African second-century writer Lucius Apuleius hears her in this voice:

I am she that is the natural mother of all things, mistress and governess of all the elements, the initial progeny of the worlds, Queen of heaven . . . At my will the planets of the air, the wholesome winds of the seas, and the silence of the underworld be disposed . . . my divinity is adored throughout the world . . . the Athenians call me Cecropian Artemis . . . they call me Queen Isis. (*Metamorphoses* 11.47)⁵

Wisdom/Sophia is a similar figure who appears in the Hebrew Bible and some Christian Bibles. She speaks poetically in *Sirach*:

“Over the waves of the sea, over all the earth,
and over every people and nation I have held sway.
Among all these I sought a resting place . . . ;
Come to me, you who desire me,
and eat your fill of my fruits.

Those who eat of me will hunger for more,
and those who drink of me will thirst for more.”

(*Sir.* 24:6–7, 19, 21)⁶

Although the divinity at the beginning of *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* sounds powerful and dominating—“I am the first and the last”—the writing quickly moves to images that are much closer to the pain and vulnerability of the Gospel of Luke and the Revelation to John. The divine voice of *The Thunder* proclaims:

I am she who is honored and she who is mocked . . .

I am a sterile woman and she who has many children . . .

I am the enslaved woman of him who served me . . .

I am she who is disgraced and she who is important . . .

Do not be arrogant to me when I am thrown to the ground . . .

Do not stare at me in the shit pile, leaving me discarded . . .

Do not stare at me when I am thrown out among the condemned

Do not laugh at me in the lowest places

Do not throw me down among those slaughtered viciously . . .

In my weakness do not strip me bare

Do not be afraid of my power . . .

I am she who exists in all fears and in trembling boldness . . .

I shall shut my mouth among those whose mouths are shut

and then I will show up and speak

Why then did you hate me, you Greeks?

Because I am a barbarian among barbarians?

. . . Hear me in tenderness, learn from me in roughness

I am she who shouts out and I am thrown down on the ground

I am the one who prepares the bread and my mind within.

(1:5, 7, 10; 2:10, 12–15, 17, 18; 3:2–3; 4:24–25)

This voice is never safe from danger of all kinds: chase, enslavement, beating, slaughter, hatred, weakness, and stripping bare. On the other hand, “trembling boldness” is all around. Even when in danger or disgrace, she is not to be pitied. She has substantial power.

The voice of *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* seems to live in the mire of humiliation and violence. This voice—usually female—cries out in pain, fears being overwhelmed, and experiences loss and loneliness. At the same time, she sounds like a goddess and almost certainly is modeled in part on Isis. But Isis never lost a battle and was always in control, while the voice of *The Thunder* is both divine and human. She is honored and mocked, disgraced and authoritative, exalted and thrown to the ground. Although she is at the same time divine and violently humiliated, these conditions are not treated as opposites. The tension between being divine and being beaten happens often. The experience of violence, slaughter, and disgrace is mentioned somewhat more than being powerfully divine. When she is divinely strong, she has the character of “the one who prepares the bread and the mind within,” of one who has many experiences, like the crazy man and the people in the Gospel of Truth who have nightmares and are fragrant, just like God. When the people of the Anointed and the Enslaved of God faced Roman violence, their sense of their own power resembled Jesus and the voice of *The Thunder*.

Although *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* does not mention Jesus at all, the voice in the writing resembles the way Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel of John. There, Jesus regularly proclaims in a divine voice “I am.” Yet even

with his divine authority, Jesus cries when his best friend dies and he is finally tortured to death on the cross. These two figures are more or less alone in the ancient world as being both divine and overwhelmed by violence.

Like the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of Truth, and the Revelation to John, *The Thunder* takes the notion of hidden transcripts against Roman violence and develops it extensively. None of these documents simply expresses fright, and all of them hide the way they manifest their resistance to Rome. The character of each of these expressions has both courage and fear.

MAKING SENSE OF AND RESISTING VIOLENCE

The artful hiddenness of these portraits of loss, trauma, and violence allowed their readers to think about and explore deep emotions about their own circumstances without putting those readers, and the writers, at increased risk with their Roman rulers. For us the cleverness of these ancient stories is so successful that their hidden meanings and messages about violence are almost completely lost. As James C. Scott points out, hidden transcripts are subtle, subliminal strategies for living with and resisting violence.

The examples we have examined show that making sense of violence was very important to ancient writers and readers alike. These people needed to come to grips with seeing neighbors, strangers, or members of their own families humiliated, tortured, enslaved, and killed. But at the same time, as some of these various groups grew larger, they also had to create ways to deflect some of the public awareness of what was often resistance to Rome. The clever, if indirect, ways that the groups addressed a wide variety of violence testifies to how much resistance mattered to them. The hidden transcripts of these stories, their tricky language, indicate these people's commitment to speaking about violence as a way to cope with it.

Instead of reducing the meaning of Jesus's experiences of violence and death to a sacrifice for sins, a wide range of writings see his death as an effort to make sense of people's pain and loss, sometimes through such hidden transcripts. These hidden transcripts about violence become a cipher

for understanding the trauma in people's lives and their attempt to find a voice in a landscape of violence.

Such hidden transcripts, however, do not provide a standard or single correct interpretation of what to do with violence. In the story of the crazy man, the “demoniac” in the tombs, the way to face violence is by cleverly associating the villainous, violent soldiers with pigs, laughing darkly about the story and celebrating a recovery (at least a temporary one) from the violence. The subtle merging of sweet fragrance and horrible nightmares in the Gospel of Truth holds in tension the ingenuity of the Anointed movements and the violence of Rome. In the case of the dreamer in the Revelation to John, the strategy of facing violence has to do with being angry at Rome and having confidence in God's revenge. In *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, the approach to humiliation and violence is to merge “all fears and trembling boldness” in a (nameless) divine figure.

In no case does one find a tragic approach to violence among the various Jesus peoples. And in no case is violence completely and successfully solved. What this group of movements, schools, and clubs shares is a courageous and clever response to and plan for experiencing almost inevitable violence. All of these expressions about the experience of violence make some kind of provisional advance in the ongoing struggle. There is no reason to apply this almost accidental bundle of writings and communities to all of the Anointed-related writings of the first two centuries. On the other hand, neither is there reason to ignore their temporary ways of dealing with the violence in the lives of the people of the time, of which hidden transcripts are one.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Taussig, Hal. “Hidden Transcripts of Violence and Partial Recovery.” Spring 2017.

Romancing the Martyr

DYING HAPPILY EVER AFTER

According to the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*, a story set right at the turn of the third century, a mass execution of women and men who asserted their belonging to the party of Christ took place in the Roman city of Carthage, on the northern coast of Africa. Roman officials killed Perpetua and Felicitas alongside a group of other heroes from their community. The story asserts that these heroes sought their own deaths and had a great desire to die for their cause.

The story ends in intense violence. Within the arena, a man named Saturus is bitten by a leopard and then thrown, unconscious, onto a pile of bleeding bodies, awaiting a final cut of his throat. The frenzied crowd demands to watch the executioner's sword finish off those bodies, so the martyrs regain consciousness, stand and move into the open, and kiss each other goodbye. Without movement or speech, the necks of many of these heroes are slit, but Perpetua "had yet to taste more pain," the audience is told with relish. Perpetua "screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman . . . could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing" (*Perpetua* 21).¹ Perpetua, both seeking and in control of her own death, is the actual victor of the contest.²

So ends the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*: in violent, spectacular, intentional death. The audience is clearly meant to interpret this finale as happy. "Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs!" the story concludes. "Truly are you called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord! And

anyone who exalts, honors, and worships his glory should read . . . these new deeds of heroism!” (*Perpetua* 21). Everything ends as it should. The heroes are in their proper place, having died noble deaths and achieved their goal. The audience is left with role models for future life, and for future death. Everyone lives and dies happily ever after.

Death, however, even noble death, is not an obvious goal for the living. The *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* is part of a later compilation of writings now known as the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, though these writings initially circulated independently. “Martyr” is a Greek word with a long history of meaning “witness.” These “witness stories,” as we might more appropriately call them, or perhaps simply “acts,” began to circulate mainly in the second century of the Common Era as letters. Eventually, over a long period of time, these letters came to define later understandings of the perpetually thorny word “Christian”: a sufferer, one who endures pain and dies willingly, holding Jesus as both model for imitation and ultimate goal. Entire communities grew up around witness stories; the Acts of Paul and Thecla was a particularly popular narrative, though relatively few are familiar with it now. Acts became hugely important to the growth and institutionalization of the later phenomenon of Christianity, and suffering, broken bodies became central to the development and understanding of group commitment, identity, and belief.

THE DISINTEREST OF EMPIRE

Although each of these witness stories concludes with this not-happy happy ending, heroic death seeking was not a lived reality for the large majority of Jesus groups. We do not know whether Perpetua and Felicitas were historical people. Where and when persecution did occur, it was local, not imperial or systemic; it was unorganized and random. Roman officials did execute people who asserted their membership in communities of the Anointed, but execution was not generally sought. Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia and Pontus in the early second century, writes to Emperor Trajan because he does not know what to do with the people he calls, in Latin, *christiani* (see [Chapter 2](#)). Though a Roman governor, the main administrative power for an important imperial place, Pliny had never been to a trial of one of these people, suggesting that such trials cannot have

been that widespread or significant, from an imperial perspective. Because he has never seen such a trial, Pliny does not know how to punish *christiani*, how to investigate them, or even whether investigation needs to be pressed to any great length.

As we have seen, Pliny uses the word *christianus* in Latin with reference to a person who is part of a rebellious, resistant group from Judea. He has executed people who maintain an identity as part of this potentially trouble-making group: “with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians [read, here, ‘members of a rebellious Judean group’ or ‘members of the party of Christus’],” Pliny recounts, “I have asked them in person if they are Christians [i.e., members of this party], and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution” (*Letters* 10.96).³ Pliny has a handle on those who persist in their identification with this group, but he does not know what to do with new, less clear-cut situations. A pamphlet circulating through his province lists names of accused Christus-party members. Informers whisper in his ear. Men, women, young, old, rich, poor, urban, rural: too many people are implicated. The accused who deny that they are members of this party and honor the emperor are released; those who say that they used to be members but are no longer, Pliny also dismisses. What to do with the others? “The question seems to me to be worthy of your consideration,” Pliny writes to Trajan, “especially in view of the number of persons endangered.”

Trajan’s response validates Pliny’s actions. “It is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula,” he replies:

These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a *christianus*, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be. But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst sort of precedent.

The emperor is clear: while asserting an identity as a member of this disruptive people is a crime, and a crime punishable by death, it is not a crime the empire has an interest in actively seeking out. Imperial authorities are not “Christian” seekers. Membership in an Anointed group or school is not a death sentence.

The large disinterest of the empire in those who identified as *christianus* is reflected in a variety of writings from the early centuries. The story of

Perpetua's noble death is dated to 202–203 CE, though we can't verify the dates, the person, or the time when the story began to circulate. Though this story is right on the edge of our two-century time frame, it is representative of other acts circulating during the second half of the second century, witness stories such as the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* and the *Acts of Polycarp*.

The regular visits to heroes in prison in these witness stories indicate that imperial officials were not that interested in pursuing communities of the Anointed. Perpetua, in the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*, persuades a prison official to allow her brothers and other people to visit, and they enjoy a meal together; her visitors then freely depart. A second-century writer named Lucian relates the story of Peregrinus Proteus, a man who, for a time, identified as a so-called Christian and was imprisoned. Prison was not a solitary experience for Proteus: “from the very break of day aged widows and orphan children could be seen waiting near the prison, while officials [of the Anointed group] even slept inside with him after bribing the guards. Then elaborate meals were brought in, and sacred books of theirs were read aloud” (Peregrinus 12).⁴ Lucian was a satirist, and he did not have a high opinion of Peregrinus Proteus nor of Jesus peoples. Lucian's description of Proteus's visitors while in prison, though, and the casual interactions depicted between those visitors and prison officials is indicative, as in Perpetua's case, of a general apathy toward Jesus-followers.

“Christian” seeking (using, again, Pliny and Trajan's bureaucratic construct of that word) was not the norm of the empire. Perpetua's and Lucian's stories also suggest that unlike the storied heroes, death seeking was not the norm for the majority of Jesus groups, even Jesus groups affiliated with a heroic witness. Perpetua's brothers and friends do not throw themselves into the prison cell with her; they eat together, and then they leave. Lucian's visitors to Peregrinus Proteus are incredibly numerous. Members of Anointed communities travel from across the empire to support Proteus in prison, donating large amounts of money to his cause. Again, they do not lock themselves in with Proteus; they come and go as they please. They are able to belong to Anointed communities in public, without fear.

SUFFERING DEATH DESPISERS

Lucian offers an important description of these people who visit Proteus: “the poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them” (Peregrinus 13). If arrested—if accused specifically of identifying themselves as a member of an Anointed group—they give themselves up to imprisonment. They do not flock to prisons. More interesting, though, in this description is Lucian’s comment that these people “despise death.” They are not death seekers, perhaps, but they are death despisers.

This preoccupation with suffering and death is not about martyrdom, as that word came to be understood in the third and fourth centuries. This preoccupation connects Jesus groups to the earlier hero and noble death stories (see [Chapter 6](#)), but not as heroes themselves. People naming themselves as belonging to the party of Christus were not systemically persecuted in the first two centuries. The preoccupation with death is *voiced* through these hero stories, but not *lived* through them.

Lucian is not the only writer from the first two centuries to comment that members of Jesus associations “despised death.” Second- and early third-century Latin writer Tertullian, a so-called Christian himself (his use of this term is ambiguous and sometimes inconsistent), calls association members “sworn to one purpose, so ready for death itself” (*Apology* 37.3).⁵ Another second-century writer, Justin Martyr, a philosopher and member of a school of the Anointed, invents a debate between himself and a fictitious challenger. His challenger remarks that those belonging to the Anointed have “invented an Anointed One, for whom you give up your lives” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 8). Suffering and death seem central to party-member representation, to understandings of who Jesus groups, those belonging to the Anointed, and followers of the Savior were during these first two centuries. While these followers were not dying in large numbers or dying by spectacular or official means, suffering and death were still central to their understanding of who they were and what made their association with Jesus meaningful. The development of elaborate stories of Christus followers seeking death and dying through these violent means builds belonging in group clubs and schools around meaningful experiences of suffering.

This centrality of pain and death to Anointed-group identity during the first two centuries helps us to understand the widespread popularity of the

witness stories as stories, rather than as lived experiences. The stories that Wisdom schools told about themselves were stories of suffering with happy endings in death. As Westar scholar Judith Perkins argues, “suffering was the message encoded in nearly all of the Christian representation of the period.”⁶ The “suffering self,” to use Perkins’s term, was not a required self. There were many different options for thinking about who these diverse Jesus peoples were and how they might understand themselves. It was the choice, Perkins argues, that many of these groups made. The suffering self was not, though, an obvious choice.

Under the early Roman Empire, stories of pain and suffering grew in importance. More and more people and groups began presenting themselves, through their writings, as sufferers. Paul, envoy to Jesus associations across the ancient Mediterranean, was the consummate sufferer: in his second letter to Chloe’s people in Corinth he presents himself as having three times been beaten with rods, once stoned, and three times shipwrecked and adrift at sea; in constant danger from rivers, bandits, and Jesus association members, non-members, and false members; and sleepless, cold, naked, hungry, thirsty, and broken (2 Cor. 11:23–27). Perkins points to an emerging consciousness of pain and suffering across the empire during the first two centuries. Broken bodies, bodies in pain, were becoming visible in new ways and in new places, among all kinds of groups and peoples.

These stories of pain, suffering, and death later collected in the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* were not isolated in the empire; they were not unique. The violence represented within them was also not new. Noble death, this form of witness, had a history in Judea. The kind of violence detailed in witness stories was not exceptional. A witness story is a redirected story of empire. It is a story of violence and death and of honor and glory, told over and over across the ancient Mediterranean, in different forms, through different kinds of media (see [Chapter 6](#)).

Perpetua’s guiding of the executioner’s hand to her throat would have been a familiar image in the early empire. The Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, a monument to the emperor—a visual representation of empire—depicted Emperor Claudius raising his arm above a woman representing conquered Britannia (see [Chapter 3](#)). Though his hand has been lost to time, he appears ready to bring down a sword and slice open her throat. Coins circulated across the empire showing a female Judea seated and bound, captive to

Roman victory, sometimes with a Roman soldier standing behind her, ready to subdue. A defeated gladiator in the arena, if not killed in battle, waited for the sponsor of the games—in Rome, most often the emperor—to decide whether or not his life should be spared; if the sponsor gave a thumbs-down, the victorious gladiator would then slit the loser’s throat. If we read Perpetua’s guiding of the executioner’s hand to her throat in this context of the propaganda of conquered nation and people, her death as a member of a disruptive Judean group makes perfect sense.



A Roman gladiator. There are many stories of people who volunteered to enter the arena to be killed rather than deny Jesus Anointed.

Jona Lendering

“I AM . . .”

Many of these stories of heroes, later called martyr stories, turn around a bold statement of group affiliation, most commonly translated as “I am Christian.” Voiced in Greek or Latin, this late second-century statement

should be treated with care. While normally translated as “I am Christian,” the declaration does not include the constellation of meaning associated with the word “Christian” in the present. Still, members of Jesus clubs and schools, parties of the Anointed, and other forms of Jesus families were asserting themselves in this way at this time. How exactly we should treat this declaration during this period remains an open question within scholarship, and the people who made it certainly meant different things. There is no one meaning to ascribe to it. “I am Christian” is certainly, though, more a statement about membership in a particular group or chosen family than about belief, practice, or personality. The “I am” statement is equivalent to “I belong to.”

In Perpetua’s case, for example, the Roman official, a governor named Hilarinus, demands that Perpetua offer proper honor to the emperor in the form of a sacrifice. When she refuses, Hilarinus asks, “Are you a Christian?” Perpetua replies, “I am Christian” (*christiana sum*, in Latin; *Perpetua* 6). This statement is enough for Hilarinus to pass sentence not only on Perpetua, but on the other members of her community: “we were condemned to the beasts.” Why? What is the nature of the accusation, exactly? What does Perpetua mean in her statement of belonging, her impenetrable “I am Christian” declaration?

This claim, “I am Christian,” is not without imperial precedent, though the “Christian” is, rather, “Roman.” The historian Livy, writing in the late first century BCE into the early first century CE, tells the story of one Gaius Mucius, later known as Mucius Scaevola, in his epic *History of Rome*. In 508 BCE, Rome, besieged by Etruscans, is slowly starving to death. Mucius, frustrated and eager to prove himself, sets out to kill the Etruscan king by himself. He kills the king’s secretary by accident and is caught as he tries to flee the chaotic scene. Brought before the king, he cries, “I am Roman! A citizen; men call me Gaius Mucius.” He continues, “I can die as resolutely as I could kill: both to do and to endure valiantly is the Roman way” (*History* 2.12).⁷

Both Mucius’s declaration of his membership to/in Rome and of his willingness to suffer and die bear striking parallels to the witness stories popular among Jesus associations. The primary importance of group affiliation, “I am Roman!,” is repeated in these stories with the same grammatical structure as “I am Christian!” Mucius desires to suffer in order to show his allegiance to Rome and, through this allegiance, to Roman

virtue. When the king orders Mucius to be thrown into the fire, Mucius decides to burn himself voluntarily: “Mucius, exclaiming, ‘Look, that you may see how cheap they hold their bodies whose eyes are fixed upon renown!’ thrust his hand into the fire that was kindled for the sacrifice. When he allowed his hand to burn as if his spirit were unconscious of the sensation, the king was almost beside himself with wonder” (*History* 2.12). The “they” to whom Mucius refers here are Romans; this renown is glory, honor. Mucius suffers for the purpose of honor; he seeks to embody what he calls “the Roman Way.”

Read alongside Mucius’s declaration, Perpetua’s statement becomes clearer. Perpetua’s “I am Christian” is a form of opposition to “I am Roman.” If we hear her voice in Latin, using *Christiana* in its bureaucratic sense, like Pliny, Perpetua is stating, “I am of the party of Christus.” This statement throws the term back in Hilarinus’s face, like a rebuke. It is a statement of both belonging (I am of the party of Christus) and anti-belonging, or intentional estrangement (I am not Roman).

THE PERFORMANCE OF BELONGING

Mucius’s suffering for honor, virtue, or the Roman Way resonates with what we know about gladiators and gladiatorial combat in the first two centuries. Earlier gladiators had predominantly been enslaved, participating in spectacular combat involuntarily. When Rome moved from republic to empire, men started to volunteer for the role. As Westar scholar Elli Elliott has convincingly argued, the role of gladiator gave men (specifically; gladiatorial combat was a highly gendered activity) an opportunity to demonstrate key Roman virtues of courage and strength and, through the performance of virtue, to acquire honor to which they would otherwise not have access.⁸ Public honor was highly prized in ancient Rome and was available in limited supply; your honor-gain meant someone else’s honor-loss. The voluntary gladiator chose to fight, and potentially die; death becomes intentional. A defeat, rather than a humiliation, became an opportunity to demonstrate virtue: the gladiator could play to the crowd, offering his neck willingly, demonstrating a courage audience members longed to possess themselves. The gladiator was both ultimate subject to empire, especially to the violent humiliation of empire, and, equally,

ultimate subject of and in empire. The gladiator performed empire; the gladiator performed belonging to Rome.

Like Mucius and the gladiator, those local heroes later known as martyrs were also suffering and dying bodies. This suffering and dying became its own performance of group belonging. Although members of Jesus schools were not being rounded up and executed in significant numbers during the first two centuries, they were experiencing pain and suffering under the violent conditions of the growing empire. As Perkins states, “the centrality of pain, suffering and death in early Christian representation suggests that Christian ‘reality’ was unrelentingly filled with risk, pain and death.”⁹ The importance of suffering and death in the stories the Anointed told about themselves—stories that were not necessarily historically true but represented truths about group understanding and attachment—points to a reimagination of honor, a reimagination of power, and ultimately, a reimagination of possibility.

If the honorable body in the Roman Empire was that of the freeborn male citizen, the bodies that are central to the witness stories, and the behaviors of these bodies, certainly cannot be associated with conventional forms of honor. The *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* centers on Perpetua, a woman in her early twenties breast-feeding an infant son. Perpetua rejects her father, the male head of her household and, as male head of a household, an institution: the *paterfamilias* was the foundation of the entire Roman system of power (see [Chapter 10](#)). Perpetua gives thanks for her separation from this conventionally powerful institution, her father. Her father makes a second visit to the prison, warning Perpetua that she “will destroy all of us!” if she insists upon dying (*Perpetua* 5). Perpetua continues to deny her father throughout the story, even as he is eventually beaten in front of her. Throughout the narrative, she upsets the household, the basic structure of Roman social and imperial life.

Perpetua is a powerful figure, and she becomes increasingly powerful as her story develops. Later in the story, she has a dream in which she becomes a gladiator. In her vision, she is taken to the arena to fight an Egyptian man “of vicious appearance.” When her clothes are stripped off in preparation for combat, “suddenly,” Perpetua states, “I was a man.” They begin to fight. Perpetua narrates:

We drew close to one another and let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air and I

began to pummel him without as it were touching the ground. Then when I noticed there was a lull, I put my two hands together linking the fingers of one hand with those of the other and thus I got hold of his head. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head. (*Perpetua* 10)

Victorious, Perpetua receives her award, a branch with golden apples, and wakes up. She realizes that her true victory will be not over beasts—or over Rome, for that matter—but over “the slanderer,” the unclean spirit or devil, himself.

Felicitas is an enslaved woman and is pregnant when arrested. She gives birth in prison, and a prison official snidely remarks that she will suffer much more in the arena than in childbirth. “What I am suffering now,” she responds, “I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him” (*Perpetua* 15). When she is thrown into the arena naked, the crowd is horrified: Felicitas is portrayed as “a woman fresh from childbirth with the milk still dripping from her breasts.” That spectacle was too much. Perpetua and Felicitas are dressed, returned to the arena, and tossed to a wild cow. Perpetua, seeing that her tunic is torn, tries to cover her exposed thighs. She then asks for a pin to fix her hair, “for it was not right that a martyr [read “witness”] should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph” (*Perpetua* 20).

Both Perpetua and Felicitas find social power through the course of their suffering. Perpetua in particular is a broken body that, through its brokenness, itself works to break dominant hierarchies and conventional social structures. As she rejects social norms, she increases in power; each time she rejects her father, he becomes smaller, weaker, less effectual. They both give up her basic identity as his daughter. The deaths of Perpetua and Felicitas in the arena at the conclusion of the story are portrayed as victories, not defeats. They are not victims of empire. They are its new conquerors. Their ending could not be more noble; it could not be happier.

THE ROMANCE OF DEATH

Perkins compares these “happy endings” of the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* to those of the Greek romances that were popular at the same time. The typical romantic finale is summarized characteristically at the conclusion of romance writer Chariton’s writing *Callirhoe*: “I think that this

last book will prove the most enjoyable for my readers, as an antidote to the grim events in the preceding ones. No more piracy or slavery or trials or fighting or suicide or war or captivity in this one, but honest love and faithful marriage” (8.1).¹⁰ Perkins’s translation of this happy ending reads “*lawful* love and *sanctioned* marriage,” a translation that points more directly to the social norms the typical romantic ending is meant to uphold.¹¹ At the conclusion of a romance, everything and everyone are in their proper place. The social world is ordered. All is as it has been, and as it should be.

From the perspective of the Greek romance, the ending of the martyr story could not seem less happy. Nothing is in its proper place. The social world is completely disordered. Nothing is as it has been. But . . . it is as it should be.

The endings of these stories make sense in their depictions of gruesome yet intentional and triumphant death, in that death in this literature is representative of social bodies, not physical ones. Early Jesus schools, groups of the Savior, and chosen families were not death seekers—at least, not in a literal sense. The spectacular death seeking of these stories represented a kind of social death seeking. The pain and suffering in the stories granted a worth to the experienced pain and suffering in and among the Jesus peoples. These stories, part of the tradition later called martyrdom, were primarily representational, a means to understand culture and context and the place of Jesus peoples within them rather than a reality of that culture and context. Pain and suffering in empire, though, was real. Everyday suffering, through the spectacular suffering of local heroes, was given new worth, a new meaning. It need not be viewed as humiliation, but as endurance, a forward-looking endurance with an honorable end.

This death seeking was also focused on the death, or denial, of certain social norms. Perpetua is fundamentally antisocial, as are most of the early Anointed heroes; she rejects forms of family, of gender, of all kinds of dominant structures of power. This rejection is the “happy ending” of the hero. Perkins argues that this ending, “just as it was in the Greek romances, was a social judgement. It disclosed an audience approving their hero’s dissociation from human society, his rejection of its immanent worth.”¹² The deaths of the heroes both recognized lived experience under empire and rejected this experience.

These stories offered a reimagination of power. The representation of violence and the purpose of violence in the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* would have been familiar to readers in the ancient Mediterranean of the first two centuries. These readers experienced empire and the propaganda of empire through many different types of media: monuments to imperial violence, coins, gladiatorial combat. Representations of violence, as well as forms of experienced violence, pervaded ancient Mediterranean life. The *Acts*, however, repurpose these stories so that dominant forms of social power might be disrupted and potentially displaced.

The second-century stories of the noble deaths of heroes were so popular and so important for the emerging group identities of Jesus schools because they use familiar tools to redirect a familiar story. As violent representations of empire expressed and depicted a certain power relation, the relation of emperor and empire to the known, and conquered, world, so the stories express and depict a parallel power relation. The emperor is no longer the one honored, however. The glory is not for Rome. “Oh, most honorable and fortunate witnesses!” concludes the account of Perpetua. “Truly are you called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord!” (*Perpetua* 21).¹³ These stories are told to honor a different ultimate ruler: a different God.

During the first two centuries of the Common Era, diverse peoples began to make pain and suffering visible in new ways. Schools of Wisdom were particularly drawn to this visibility, representing suffering bodies as significant tools for thinking about and for imaginatively reordering their social worlds. Stories about suffering and noble death, particularly the dramatic, vivid stories of those later known as martyrs, helped to give worth to everyday suffering, and to shape many Jesus followers as certain kinds of people, interested in certain kinds of things: interested in brokenness, interested in power, interested in the intersection between the two. As inhabitants of empire, those belonging to the Anointed redirected familiar stories and media forms as one strategy, among others, of making sense of lived experience in new ways.¹⁴ The stories became, with their repurposing of the ancient happy ending, the new romance: the romance of the martyr.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

Daniel-Hughes, Carly. “Producing and Contesting Martyrdom in Pre-Decian Roman North Africa.” Spring 2015.

Elliott, Susan M. (Elli). "Gladiators and Martyrs: Icons in the Arena." Spring 2015.

Taussig, Hal. "What Do Fiction, Mass Crucifixions and Killer Seals Add Up To?: Summarizing Break-Throughs in Martyrdom Scholarship Since 1990." Spring 2015.

Better than a New Testament?

The birth name of “The Artist Formerly Known as Prince” was Prince Rogers Nelson. As he and his music rose to prominence in the 1980s, he became known as just “Prince”—playing coolly with the fact that hardly anyone knew that that was in fact his first name. Even now, posthumously, he is mostly known as “Prince.” By the 1990s, for various reasons, he became uneasy with “Prince,” claiming instead a symbol as his preferred name. This symbol—a stylized combination of the conventional icons for female and male gender—had no sound or pronunciation associated with it and was impossible to reproduce in any print typeface. So media adopted the clumsy “The Artist Formerly Known as Prince” for the rest of the decade, until the artist reclaimed “Prince” in the 2000s. Continuing his play with language and social boundaries, the artist wrote about his unpronounceable symbol, “It’s all about thinking in new ways, tuning in 2 a new free-quency.”¹

This chapter demands a similar experiment with language, names, and boundaries. Given all the surprises in this book, here in the final chapter, the history of the New Testament turns out to have two of the biggest surprises of this whole volume.

The first surprise is this: There was nothing like a New Testament in these first two hundred years. This must be told. Quickly.

The second shocker: The writings of these first two centuries (very much like Prince’s music and the “unpronounceable symbol” that followed it) were so dynamic and flexible that they could hardly be called “books.” In contrast to how Bibles are understood to bring every important thought together, these first two centuries of writings kept spinning out into a wide

variety of new forms of awareness. This chapter explores the imaginative and quirky way these writings unfolded. We imagine and reimagine what “writing” actually is and what writing means. As Prince stated, we will be “tuning in 2 a new free-quency.”

BUT FIRST, NO NEW TESTAMENT

The first sign that no New Testament existed in the first two centuries is that few people in these movements could read or write; literacy was minimal. Most people of the time were subsistence farmers, weavers and other artisans, day laborers, and merchants. They were known for their ingenuity and aliveness, but few were wealthy and even fewer were authors. In the first and second century one might be able to do the minimal necessary reading for marketplace transactions without ever going to school. People who did not write much, or at all, still were highly skilled at communication in daily life.

Probably neither Jesus nor the great majority of his followers knew how to read or write. In the first hundred years of the Common Era there is only one story in which Jesus reads, and one in which he writes, bending to draw with his finger on the ground. More to the point, neither Jesus nor most who came after him in the first two centuries focused on writing or reading. They were busy with pithy parables, pointed assertions, clever blessings, and miniature pictures—expression and thought that happens outside the boundaries of writing. The only writer we know about during the first sixty years after the death of Jesus is Paul, who writes letters to specific groups, most of whose members cannot read. Instead, the letters are read to them when they gather to eat and drink, enjoy one another’s company, sing songs, and listen to a story or a letter. Paul writes about their daily lives together—the writing is about practice and not philosophy or theology.

These groups and makeshift schools were awash in new ideas and practices. But writing, especially writing in the way we tend to think about it in our contemporary world, was rarely the way these thoughts and actions came to the fore. Instead, these people rushed into expressive conversations and attended weekly gatherings where they could speak and listen. Of course, some of these good ideas and beautiful odes would eventually get written down in letters, short stories, and musings, but they were sidebars

compared to the riptide of conversations at group meals, in workshops, and in the middle of the marketplace.

With the growth of Jesus movements by the end of the first century, some writings, and even some with longer stories, were read aloud to others. Many of these writings were probably sets of rules and codes of conduct for Jesus clubs and associations, rather than stories about the Anointed. We do not possess anything from these groups that was actually written during the first century. We are not sure how many writings were produced by the end of that century. The earliest manuscripts of first-century writings are second-hand, third-hand, fourth-hand, or fifth-hand copies from the mid- to late second century. Most of the actual “early” manuscripts of first-century writings were copied during the fourth through sixth centuries. The earliest partial copies from first-century writings are a few tiny papyrus scraps of several sentences only, dated to the second century and later.

That the members of the many different groups associated with Jesus in these first two hundred years did not read and write strikes twenty-first-century readers as bizarre or perhaps impossible. Since the writings of the first twenty generations of the movement are the main way we know anything about and understand these Jesus groups, it is difficult today to think that the real people of that time sang, worked, and hung out together but rarely read or wrote. The rare person who had learned to read knew it was a civic duty to read aloud so that others could hear stories, club rules, thoughts of someone else, tombstone epitaphs, and expressions of protest. If we moderns think that reading and writing were important to those early clubs, groups, and schools, we miss most of who they were and how they became excited about Jesus, new kinds of family, or God.

That such groups wanted to be guided primarily by a list of readings they themselves had written during these first two hundred years seems highly unlikely to participants of the Seminar. The New Testament came into being sometime between the mid-fourth and the seventh century, depending on what exactly one means by “New Testament.” Even though much evidence supports this position, it surprises most people.

IF NOT EARLY, WHEN?

New scholarship by the Seminar in 2020 has underlined that even though there were more writings associated with Jesus groups and schools in the second century than in the first, the larger Jesus-related movements continued to be primarily oral and community-based. Inasmuch as they sometimes had “holy writings” in the first two centuries, these were mostly spoken from memory, or one person read aloud to a larger group. The Seminar approved new scholarship by Jason BeDuhn that clearly showed that most second-century writings were not read by communities at large, and some should be considered to be something like mere notes. In his recommendations to the Seminar, BeDuhn says clearly, “(I)t is inappropriate to speak of Christian ‘scriptures’ in the second century.”² No one in the second century would have proposed a collection of writings of twenty or thirty documents to act like a “New Testament”; there was little interest in a written religious authority in the second century; no one proposed it and no one assembled something like a New Testament.

By the end of the second century, Irenaeus, the leader of a Jesus assembly in Lyon (now in southern France), mentions the four Gospels that are now considered part of the canon: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in that order. Irenaeus’s mention of these writings has generally been understood as proof that four “canonical” gospels existed by that time. Close attention to Irenaeus’s words, however, suggests a very different situation:

Matthew published a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were proclaiming the gospel in Rome and founding the assembly. After their deaths, Mark, the student and interpreter of Peter, also handed down Peter’s proclamation to us in written form. Luke, the follower of Paul, put the gospel proclaimed by Paul down in a book. Then John, the student of the Lord, the one who reclined on the Lord’s breast, he also published the gospel, while living in Ephesus of Asia. (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1)³

Irenaeus, a tenacious promoter of a certain kind of Jesus people, mentions four “authors”—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and he grants these writers times and places. However, his language concerning what these writings were varies widely and certainly is not suggestive of the stability of the Gospels now associated with the New Testament canon. As scholar Matthew D. C. Larsen has pointed out, only Luke is called a “book” by Irenaeus. Matthew and John are “published,” or in the public domain; Mark is something “handed down” in some sort of written form, though the

Greek word here translates best to “writtenly.”⁴ Far from offering a picture of a stable four-book set of Gospels, Irenaeus’s statement actually indicates that these writings existed in a variety of forms, as different kinds of written objects that represented different kinds of writers, stories, traditions, and situations.

Yes, here we have a real surprise. The first two centuries did not come close to producing any kind of New Testament.

NOT-BOOKS

It turns out that what happened with first- and second-century writings may be more remarkable, meaningful, and moving than we have previously imagined. Endlessly searching for a “New Testament” has limited our ability to see and appreciate the diverse forms and functions of early writings in their full creative capacities.

Irenaeus’s naming of three gospels and one object handed down “writtenly” has long been taken as confirmation of what we yearned for: a bounded collection of four stable Gospels. Reading Irenaeus, scholars proclaim, “The Gospels are finally named!” as if we had been waiting for this moment all along.⁵ This interpretation of Irenaeus reads history backwards, starting with much later understandings of the words “author,” “book,” and “publication” as well as the biblical canon. Irenaeus’s statement has echoed loudly throughout history probably because it seems to approve our own way of knowing these writings. We know these four Gospels, and it’s nice that Irenaeus knew them, too. Our knowledge is validated.

Most second-century writers refer to a range of written traditions, called gospels, “the gospel,” memoirs, memorials, words, and voices. Irenaeus has been allowed to speak loudest because he tells us what we like to think we know. When other, equally important voices have the chance to speak, what we hear is much different. After taking seriously the lack of “New Testament” in the first two centuries, we now turn to view that many of these early writings were not writing down the answer but opening up new possibilities and experiences.

One of the authors of the present book, Erin K. Vearncombe, proposed that many “writings” of the first two centuries are a thorough mix of

conversation, physical objects, community, and writing, in which the writing was not the deciding factor in terms of meaning.⁶ In cultures where the great majority of people do not read or write, life becomes meaningful in ways that involve writing alongside all kinds of other ways of expressing learning and belonging. Books or scrolls are important not just because of what is written in them, but as objects. These objects in and of themselves create meaning, possibility, and community. Meaningful and productive parts of living combine reading and writing with many other actions and conversations. That kind of meaning making makes these writing-objects, Vearncombe maintains, texts with which “one expects to cooperate in the production of meaning.” Once one understands that many of the writings of these peoples were less books or essays and more events, ongoing conversations, songs, theatrics, or unfinished letters, then one can approach what the “writings” of these early centuries were like.

The current breakthrough into these eventful “writings” is happening mostly because scholars are paying very close attention to the exact words about this early partly written material. As we have seen, Irenaeus uses a wide variety of words, including “gospel,” “proclamation,” “book” (and only in the case of Luke), and “publication” to refer to “things” that were written, handed down, given up, or, in the case of Mark, ambiguously “writtenly,” which could be interpreted as “sort of written” or “in the form of notes.” An opponent of the Jesus movement, Celsus, criticized what they wrote, claiming that these peoples “as if in a drunken brawl with one another, alter and remodel the gospel from its original written form—three times, four times, many times—so that they might be able to give a rebuttal in the face of critical accusations” (Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.27).⁷ Writing, in form and function, was much more fluid during the first two centuries than we have previously understood.

Focusing on Mark, Vearncombe states, “The writing we now call ‘the gospel according to Mark’ did not exist as such in the first two centuries.” This nonexistence of Mark does not mean that the writing-now-called-Mark was somehow missing in action during the first two centuries; instead, it was important as a non-book or not-book, as an “object, writtenly.” What do we call Mark, if not a writing? Vearncombe writes, “‘The-textual-object-we-now-call-Mark’ sounds a bit too much like ‘the-artist-formerly-known-as Prince.’” The problem of what to call the diverse writings of the first two centuries recalls the related problem of what to call the Jesus peoples,

groups, and schools of this same period. Without an appropriate symbol at our disposal, we struggle with language, not wanting to fall into the traps of “book,” “text,” or modern concepts of authorship.

As we undo the modern perception that people during the first two centuries wrote lots of books, essays, creeds, and reports, it is helpful to recall the present book’s earlier chapters about meals and supper clubs (see [Chapters 11 and 12](#)). In those chapters it is clear that members of the many different Jesus movements gathered almost exclusively at festive meals. Discovering now that their “writings” were not books for intellectuals matches well with the activities of their boisterous banquets.

COMMUNAL “WRITINGS” IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA

Vearncombe’s research focuses on how these writings were less books and more physical *things*. In her studies of Mark, she notices how often the writing sounds like a memorial for people who had died—how often bodies are broken, Jesus warns of death, and he predicts his own crucifixion in this gospel. In her inspection of first- and second-century memorials of stone and statuary and the role writing plays in those memorials, she notes, “the epitaph does not exist apart from its material context, the tomb itself.” Many small and large “graves” are no more than a written epitaph. These “graves” allowed and encouraged people to visit the cemeteries often and participate in the drama of the deceased person’s life, offering food and wine and remembering a life as part of a community. Writing and sculpture on a grave together tell stories and recall group belonging. This function of writing as memorial points to parallels between written portraits of people’s lives in Mark, especially Jesus’s life, and stone and statuary memorials.

The word usually translated as “tomb” in Greek means, more accurately, “memorial” or “memory marker.” Many inscriptions on grave monuments from the ancient Mediterranean basin begin with the words “memorial of” followed by a person’s name. One such memorial inscription from the second century BCE remembers the priestess Stratonike and her involvement in the ritual activities of a local association. The inscription on the monument is worth reproducing in full:

It was resolved by the association of hero-devotees who gather together for Harpalos (senior), Athenodoros (senior), Menodote and Zostas: Since it was announced that the priestess Stratonike—daughter of Athenodoros and mother of both Harpalos (junior) and Athenodoros (junior)—has left us, who was beautiful and good and behaved in an honor-loving manner towards both the association and each member individually during the gathering of the association. She conducted her entire life in an honorable manner, always seeking to maintain her propriety and love of humanity in a manner worthy of her ancestors and she was god-fearing.

Then it is just and appropriate, since she is irreproachable, for her to be honored by the associates in the following manner: that a day may be observed for her whenever the rest of the sacrifices are performed, just as is also done for her ancestors (i.e., those heroes listed at the opening); that she also be crowned with a gold crown worth ten gold coins; that a painted portrait be set up in the heroes' shrine; and, that a slab of white stone be set up with the decree inscribed on it, in order that she herself might possess an eternal memorial of her benevolence toward everyone. Furthermore, men are to be sent who, meeting with Harpalos and Athenodoros (i.e., her sons), will explain the honors which have been decreed and will comfort her sons appropriately to endure her deification (*apotheōsis*) which has taken place, of one who was affectionate towards her children and was blameless by all people during her life-time.⁸

This monument was close to another naming additional members of Stratonike's family, as well as sixty-five other active members of this association. When family and club members visited Stratonike's monument, according to Vearncombe, both the monument and writings "were culturally accepted and expected means for interaction with the dead. Memorialization in a material, visual format was essential to both the dead and the living, as . . . actively celebrated by the living, after one's death." This material memorialization expands the many combinations of writings and sculptures from being a story about the deceased to being an interaction and conversation with the deceased.

The connection between the Gospel of Mark and these physical, visual monuments and memorials is made clear when Vearncombe asks about what happens to group remembering when the usual means for remembering are not available:

What happens if there is no body for a tomb—only empty space? The textual tradition we now call Mark highlights this absence: at the (non-)end of the text, the body of Jesus is gone, and Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome run from the empty tomb in terror, saying nothing to anyone. Absent body, absent followers, absent speech.

Words have meanings like the rungs of a descending ladder.⁹ The top rung, the first step, is the meaning most commonly associated with a word. The word usually translated as "tomb" means, on its top rung, "memorial" or "means of remembrance"—words that have the physical connotation of

tomb or monument. Farther down the ladder, this word can also mean “written reminder” and even “notes.” Staying on the top rung, we can interpret Mark as a memorial: a material memorial to a missing Messiah.

Perhaps over generations of storytelling about Jesus and visiting the memory of him through other people addressing his questions or groups singing, the presence of Jesus lives on. “Extended epitaph,” Vearncombe suggests, is a much more appropriate name for the Gospel of Mark, or simply, “memorial.” Making Jesus stories into writing created a way for members of Jesus associations to remember him and respond to a situation of absence. Stories about Jesus handed down “writtenly” were meaningful because they created a real, lived opportunity to remember, or for memorialization, in the way in which remembrance was meant to be carried out in the first two centuries. For Vearncombe, Mark is a memorial: a tomb created “writtenly.”

Approached as memorial, Mark suddenly bears a striking resemblance to the monument for the priestess Stratonike. Her family, including the chosen family of her association, needed a way to remember her. She has died, but she is also absent—her body has been “taken up,” according to the inscription on her monument. The monument, Vearncombe argues, “is established in order to ensure that members of the association will have and adhere to particular guidelines for Stratonike’s memorialization, or for remembering her appropriately.” People will explain the honors that are to be maintained for Stratonike and to comfort her family in the reality of her missing body. The parallels to Mark’s story of Jesus are strong. As a memorial for a missing body, this written “thing,” the Gospel of Mark, allows Jesus associations, like the association of Stratonike, to continue in community, to continue their group activities in a structured way. The “thing” that is the Gospel of Mark is the thing that happens when the actual community’s time together adds to and redoes the stories.

As Vearncombe’s understanding becomes clear, it is probably less proper to call this early form of Mark’s Gospel “less than final” and more correct to call it “more alive.” We are now close to something alive for the experiences of a variety of first- and second-century Jesus peoples. Not a book, for sure, and just barely “writing,” as it hangs brightly in the rawness of real people. These early “less than writings” are not a hefty, if meandering, New Testament. Rather, they seem sometimes more vibrant in the space between life and death in the early centuries.

Vearncombe points toward another way that the tenuous status of the “writing” of Mark positively affects the people of the first two centuries. A number of studies of Mark underline that it is responding to situations of disaster, at least implicitly related to the two unsuccessful wars of Israel against Rome, the countless acts of tortures by the empire, and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Vearncombe finds “disaster response” in the frayed texts of early Mark.

Clearly in the versions of Mark that we now read, the absence of Jesus after his death has the potential to be a disaster. This disaster is evident not only in Mark’s open ending (“he is not here,” Mark 16:6), but across the story. In present story time the “bridegroom” has been taken away (2:20), followers in Judea are fleeing without even grabbing their clothes (13:14–16), the shepherd is struck and the sheep are scattered (14:27), and the disciples, confronted with a missing body, feel abject terror (16:8). There is no validating presence of the risen Jesus in this textual object. Both content and composition in this story make Jesus’s absence palpable.

The reading of Mark at these early stages of writing, then, serves as an extended epitaph for a larger disaster happening to many people. The absence of Jesus and the disasters of both Jesus movements and other larger disasters are processed in provisional, yet dramatic, memorial writing.

CONCLUSION

These first two hundred years of the Common Era are not the territory of something (to be) called the “New Testament.” There is little organization or dogma, as people and groups work on defining their identities in unsteady but creative times. The writings, the people, and the identities are fresh, free, and incomplete. Some of us will wish for a more quickly formed finality of the New Testament, and perhaps read backwards into statements like that of Irenaeus on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Others of us will be happy to discover this resourceful open-ended space of sort-of-writing, continuing our experiment of reading forward and taking history one step at a time. “Tuning in 2 a new free-quency,” as The Artist Formerly Known as Prince put it, thinking not about “texts” but about dynamic “objects, writtenly,” we find exciting and diverse possibilities for meaning making in the first two centuries.

Papers Relevant to This Chapter by Seminar Participants

BeDuhn, Jason. "Becoming a People of the Book: Texts, 'Scripture,' and 'Canon' Among Christ Groups in the Second Century CE." Spring 2020.

Shea, Chris. "Some Observations on the Evolution and Politics of Roman Imperial Canons." Spring 2020.

Taussig, Hal. "Scripture and Resistance Hybridity: Without Canon." Spring 2020.

Vearncombe, Erin K. "Gathered Around Absence: A First-Century Approach to the Text Known as 'Mark.'" Spring 2020.

Conclusion

Assumptions are dangerous things to make, and like all dangerous things to make—bombs, for instance, or strawberry shortcake—if you make even the tiniest mistake you can find yourself in terrible trouble. Making assumptions simply means believing things are a certain way with little or no evidence that shows you are correct, and you can see at once how this can lead to terrible trouble. For instance, one morning you might wake up and make the assumption that your bed was in the same place that it always was, even though you would have no real evidence that this was so. But when you got out of your bed, you might discover that it had floated out to sea, and now you would be in terrible trouble all because of the incorrect assumption that you'd made. You can see that it is better not to make too many assumptions, particularly in the morning.

LEMONY SNICKET, *THE AUSTERE ACADEMY*¹

It is time to consider our results. We began with our hypothesis: Christianity was not the inevitable future. An examination of available evidence from the first two centuries suggests that the futures of the diverse Jesus groups and Anointed communities across the Mediterranean basin were open and full of possibility and difference. Some of these possibilities may have

overlapped in different ways, but these possibilities make it clear that there was no organized or cohesive phenomenon called Christianity in the two centuries after Jesus.

We tested our hypothesis with evidence. The evidence, fragmentary as it may be, is startling. However we might think of the various peoples of these two hundred years, they were neither a religion nor preludes to a religion. Yes, there were jumbles of peoples with various interests in Jesus stuff and Anointed activities. Evidence makes it clear, though, that these various groups, schools, clubs, and movements cannot be summarized together as something like “Jesus peoples,” much less as Christian. They were too diverse and had too many other dimensions to their lives.

These jumbles of peoples accomplished a great deal in the midst of dramatic, unsettled times. Their collective experiences and accomplishments between Jesus’s death and the beginning of the third century are told in moving and creative ways, some through story, others through what we have called “objects, writtenly.” Central to this experiment was the assessment of these experiences on their own terms, rather than on the terms of a Christianity still unborn. Our experiment looked forward, not back.

Our looking forward required a deep questioning of long-held assumptions, an active process of unknowing. It required a willingness not just to look past ourselves, but to un-see ourselves in a history many of us might claim as our own. The goal was to see not the familiar, not the practices, structures, or stories that might remind us of what we know now, the things we are comfortable knowing, the things we understand. We did not set out looking for practices and offices that are now established; we did not set out even to look for their origins, hints of institutions yet to come. We did not set out to find priests and bishops, sacraments, or churches. We did not set out to find these things, and we did not find them.

Rather, the goal was the nourishment of an ongoing willingness to see and respectfully attempt to understand the “other”—many others. To not believe that things are or have to be a certain way. To hear voices completely different from our own, and completely different from those of our present moments. The goal was to hear voices that have gone unheard: the voice of a rag dealer who joined an Anointed supper club. The voice of a female head of household, supporting a Jesus group in her home, despite and against the norm of the Roman father-centered family.

Our unknowing, however, is not an act of deconstruction. It is a radical act of imaginative construction. The construction of new, authentic, exciting possibilities for meaning is enabled when we ask, “What can we understand about the lived experiences of the diverse peoples who associated, in different ways, with Jesus across the ancient Mediterranean, when we start assuming nothing?” We have, essentially, discovered that the bed has indeed floated out to sea. What’s more, it is not just a bed anymore. It is also a boat. A raft. The immense hump of a whale. A small island refuge. The haunt of a wandering albatross.

CONNECTING THREADS

In any self-respecting experimental report, results are followed by discussion. After the findings are reported, those findings need to be interpreted. Connections need to be made. Experimental limitations and future possibilities for study need to be acknowledged.

Certainly, our hypothesis—that Christianity was not the inevitable future—has been proved. The Anointed communities of the first two centuries, in their many structures of and for group belonging, do not suggest a nascent singularity called Christianity. The results of our experiment are indeed so diverse that making any single overarching claim to meaning is challenging and risks the integrity of those results. These groups were loosely or occasionally interconnected; gathered around similar, but not identical, practices such as meals; and focused on Jesus Anointed in sometimes very different ways. No single name or form of these groupings gained considerable traction in the first two centuries.

The elements that stand out from our study of those committed to the heritage of Jesus in the first two centuries will likely be different for each reader, and that possibility is exciting. There are so many new stories to tell. Among these new stories, though, are several important connecting threads, threads that are themselves closely woven together into a tight, if motley, fabric. Integral to the fabric is empire.

Responding to Empire

In the first century CE, Rome had conquered all the nations around the Mediterranean and consolidated them into an empire. From the Romans’

point of view they were masters of the whole world—in the words of Virgil, empire without limit. While empire brought some benefits to citizens, the overarching violence of empire led many nations, institutions, communities, and families to experience great loss and trauma.

Underlying everything we have found is the Roman Empire. The influence of empire is everywhere in early Jesus-group representations of life and practice. Empire actually initiates what one might call the Jesus-group process through the crucifixion of Jesus. The empire's ongoing violence toward parties of the Anointed became a primary factor in the self-understanding of these communities: they were ones who suffered.

Responses to empire were varied. While some parties of the Anointed actively worked to resist empire, other communities sought simply to survive within it, or to use the tools of the empire for redefined ends. The Revelation to John offers a vision of Rome's fleets burning up, an explicit image of a desired destruction of empire. The Gospel of Mary offers comfort and encouragement in the face of violence: Mary provides strength to those students of the Savior who cry out in fear at his death. The envoy Paul's identification with Jesus's crucifixion—"I am crucified with the Anointed One, nevertheless I live" (Gal. 2:19)—leads association members to a consciousness of the interdependence of being hurt and being alive. The many ways in which Jesus groups deal directly or indirectly with Jesus's execution create a wide social consciousness of oppression.

Seeking Refuge

The life of these groups came out of surviving in the context of the Roman Empire. Their concern was about what to do, how to care for one another. Compared with what they practiced, what they believed was of relatively little concern.

These communities experimented in many different ways. They organized themselves into and around families. They looked at times like clubs and associations, formed schools out of which came new wisdom. They played with gender and sexual boundaries, with some forsaking marriage. They did not seem to be looking for *the* way, but for a whole variety of ways. Women were prominent leaders, patrons, and participants. Belonging to Israel was strongly felt.

These experiments in community life functioned as refuges, as safe places amidst imperial violence. These communities did not espouse one

single, systematic approach to dealing with violence; they did not have enough social power to do so. Likewise, the emergence of refuge was not the direct result of ethics or religion. Different groups employed different strategies to create safe places. Varieties of social cohesion were at the heart of group practice.

The creation of refuge played with and built upon existing, everyday social realities. Associations provided ready models of social safety. Households were repurposed and reimagined. Nations in diaspora, especially Judea, pulled toward group belonging. Gender was bent to allow for alternative possibilities for living. A recognition of experienced pain, suffering, and fear allowed for new forms of social cohesion.

The biggest experiment concerned the representation of safety itself. Generals, kings, and emperors had long been heralded as saviors, fathers of nations, deliverers from evils. Emperors were the divine good powers of the entire inhabited earth. Zeus, the *paterfamilias* of the Greek pantheon, ruler of the gods, was a savior. The emperor, *paterfamilias* of Rome, ruler of defeated nations, was a savior.

Jesus groups in the first two centuries radically changed this image of a savior. The savior of these communities was a crucified man: a man tortured and executed through means the empire deemed ultimately humiliating. This crucified man was a source of refuge and bringer of safety. This man's god, the God of the Judeans—the God of a defeated, humiliated nation—was honored as parent of the known world.

While the meaning of the word “salvation” now lies blanketed in belief, its ancient heart meant keeping safe, a means or way of safety. Understood this way, the Anointed communities of the first two centuries certainly were interested in salvation. They were deeply invested in the communal work of keeping safe.

Families That Eat Together . . .

The extent to which communal meals provided the social context for the development of Anointed communities cannot be overestimated. Sharing a meal was the practice that really made these groups happen. The Anointed-group practice of community meals popped up around the empire, forming a diverse set of social organizations in villages, towns, and cities. While many different clubs celebrated meals that connected people, Jesus communities were especially attracted to this practice, and it was their most

characteristic trait. Writings from these communities present Jesus as host, guest, and chief honoree of the meal, building off the meal practices of neighboring groups.

The life that grew up in the practice of these meals provided a safely ordered space in a precarious and dangerous world. The requirement of a certain set of participant behaviors, both moral and practical, ensured that guests at the meal would receive a certain level of respect, honor, and reciprocity from other group members. Adhering to group standards led to the cultivation of specific dispositions focused on caring for others and honoring God.

Although communal meals strongly contributed to who these diverse groups were, the practice did not last. This primary way of belonging fell out of practice during the third century. Initially, these chosen families that ate together, stayed together. If there is an essence of this movement in the first two centuries, it is their common meal practice, and it disappeared in the third century. Why this essential practice disappeared from group life at that time is a question for our next experiment.

Haunt of the Albatross

Study of the ancient world involves us in a strange paradox: the more we learn, the more we realize we do not know. Our experiment's conclusion is one of humility at what we cannot know, while realizing that this humility, this recognition of our ignorance and limitations, is also often the long and winding, sometimes torturous, path to knowledge. Most of our evidence is fragmentary or missing from the historical record. Much of the evidence we do have may be misleading, promoting only the voices of history's most powerful, those in a position to say whose voices are heard and whose should be silenced.

We can, however, and should find power in our vulnerability to the unknown past. In considering new forms of evidence and reconsidering evidence we thought we knew, in considering evidence on its own terms, and on equal terms, so many new and vital voices throng to our attention. These Anointed communities in the first two centuries of the Common Era told many more stories than just the ones now collected in the New Testament, so privileging only those writings later deemed canonical drastically skews the evidence, misreading the evidence of the communities it claims to represent.

Opening our ears to these voices requires a great intellectual shift. If we are to really think about what happened between two imperial moments—when the Roman Empire crucified an insignificant Galilean peasant and when the emperor Constantine favored emergent Christian practice about three hundred years later—we can no longer look for essences. We cannot take for granted that the bed remains in the corner, no matter how long we have believed it to be there. We need to wake up to find ourselves at sea, the albatross slowly drifting overhead.

Any experiment worth its salt should be reproducible. A strong hypothesis is one subject to testing; a strong hypothesis needs to be ready to be proved wrong. Our evidence is out there. It has not received sufficient attention in the past, but we invite you to consider it now. We must continue to listen for these buzzing, urgent voices. These voices can and need to reshape our understanding of group experience and belonging in the two vibrant centuries after Jesus, before Christianity.

Notes

Chapter 2: If Not Christian, What?

1. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of ancient texts are those of: Erin K. Vearncombe, Hal Taussig, and Bernard Brandon Scott. Because there is no canon of the New Testament in the first two centuries of the Common Era, we have treated canonical and noncanonical books the same typographically, meaning that none of these books are italicized. They should be treated the same, so they should look the same in our text.
2. Pliny the Younger, *Letters, Volume II: Books 8–10. Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, Loeb Classical Library 59 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969).
3. Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13–16*, trans. John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 322 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1937), XV.44.
4. Cicero, *In Catilinam 1–4. Pro Murena. Pro Sulla. Pro Flacco*, trans. C. MacDonald, Loeb Classical Library 324 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976).
5. See Dennis E. Smith and Joseph B. Tyson, eds., *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2013).

Chapter 3: Engine of Empire: Violence

1. Celene Lillie, *The Rape of Eve: The Transformation of Roman Ideology in Three Early Christian Retellings of Genesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).
2. The historian Josephus recounts that ninety-seven thousand people were taken prisoner—read, enslaved—at the conclusion of the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE (*The Jewish War* 6.9.3). For more on enslavement in the Roman world and in early Christian contexts, see Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002).
3. Inscription is published as CIL II 3258. The tombstone dates to the second century. Currently the stone is part of Madrid’s National Archaeological Museum collection.
4. Translation from the New Jerusalem Bible.
5. Translation from *A New New Testament*.
6. Translation from the New Jerusalem Bible.
7. Translations from Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: The Scholars Version*, 4th ed. (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010).
8. See, for example, Maia Kotrosits and Hal Taussig, *Re-reading the Gospel of Mark Amidst Loss and Trauma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Chapter 4: Gospel of Empire, Gospel of Jesus

1. Translation from Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1982), 216–217.
2. For a thorough examination of the Gemma Augustea, see Susan M. (Elli) Elliott, *Family Empires, Roman and Christian. Vol. I: Roman Family Empires: Household, Empire, Resistance*

(Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2018), preface.

3. Translation lightly adapted from Arthur J. Dewey, Roy W. Hoover, Lane C. McGaughey, and Daryl D. Schmidt, trans., *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning, the Scholars Version* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010).
4. Translations from Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: The Scholars Version*, 4th ed. (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010).

Chapter 5: Violence in Stone

1. Dio Cassius, *Roman History, Vol. VIII: Books 61–70*, trans. Earnest Cary and Herbert B. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 176 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1925), LXVI.26. On Titus's death, see also Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume II*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 38 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1914), *Deified Titus* 10.
2. Dio Cassius, *Roman History* LXVI.26.
3. This is according to the Westar Institute's Acts Seminar: Dennis E. Smith and Joseph B. Tyson, eds., *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2013).
4. Josephus, *Jewish War, Vol. III: Books 5–7*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library 201 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1928), V.449–451. Further quotations from *Jewish War* are from this edition.
5. This tradition is preserved in the writing of the second-century Carthaginian Tertullian, *Apology* 33.
6. Amanda Claridge, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 278.
7. See Meet the Romans with Mary Beard, "All Roads Lead to Rome" (episode 1), BBC Two, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01ghsjx>.
8. Tacitus, *Agricola. Germania. Dialogue on Oratory*, trans. M. Hutton and W. Peterson, Loeb Classical Library 35 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1914).

Chapter 6: The Deaths of Heroes

1. Plato, *Phaedo*, in *The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro, the Apology, Crito, Phaedo*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). Further quotations from *Phaedo* are from this edition.
2. Quotations from Lucretia's story are from Livy, *History of Rome, Vol. I: Books 1–2*, trans. B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 114 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1919), I.i.57–58.
3. Translations of 2 Maccabees are from the New Revised Standard Version.
4. Translations of 4 Maccabees are from H. Anderson, "4 Maccabees: A New Translation and Introduction," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol. 2: Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments for Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1985).
5. Translations of 1 Corinthians are from, or lightly adapted from, Arthur J. Dewey, Roy W. Hoover, Lane C. McGaughey, and Daryl D. Schmidt, trans., *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning, the Scholars Version* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010).
6. Gospel translations in Chapter 6 are from Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: The Scholars Version*, 4th ed. (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010).

Chapter 7: Testing Gender, Testing Boundaries

1. Translations of Gospel of Mary are from Celene Lillie, “The Gospel of Mary,” in *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, ed. Hal Taussig, 224–226 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), with some emendations. Lillie’s 2018 paper for the Seminar, “Thinking Through Gender in the Second Century Jesus Movements,” was essential to the writing of this chapter.
2. Celene Lillie, “Thinking Through Gender.”
3. This translation of 1 Timothy is from the New Revised Standard Version.

Chapter 8: Forming New Identities Through Gender

1. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck, Loeb Classical Library 366 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1042), II 737a.
2. Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* 14.6, trans. Margaret Tallmadge May, referenced in Elaine Fantham, Helene Peet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and H. A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 201.
3. Trans. Heinrich von Staden, referenced in Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World*, 194.
4. Virginia Burrus, “The Gender of Martyrdom,” paper presented at the Westar Institute Annual Meeting, Christianity Seminar, Denver, November 2018.
5. Translations of 4 Maccabees in this chapter are from the New Revised Standard Version, with adaptations by the authors shown in square brackets. The NRSV sometimes uses terms we find inappropriate for ancient contexts, such as the word “Judaism” in this particular quotation. “Judaism” as such was not a fixed “entity” or institution in this time period. While the NRSV reads “Judaism,” we believe “ancestral practice” would be a more appropriate translation for the context.
6. Burrus, “Gender of Martyrdom.”
7. Translation from Burrus, “Gender of Martyrdom.”
8. This line is adapted from Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972). Musurillo’s text presents Blandina as saying “I am a Christian,” but we know from our work in [Chapter 2](#) that this translation is not accurate.

Chapter 9: Belonging to Israel

1. Translation is that of the authors. Another (though similar) translation by Philip A. Harland and the original Greek text, as well as images of the tomb, are available at Associations in the Greco-Roman World, “[152] Grave of Glykon with Bequest to Purple-Dyers and Carpet-Weavers (161–250 CE); Hierapolis–Phrygia,” <http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/152-grave-of-glykon-involving-purple-dyers-and-carpet-weavers/>. Highly recommended reading is Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York: T&T Clark International/Continuum Press, 2009). See also Philip Harland, “Acculturation and Identity in the Diaspora: A Jewish Family and ‘Pagan’ Guilds at Hierapolis,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 57, no. 2 (2006): 222–244, <https://doi.org/10.18647/2670/JJS-2006>.
2. This idea of an “ethnic ladder” comes from Philip A. Harland, “Climbing the Ethnic Ladder: A Portrait of Interactions Between Judeans and Other Peoples,” paper presented at the Westar Institute Annual Meeting, Christianity Seminar, San Antonio, November 2016.
3. Again, for more on this idea of ethnic hierarchy, see Harland, “Climbing the Ethnic Ladder.”
4. In her book *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), Maia Kotrosits considers the language of diaspora, specifically Israelite diaspora and experiences of trauma in and through diaspora, to help us to work through these

questions about belonging. The Seminar takes a different direction on those questions in this book.

5. See Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007).
6. Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), 30–31.
7. Daniel Boyarin, “The Christian Invention of ‘Judaism,’” paper presented at the Westar Institute Annual Meeting, Christianity Seminar, San Antonio, November 2016. See also these responses to Boyarin’s work: Maia Kotrosits, “Devising Collectives: Losing the Nation in the Story of Judaism and Christianity: A Response to Daniel Boyarin’s *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* and *A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonia Talmud as Diaspora*,” paper presented at the Westar Institute Annual Meeting, Christianity Seminar, San Antonio, November 2016; and Nina Livesey, “Difference and Similarity: A Review of Daniel Boyarin’s *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity and Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*,” paper presented at the Westar Institute Annual Meeting, Christianity Seminar, San Antonio, November 2016.

Chapter 10: Experimental Families

1. Translation of Acts of Paul and Thecla from J. K. Elliott, “The Acts of Paul and Thecla,” in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 366.
2. Translation lightly adapted from Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 264 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1932).
3. Susan M. (Elli) Elliott, *Family Empires, Roman and Christian. Vol. I: Roman Family Empires: Household, Empire, Resistance* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2018), ch. 3 (n.p.).
4. P.Oxy. 7 1021, from Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, dated November 17, 54 CE. Notification of accession of Nero. Greek text available at Papyri.info, <http://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.oxy;7;1021>.
5. The term “household lens” comes from Lillian I. Larsen, “Re-defining ‘Solitude’: Monastic Registers of Fictive (and Factual) Family,” *Forum* 9, no. 1 (2020): 77–102, here 90.
6. See Elliott, *Family Empires*, chs. 14 and 15.
7. Elliott, *Family Empires*, ch. 15.
8. Elliott, *Family Empires*, ch. 14.
9. Marika Rose, “Holy Mothers of God: Sex Work, Inheritance, and the Women of Jesus’ Genealogy,” *Theology & Sexuality* 25, nos. 1–2 (2019): 1–20, here 7, doi: 10.1080/13558358.2019.1652031.
10. Rose, “Holy Mothers,” 11–12.

Chapter 11: Join the Club

1. *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum* (CIL) XIV 2120. Consilio et Auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Regiae Borussicae Editum. Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1863–1974. Available from Last, Richard, trans., “Honors for C. Sulpicius Victor with Reference to a Women’s Assembly (curia) (ca. 200 CE), Lanuvium - Campania,” *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, Accessed July 23, 2021, HYPERLINK “

<http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/honorary-decree-for-aba-150-200-ce/>.

3. ISmyrna 295 = IJO II 43, second–third century CE. From Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland, and John S. Kloppenborg, “Family Grave of Rufina the Head of the Synagogue,” in *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2012), 120.
4. CIL XIV 2112. Translation from *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, “Regulations of the Worshippers of Diana and Antinoüs (136 CE), Lanuvium–Campania,” trans. John S. Kloppenborg, <http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/310-regulations-of-the-worshippers-of-diana-and-antinous/>.
5. TAM V 1539. Translation from *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, “Divine Instructions for the Household Association of Dionysios (late II–early I BCE), Philadelphia–Lydia,” trans. Philip A. Harland, <http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/divine-instructions-for-the-household-association-of-dionysios/>.
6. Kirchner, Johannes, ed. *Inscriptiones Atticae Euclidis anno anteriores* (IG II²). 4 vols. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1913–1940. 1368.
7. All references to this inscription are from the translation of Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland, and John S. Kloppenborg, “Regulations of a Bacchic Association–The Iobacchoi,” in *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, 13–16.
8. Translation from Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: The Scholars Version*, 4th ed. (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010).
9. Translated in Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland, and John S. Kloppenborg, “Aelius Aristides of Smyrna (Ionia), Orations 45.27–28,” in *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, 246.
10. Andrew Monson, “The Ethics and Economics of Ptolemaic Religious Associations,” *Ancient Society* 36 (2006): 221–238, here 233–234, doi: 10.2143/AS.36.0.2017836.

Chapter 12: Feasting and Bathing

1. Translations of Gospel of Thomas are by Justin Lasser, “Gospel of Thomas,” in *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, ed. Hal Taussig, 15–26 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).
2. Translation from Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: The Scholars Version*, 4th ed. (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010).
3. Translation of Prayer of Thanksgiving by Celene Lillie, “The Prayer of Thanksgiving,” in *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, ed. Hal Taussig, 7 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).
4. See also Andrew Brian McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014).
5. Translation of Tertullian, *On Baptism*, by S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885); revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0321.htm>.
6. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Vol. VIII: Books 18–19, trans. Louis H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library 433 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965).

Chapter 13: Inventing Orthodoxy Through Heresy

1. See Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.119–166; *Jewish Antiquities* 13.171–173; 18.11–22.
2. Translation from Markus Vinzent, “Orthodoxy and Heresy: Misnomers and Misnamers,” paper presented at the Westar Institute Annual Meeting, Christianity Seminar, San Diego, November

2019.

3. For a treatment of the importance of schools and school models in later antiquity, see Lillian I. Larsen and Samuel Rubenson, eds., *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018).
4. *First Letter of Clement*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 1, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003).
5. Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*, in *Apostolic Fathers*.
6. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Philip Schaff, “ANF01. The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus,” *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, https://ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/against_heresies_iii/anf01.ix.iv.xix.html.
7. Translations of *Testimony of Truth* by Søren Giversen and Birger A. Pearson, “The Testimony of Truth,” *Gnostic Society Library: The Nag Hammadi Library*, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/testruth.html>.
8. Translations of Acts of Paul and Thecla from J. K. Elliott, “The Acts of Paul and Thecla,” in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. J. K. Elliott, 364 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

Chapter 14: Demolishing Gnosticism

1. Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003).
2. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 189.
3. Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Author of the Acacia Seeds,” in *The Unreal and the Real: The Selected Short Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin* (New York: Saga, 2012), 617–625.
4. Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009), ix.
5. King, *Secret Revelation*, 26.
6. King, *Secret Revelation*, 28.

Chapter 15: Paul Obscured

1. Translation of Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*, from Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 686.

Chapter 16: Jesus by Many Other Names

1. Except where otherwise noted, translations in this chapter of canonical writings—writings now found in the Hebrew Bible and the “New Testament”—are from the New Revised Standard Version, with adaptations by the authors shown in brackets.
2. This translation is by the book editors, and is therefore not from the NRSV, as has been otherwise noted for other translations in this chapter.
3. Translation from Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).
4. Translations of the Gospel of Mary are from Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2003).
5. Translations of the Gospel of Truth, with some adaptations, by Celene Lillie, “The Gospel of Truth,” in *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, ed. Hal Taussig, 230–241 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

Chapter 17: Hiding in Plain Sight

1. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 141, 143.

2. Translations of the Gospel of Truth by Celene Lillie, “The Gospel of Truth,” in *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, ed. Hal Taussig, 230–241 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).
3. This is cleverly developed by Adela Yarbro Collins in *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, 152–154, 161, 166 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984).
4. Translations of *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* by Hal Taussig, Jared Calaway, Maia Kotrosits, Celene Lillie, and Justin Lasser, “The Thunder: Perfect Mind,” in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind: A New Translation and Introduction*. Hal Taussig et al. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, a division of St. Martin’s Press. 183–188).
5. Lucius Apuleius, *Metamorphoses or the Golden Ass*, translation adapted by Paul Halsall from the translation of Adlington (1566) in comparison with that of Robert Graves (1951). Paul Halsall, “Lucius Apuleius (c. 155 CE): Isis, Queen of Heaven,” Fordham University, Ancient History Sourcebook, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/lucius-assa.asp>.
6. New Revised Standard Version translation.

Chapter 18: Romancing the Martyr

1. Translations of the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* are from Herbert Musurillo, trans., *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972).
2. Building on Judith Perkins, Carly Daniel-Hughes supports this reading in her paper for the Seminar, “Producing and Contesting Martyrdom in Pre-Decian Roman North Africa,” presented at the Westar Institute Spring Meeting, Christianity Seminar, Santa Rosa, CA, March 2015.
3. Translation of Pliny, *Letters*, LCL 59.
4. Lucian, The Passing of Peregrinus. Translations here and following from *Lucian*, Vol. V, trans. A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library 302 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1936).
5. From Minucius Felix Tertullian, *Apology. De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius*, trans. T. R. Glover and Gerald H. Rendall, Loeb Classical Library 250 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1931).
6. Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in Early Christianity* (London: Routledge, 1995), 23.
7. Translation adapted from Livy, *History of Rome*, LCL 114.
8. See Susan M. (Elli) Elliot, “Gladiators and Martyrs: Icons in the Arena,” *Forum* 3, no. 6 (2017): 29–59.
9. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 15.
10. Chariton, *Callirhoe*, ed. and trans. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 481 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).
11. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 26, uses Reardon’s translation in B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989).
12. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 27.
13. As adapted from Musurillo: “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” from *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. Herbert Musurillo (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972).
14. Daniel-Hughes, “Producing and Contesting Martyrdom,” offers a helpful overview of responses that contested or countered so-called martyrdom.

Chapter 19: Better than a New Testament?

1. Quoted in Jessica Lussenhop, “Why Did Prince Change His Name to a Symbol?” BBC News Magazine, April 22, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36107590>.

2. Jason BeDuhn, “Becoming a People of the Book,” paper presented at the Westar Institute Spring Meeting, Christianity Seminar, online, May 2020.
3. Translation adapted from Matthew D. C. Larsen, *Gospels Before the Book* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), 93.
4. Larsen, *Gospels Before the Book*, 95–96.
5. “The Gospels Are Finally Named! Irenaeus of Lyons,” is actually the title of a blog post by Bart D. Ehrman on his eponymous blog The Bart Ehrman Blog: The History & Literature of Early Christianity, November 18, 2014, <https://ehrmanblog.org/the-gospels-are-finally-named-irenaeus-of-lyons/>.
6. Erin K. Vearncombe, “Gathered Around Absence: A First-Century Approach to the Text Known as ‘Mark,’” paper presented at the Westar Institute Spring Meeting, Christianity Seminar, online, May 2020. All citations of Vearncombe in this chapter refer to this paper.
7. Translation from Larsen, *Gospels Before the Book*, 150.
8. This translation of I LydiaHM 96 is from Associations in the Greco-Roman World, “Posthumous Honors by Heroists for Stratonike the Priestess (II BCE); Koloe area–Lydia,” trans. Philip A. Harland, <http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/posthumous-honors-by-heroists-for-stratonike-ii-bce/>.
9. This image comes from Philip Pullman’s novel *The Golden Compass* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), ch. 9, “The Spies.” Lyra, the main character, describes how she interprets the symbols on a special piece of equipment in her possession called an “alethiometer”: “I kind of see ’em. Or feel ’em rather, like climbing down a ladder at night, you put your foot down and there’s another rung. Well, I put my mind down and there’s another meaning, and I kind of sense what it is. Then I put ’em all together. There’s a trick in it like focusing your eyes.”

Chapter 20: Conclusion

1. Snicket, Lemony. *The Austere Academy: Book the Fifth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 187.

Ancient Writings in Translation: A Guide

This bibliography will enable readers to follow up on the discussions in this book by reading the primary sources, in translation, from or associated with the early groups of Jesus Anointed followers: gospels, acts accounts, histories, and letters by leaders of these groups, and the like. Individual writings (for example, the Gospel of Mary or the Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas) are noted in chapter endnotes. This guide is to collections of various ancient writings associated with or important for the study of the groups of Jesus Anointed.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The Italian proverb “*Traduttore, traditore*” (to translate is to betray) sums up the problem with translations. All translations are mistranslations. Readers need to keep this in mind. Mistranslation is not deliberate but results from the inevitable fact that words and grammar do not have an exact correspondence between languages. So-called word-for-word or literal translations are actually impossible. Translation is always interpretation, whether or not it is admitted to be such. Also, a language over time shifts and changes, which is why we always need new translations.

Biblical translations have a way of taking on a “sacred” character, but they are still just translations. Reading multiple translations is always a good strategy.

COLLECTIONS OF ANCIENT WRITINGS

Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper>. This website covers the history, literature, and culture of the Greco-Roman world. It is an important resource when dealing with the ancient world.

A New English Translation of the Septuagint. Edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is the sacred writings of ancient Israelite and Judean communities, as well as those of Jesus

- Anointed. The Hebrew text on which it is based, as well as the books included, differs from the Masoretic Hebrew tradition that has led to much conflict between Catholic and Protestant editions of the Bible.
- Early Jewish Writings, <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com>. This website provides digital access to many early Jewish writings. Currently missing are the Dead Sea Scrolls (claimed to be forthcoming).
- BibleGateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com>. This website provides easy access to multiple versions of the Bible in English, as well as several foreign languages. It allows users to read multiple versions of a given biblical passage side by side so that users can compare translations.
- Bible, King James Version (1611). Authorized by King James VI, the translators of the New Testament were excellent Greek scholars who were still part of the living tradition of ancient rhetoric. While antiquated in many ways, this translation is often worth looking at because of the translators' understanding of rhetoric and as an important point in the history of translation into English. Many English versions of the Bible are revisions of the King James Version. Available on many internet sites.
- The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised & Updated*. Edited by Harold W. Attridge and Wayne A. Meeks. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006. General reference Bible using the New Revised Standard Version. Includes articles, introductions, and notes by scholars for the Society of Biblical Literature.
- The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol. 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments. Vol. 2: Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*. Edited by James H. Charlesworth. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983 and 1985. Although not produced by groups of Jesus Anointed followers, these writings often influenced them. The translations are excellent, with strong introductions and notes.
- Early Christian Writings, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/intro.html>. This website collects in digital format all known so-called Christian writings from the first two centuries, as well as a selection from the third century. An Index (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/index.html>) lists all these writings in chronological order. Provides easy digital access to a great many writings.
- Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 vols. Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1867 and 1873. US edition, 1885, edited by Cleveland Coxe. As its subtitle of the 1885 edition indicates, this contains "The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325." The translation is antiquated but more important is missing all the writings that have been discovered since the late nineteenth century. It is still available in reprint editions, free on Kindle, and on the internet (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ante-Nicene_Fathers). Even given its limitations, it is still worth consulting.
- New Testament Apocrypha. Vol. 1: Gospels and Related Writings. Vol. 2: Writings Relating to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects*. Edited by Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963 and 1965. A translation of the standard German collection of New Testament apocrypha. Good introductions.
- The Apocryphal New Testament*. Edited by J. K. Elliott. Oxford: Clarendon, 2005. A translation similar to that of Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher and based on the earlier work of M. R. (Montague Rhodes) James (1924).
- The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning*. Edited by Arthur J. Dewey, Roy W. Hoover, Lane C. McGaughy, and Daryl D. Schmidt. Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010. A completely new translation of Paul's letters that pays attention to their rhetoric. It breaks away from the King James tradition. With introductions and notes.
- The Gnostic Society Library, <http://gnosis.org/library.html>. A major digital archive of all Nag Hammadi documents discovered in the past century. Although committed to a twenty-first-century "gnostic" interpretation, this website provides good scholarship and translations.

The Nag Hammadi Library in English. Edited by Marvin Meyer and James M. Robinson. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009. New translations and introductions to all the writings discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, a major find.

A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts. Edited by Hal Taussig. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. New translations of ten new writings alongside traditional New Testament writings.

The Complete Gospels. Edited by Robert J. Miller. Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010. A translation with introductions and notes to all the early extant gospels. The translation breaks with the King James Version tradition.

The Apostolic Fathers. Vol. 1: I Clement, II Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache; Volume II. Epistle of Barnabas. Papias and Quadratus. Epistle to Diognetus. The Shepherd of Hermas. Translated Bart D. Ehrman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003. Part of the Loeb Classical Library, a standard collection of Greek and Latin writings with English translations on facing pages. This collection of early Christian writings dates from the seventeenth century.

The Acts of the Christian Martyrs. Herbert Musurillo. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972. Greek and Latin texts with translations and short commentaries. The standard for dealing with these writings.

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