

Synoptic Background

Of the four canonical Gospels, the first three are related to each other in a way that is different from the relation of any of them to the Gospel of John. Much of the material in the first three Gospels can be arranged in parallel columns on the same page so that they can be “seen together” and compared (syn- = “together” + optic = “seen”). The Gospel of John overlaps the Synoptics at only a relatively few points. The first three Gospels resemble each other quite closely, while the Fourth Gospel is distinctive in both content and form. It is generally agreed that the Fourth Gospel is later than the Synoptics. (Boring, 473)

The materials from and about Jesus were handed on orally for about a generation between the death of Jesus and the first written Gospel. The ancient world from which the Bible emerged was primarily an oral culture. It was possible then, as it is still possible, for human beings to memorize and transmit book-length stories orally. For example, Greek epics such as Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey and extensive collections of Jewish tradition (the Mishnah) were handed on orally for generations before being written down. (Boring, 467)

Jesus had disciples who heard and saw what he said and did. There can be no reasonable doubt that some of their memories have been included in the present form of the Gospels. But the textual phenomena of selection, order, and verbal agreement presented below cannot be accounted for merely on the basis of individual memory. (Boring, 468)

On the basis of critical study of the Gospels themselves, no scholar doubts that the Gospels contain stories and sayings from the original disciples of Jesus who saw and heard him. On the basis of the same kind of study, no critical scholar believes that any of the Gospels is merely a transcript of such eyewitness testimony. All the materials... were transmitted within the community of faith, and seen in the perspective of the resurrected Lord. In the course of transmission and interpretation, this tradition was modified and expanded. (Boring, 470)

The most widely accepted view is that Mark is the earliest extant comprehensive narrative of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. This theologically innovative and creative work was known and interpreted by Matthew and Luke, and perhaps by John as well. A significant minority argues that Matthew was the first Gospel, and only an occasional scholar that Luke or John was first. (Boring, 472)

Almost all of Mark is paralleled in either Matthew or Luke, with most of it being found in both. Of Mark’s 661 verses, at least 80 percent are found in Matthew and at least 65 percent in Luke. Every pericope of Mark has parallels in Matthew and/ or Luke except §§ 116, 152, and 156 (Mark 3: 20– 21; 7: 31– 37; and 8: 22– 26). When scattered individual verses not paralleled in either Matthew or Luke are added to the tabulation, the result is that of Mark’s 661 verses, all but 45 have parallels in Matthew and/ or Luke (93.2 percent). In addition, Matthew and Luke share about 235 verses not found in Mark (the double tradition, the basis for the Q hypothesis). Both Matthew and Luke have a substantial element of special material unique to each Gospel. (Boring, 475)

The Priority of Mark – A combination of types of evidence has convinced most scholars that Mark was the earliest Gospel. Though the categories are overlapping, for purposes of discussion the evidence may be classified as follows:

Orality - The earliest written Gospel will necessarily have primarily used oral sources. It is widely recognized that, of all the Gospels, Mark is closest to the oral style. Mark seems to be only one step removed from oral tradition, preserving many of the features of oral style, including Aramaisms and parataxis (see below), frequent use of the historical present, the lively pace of the narrative (εὐθύς, euthus, immediately, directly, next, forty-two times, vs. three times Luke, six times Matthew, three times John), vivid details (“in the stern, asleep on the cushion,” 4:38; “green grass,” 6:39; the extended story with its gory details of the death of John, 6: 14– 29), the tantalizingly abrupt and thought-provoking ending, 16:8. (Boring, 482)

Content - It seems more convincing that Matthew and Luke would expand Mark by adding birth and resurrection stories and additional sayings material rather than that Mark would omit them. Mark has no appearance stories; Matthew has Jesus appear to the disciples only in Galilee, while Luke has only Judean appearances. Likewise, difficult Markan stories such as Jesus’ family considering him mentally unbalanced (Mark 3: 30– 31) and Jesus requiring two attempts to heal a blind man (Mark 8: 22– 26) can understandably have been omitted by Matthew and Luke, but it is difficult to think of Mark making difficulties for himself and his readers by adding these stories after omitting so much else that Matthew and Luke have in common. Mark pictures Jesus as a teacher, referring to his teaching activity thirty-four times. It seems comprehensible to most interpreters that Matthew and Luke would expand Jesus’ teaching in Mark by adding Q and other materials, but hard to understand why Mark, after emphasizing the role of Jesus as teacher, would systematically reduce Jesus’ teaching available to him in Matthew and Luke.

Order - Sometimes Matthew has located an incident at a different chronological place than in the Markan order but has incidentally left hints that it is Matthew who is altering Mark, rather than vice versa. Thus in Matthew 8: 16 the phrase “evening having come” agrees verbatim with Mark 1: 32. In the Markan context, the function of the phrase is to indicate that people came for healing only after the Sabbath was over (see Mark 1: 21; in Mark all the incidents 1: 21– 34 occur on the same Sabbath day). In Matthew, the scene has been relocated in another context, no longer on a Sabbath; yet the Markan phrase is retained, though no longer serving any purpose. Such data indicate it is Matthew who is rearranging his Markan source, rather than vice versa. So also Luke 4: 23 would make chronological sense in Mark 6: 1– 6, where Jesus has already worked miracles in Capernaum, but not in Luke 4, where Jesus does not visit Capernaum until after this episode at Nazareth (Luke 4: 31 is the first reference to Capernaum in the Gospel of Luke). Here Luke seems to presuppose Mark. Another example: Luke mentions Simon in 4: 38, but his call is not narrated until 5: 1– 11. In Mark, Simon’s call had already occurred in 1: 16– 20; when Luke moved this story to a later setting in order to provide a basis for it in Jesus’ miracles, this resulted in a premature reference to Simon in the narrative as though he were already known. Such data indicate that it is Luke who has rearranged the Markan order, not vice versa. An examination of all such instances where Matthew or Luke have a Markan incident in a different location from Mark has convinced most scholars that more plausible explanations can be given on the basis of the priority of Mark.

Language and Style - Another category of material in which it appears that Matthew and Luke have edited Mark, rather than vice versa, is provided by examining their respective use of the Greek language. The following types of phenomena indicate Markan priority:

General Level of Mark's Greek - Numerous studies have shown in detail that Mark's text, in terms of the level of Greek in which it is written, reflects the unsophisticated composition of a person without higher education. Mark is a profound theologian and gifted writer, but his story is composed in simple, awkward, and sometimes incorrect Greek. Matthew is more skilled in Greek than Mark, and Luke even more so. A few examples (much of this does not, of course, come through in English translations, which necessarily smooth out the differences):

The historical present. Mark has 151 examples. While not incorrect, use of the historical present was considered vernacular, not literary style. Matthew's longer text has only 78 instances, changing most of the occurrences in the Markan narrative. Luke eliminates all but one of Mark's historical presents (Mark 5: 35 = Luke 8: 39).

Parataxis. Mark tends to string together his sentences with the coordinating conjunction καί (kai, and). Of Mark's 115 paragraphs, 92 begin with "and." Both Matthew and Luke typically join their clauses with a variety of conjunctions and participles. It is unlikely that this more elegant use of the Greek language was intentionally deconstructed by Mark.

Aramaic and Hebrew - Aramaic, which belongs to the same linguistic family as biblical Hebrew, was the mother tongue of Jesus and the earliest church. Mark contains seven direct Aramaic expressions from Jesus: Boanerges (3: 17, Sons of Thunder); Talitha cum (5: 41, Little girl, get up); Corban (7: 11, an offering for God); Ephphatha (7: 34, be opened); Abba (14: 36 father); Golgotha (15: 22, Golgotha); Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani (Mark 15: 34, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?). Luke has parallels to five of these seven texts, but the Aramaic is missing in each case. Matthew has parallels to all seven Markan passages, but has none of the Aramaic words except "Golgotha" in Matthew 27: 33 (= Mark 15: 22). The Aramaic form of Jesus' cry of dereliction in Mark 15: 34 had already been accommodated to the text of the Hebrew Bible (Ps 22:1).

Mark's Harder Readings - There are numerous texts in which Matthew and/ or Luke has eliminated or changed objectionable features within the Markan text:

—Matthew 8: 16/ Mark 1: 32– 34/ Luke 4: 40. In Mark, people bring all the sick and Jesus heals many. In both Matthew and Luke, people bring many and Jesus heals all.

—Matthew 4: 24/ Mark 3: 9– 10/ Luke 6: 17– 19. Again, Mark's many becomes all in Matthew and Luke.

—Matthew 3: 1, 15– 16/ Mark 1: 4, 9. Similarly in Mark 1: 4 John baptizes for the forgiveness of sins, and in Mark 1: 9 Jesus is baptized by John without objection or explanation. In Matthew, however, "forgiveness of sins" is removed from John's preaching, and in 3: 14– 15 an explanation is given for Jesus' being baptized by John. Luke 3: 3 retains forgiveness as ingredient to John's baptism, but Luke never narrates Jesus' baptism, getting John off the narrative stage before Jesus comes on (see Luke 3: 19– 20).

—Mark 1: 2. The quotation is incorrectly attributed to Isaiah. This mistake is omitted by Matthew and Luke.

—Mark 2: 26. Abiathar is high priest, but in 1 Samuel 21 the high priest is Ahimelech. This mistake is omitted by Matthew and Luke.

Historical Situation Presupposed - In some cases, the historical situation presupposed in Matthew and/ or Luke is later than that of Mark. In the apocalyptic discourse Mark 13: 5– 37, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple seems to be imminent, to be in progress, or to have just occurred. Both Matthew and Luke seem to look back on the destruction of Jerusalem from some distance, and to rewrite their sources from this perspective (Matt 22: 4– 8; Luke 21: 20– 24). The conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew, especially Jesus' denunciations of the Pharisees, reflect a historical setting some decades later than is the case in Mark.

Theology –

The secrecy motif - In Mark, Jesus' identity is not recognized by the characters in the narrative until the story is over. This is a key element in Mark's narrative strategy, a way of preserving conflicting christological images of Jesus in one story (see § 20.1.2). Minimal elements of the secrecy motif are also found in Matthew and Luke, but these are in tension with their respective ways of telling the story, in which Jesus' parents, disciples, and enemies all recognize who he claims to be. The secrecy elements included in Matthew and Luke are difficult to explain except as remnants of Markan theology taken over from their source (e.g., Matt 16: 13– 20 vs. Mark 8: 27– 30). Likewise, the places where the secrecy motif is present in Mark but absent in Matthean or Lukan parallels are difficult to explain as Markan insertions (e.g., Mark 6: 51– 52 vs. Matt 14: 32– 33; Mark 5: 43 vs. Matt 9: 26).

The disciples' misunderstanding - It was important to Mark that not even the disciples understand Jesus' true identity before his death, for authentic Christian faith must include the cross and resurrection. Matthew and Luke have other theological and narrative means of expressing this, which allows a more positive picture of the disciples and their understanding to be included in their narratives. Matthew omits, modifies, or offers a supplemental correction for every passage in Mark that pictures the disciples as misunderstanding or failing to understand (e.g., Matt 13: 10, 18, 51– 52/ Mark 4: 10, 13; Matt 16: 12/ Mark 8: 21). 33 What is true of the disciples' misunderstanding is also true of the generally negative descriptions of Peter and the disciples in Mark, which are improved in Matthew and Luke (e.g., Mark 8: 27– 33/ Matt 16: 13– 23/ Luke 9: 18– 22; Mark 10: 35– 37/ Matt 20: 20– 21). The view that Mark first developed the motifs of the messianic secret and the misunderstanding of the disciples, which were later interpreted by Matthew and Luke, seems more plausible to most scholars than Mark's imposition of these motifs on the earlier narratives of Matthew and/ or Luke.

"Lord" as a christological title. While the title "Lord" (κύριος, kurios) was sometimes used simply as an honorary form of address corresponding to English "Sir", in both Judaism and the Gentile religious world it was used as a term for deity. Jews adopted it as a term for God in place of the sacred Tetragrammaton YHWH; Greeks and Romans used it for their gods, including in the emperor cult as a title for the divine Caesar. At a very early period, at least some streams of Christian tradition adopted the word as a christological title for Jesus (e.g., Acts 2: 36; Rom 1: 7; 10: 9; Phil 2: 9– 11). The Synoptic Gospels manifest the following usage of "Lord" as a title for Jesus: Mark uses the term six times, but never unambiguously for the earthly Jesus (1: 3; 5: 19; 7: 28; 11: 3; 12: 36– 37; [2: 28]). No one in the narrative calls Jesus "Lord," nor does the narrator ever refer to him in this manner. Matthew applies this term to Jesus thirty-four times, both in his own compositions and inserting it into Q and Markan contexts. In Mark, the disciples never use "Lord" when they speak to Jesus (e.g., cf. Mark 9: 5/

Matt 17: 4), but in Matthew disciples regularly address Jesus as “Lord” and only unbelievers use “teacher.” So also Luke uses “Lord” very often (104 times, in a variety of contexts), referring both to God (e.g., 1: 68) and to Jesus (e.g., 2: 11). The narrator uses the term of Jesus (e.g., 7: 13), and people in the narrative, both disciples and nondisciples, address Jesus as “Lord” (e.g., 9: 59; 10: 17). To most interpreters, it makes more sense to see Matthew and Luke increasing the use of this christological title and retrojecting the post-Easter insight of the church into their narrative of the life of Jesus, than to claim that Mark later virtually eliminated this usage.

“Son of David” as a christological title - Similarly, Mark appears to have deep reservations about “Son of David” as a christological title, using it only twice, never in a clearly positive sense. He apparently rejected its violent and militaristic overtones. In 12: 35 the Markan Jesus uses the Scripture against the scribes to show the problem with this title, and in 10: 47 a blind person addresses Jesus with this title— but only before his blindness is healed. The crowds, who, as it turns out, misunderstand Jesus and his mission, refer to the coming kingdom of David that he brings (11: 10). This is different in both Matthew and Luke, who use Davidic language of Jesus often and positively (Matthew fifteen times, Luke eleven times), including the insertion of the title into Markan contexts (e.g., Matt 21: 9, 15/ Mark 11: 9– 11; Luke 1: 27, 32, 69; 2: 4, 11). Again, most interpreters find it easier to understand Matthew and Luke as amplifying and reinterpreting Markan usage than Mark filtering out Matthew’s and Luke’s use of the term, and reinterpreting in a negative sense the few references he retains.

“Son of God” as a christological title. “Son of God” is a key christological title for Mark (1: 1, 11; 3: 11; 5: 7; 9: 7; [13: 32], 14: 62, 15: 39 [cf. 12: 6]). Yet during the course of the narrative this title is known only to Jesus himself, to God, and to the demons (and to the post-Easter reader), with the characters in the story never recognizing Jesus as Son of God. It is only at the end of the story, in the shadow of the cross, that Jesus acknowledges himself to be Son of God (14: 62). Then the crucified Jesus is confessed by a Gentile to be Son of God (15: 39). That Jesus’ true identity is known only in retrospect, in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection, is a central element of Markan Christology (see on § 20.1.2 below). Again, Matthew and Luke reinterpret Mark by retelling the story in such a way that Jesus is known as Son of God to the characters in the story during his earthly life (e.g., Matt 1: 18– 15; 3: 17 [cf. Matthew’s “this is” with Mark 1: 11 “you are”]; 14: 33 [cf. Mark 6: 52]; Luke 1: 35).

(Boring, 482-490)

When the Markan parallels to Matthew and Luke are thus accounted for, there remains a substantial body of material (ca. 235 verses, about the size of 2 Corinthians) in which Matthew and Luke are parallel in non-Markan passages (= the double tradition). Most scholars are convinced that the most adequate explanation of the data is that Matthew and Luke used, in addition to Mark, a source consisting primarily of sayings of Jesus, thus sometimes called the “Logia” or “Sayings Source.”³⁵ Since the nineteenth century, this lost source has been called “Q” (the abbreviation of the German word for “source,” Quelle). (Boring, 493)

[Diagram of Mark and Q contributing to Matthew and Luke on Boring, 504. But also include separate M and L sources.]

Spotlight on Mark

Like the other Gospels, Mark is anonymous. The name “Mark” later attached to it could represent the name of the actual author— it was the most common masculine name in the Hellenistic world. More likely, however, in the process of canonization of the Gospels, Mark’s name was attached to it as a way of affirming it as a representative of the apostolic faith. Who was this Mark, why did the church attribute the Gospel to him, and was the church historically correct in doing so? A certain “Mark” first appears in the New Testament in Philemon 24 as among those with Paul who send greetings from his imprisonment. The author of Acts later refers three times to a John Mark who was a member of the Jerusalem church who had contacts with both Peter and Paul (Acts 12: 12, 25; 13: 5, 13; 15: 37, 39). Beginning with Papias in the second century, a tradition developed in various forms that attributed the authorship of the Gospel of Mark to this John Mark, who had been the companion of both Paul and Peter (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.39.15). In all its variations, the ancient tradition makes clear that Mark’s Gospel was accepted and valued in the church, not because of its historical accuracy, but because it represented Peter’s apostolic authority. The Gospel of Mark itself makes no claim to have been written by an eyewitness and gives no evidence of such authorship. While most critical scholars consider the actual author’s name to be unknown, the traditional view that Mark was written in Rome by a companion of Peter is still defended by some scholars who begin with the church tradition cited above and do not find convincing historical evidence to disprove it. (Boring, 521)

Most scholars now agree that Mark was written in northern Palestine, Syria, or Rome between 65 and 75, and that at least Matthew and Luke, possibly even John, had Mark’s text available to them. Though early Christian authors make various claims, we do not really know who wrote it. (It will be easiest to follow tradition and call its author “Mark,” which was, after all, the most common name in the Roman Empire, and to assume that “he” was, like nearly all authors of the time, male.) Whoever the author was, he probably knew people who knew Jesus. Jesus died thirty-five to forty-five years before Mark wrote. Mark tells how Jesus’ cross was carried part of the way by “Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus” (15:21). Since Alexander and Rufus get no introduction or further reference, it seems likely they were members of Mark’s community, known to his first listeners. Mark was thus writing, first of all, for people who knew the sons of the man who had carried Jesus’ cross. (Placher, 2-3)

On the one hand, the gospel must have been written late enough to allow for the development of the oral tradition on which it is based, that is, about a generation, and, on the other hand, early enough to have been used by Matthew and Luke around the turn of the century. These general considerations would locate Mark roughly between 60 and 80 CE. This period is narrowed somewhat by the apocalyptic discourse of chapter 13, with its prediction of the temple’s destruction, which seems to reflect the tumultuous times of the war in Judea 66– 70, but it is not clear whether Mark was written during, just before, or just after the war. Thus practically all scholars date Mark in the period 65– 75, with the major issue being whether or not Mark 13 is understood to reflect the destruction of Jerusalem as something that has already occurred. (Boring, 523)

A tradition developed that the Gospel of Mark was composed in Rome. Against the tradition of Roman provenance is the fact that Mark does not reflect Paul's letter to the Romans written about fourteen years previously, that is, does not appear to emerge from a church where Romans was regularly read. Likewise, the Gospel of Mark is not reflected in any of the earliest Christian writings emanating from Rome. First Peter and 1 Clement both come from Rome near the end of the first century; neither indicates directly or indirectly any awareness of the Gospel of Mark, and neither has the Gospel type of narrative Christology that includes stories of Jesus' life, but only the Pauline cosmic Christology. Some implications for the social and religious setting of Mark may be inferred from the text itself. The debate with Jewish scribes and traditions (e.g., 7: 1– 23; 11: 27– 12: 40) points to a community that is seriously engaged with Jewish tradition and synagogue leadership. The lack of reference to large cities (except Jerusalem), the primarily agrarian imagery, the lack of urban metaphors, the preponderance of situations in which poor people play leading roles, and the limitation of reference to monetary units to small-denomination coins suggest that the community from which Mark came belonged to the lower socioeconomic strata. That Aramaic terms and Jewish customs are translated or explained (e.g., 5: 41; 7: 1– 4, 11, 34; 14: 36; 15: 34) indicates that it was directed to a Greek-speaking church composed primarily of Gentiles. The indications in Mark 13 of the proximity of the author and his community to the war of 66– 70 suggest Syria or Palestine. The author's imprecise knowledge of Palestinian geography points to a setting outside Palestine proper. Since Matthew was probably written in or near Antioch, this suggests a Syrian provenance for Mark as well. Someplace in Syria, not too far from Galilee, seems to be the most likely provenance. (Boring, 524)

To be sure, Mark was not trying to write history the way a modern historian would. No one in the ancient world did. Ancient writers generally, including historians – and in this perhaps they were just more honest than we are today – understood their purpose as affecting their readers in some way. Mark wanted to convey the identity of this man Jesus. To do that best, he was willing to juggle chronology and combine features of several stories. As John Calvin once put it, “No fixed and distinct order of dates was observed by the Evangelists in composing their narratives. The consequence is, that they disregard the order of time, and satisfy themselves with presenting, in a summary manner, the leading transactions in the life of Christ.” People still tell stories the same way. A personal example: my father died when I was in high school. I can recall some things he said word for word, and I have one letter he wrote me. That one surviving letter (written when I had won an award) is weirdly formal and would give a badly distorted impression of our relationship. If you wanted to know about the sort of man my dad was, you would do better to trust my general descriptions and the stories I tell about how he was most himself. (Placher, 4)

How could the Messiah accomplish divinely powerful deeds and not be recognized as the Son of God until after the cross and resurrection? Mark's response to this problem was to take the elements of secrecy and misunderstanding that were already resident in various elements of the stories about Jesus and to develop them into a comprehensive means of presenting the whole story of the Christ event: Jesus had done the miraculous saving acts during his earthly life as pictured in the epiphany Christology, and God's saving act in him had not been recognized

until after the story was over, as called for by the kenosis Christology. Mark constructs the paradoxical narrative of “secret epiphanies” that allows him to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that the saving power of God is already manifest in his earthly life, but that his true identity could not be grasped until after the cross and resurrection. The secrecy motif is woven into the narrative throughout. (Boring, 516)

Mark’s Ending. Galilee – at the narrative level, the term functions literally and geographically. Galilee functions otherwise, however, at the level of discourse between text and reader. Galilee of the Gentiles is the locus of the mission to the nations. Galilee is also the place from which the disciples and the women came: their home turf, the place of their daily routine. The last verse of Mark’s Gospel falls like a bomb on the carefully nurtured expectation that the women will always faithfully do what needs to be done and that predictions of Jesus will always find fulfillment in the story. Instead of giving the message to disciples, as they were commanded, the women flee from the tomb in astonishment, fear, and trembling and tell no one anything. And instead of reporting a glorious epiphany in Galilee, the Gospel ends abruptly with no resurrection appearance at all. The group of faithful followers finally fails; the resurrection predictions are fulfilled, but the second shoe (appearance to the disciples in Galilee) never drops. The crucifixion had seemed to end the story but did not. The resurrection does not really do so, either. Resurrection-with-appearances would bring closure to the narrative, a closure which characterizes the other three Gospels. Mark’s ending is no end; only the reader can bring closure. In one sense this unfinished story puts the ball in the reader’s court. It puts us to work; we must decide how the story should come out. In a deeper sense, however, Jesus remains in control of the ball. No ending proposed by our decisions can contain him, any more than the tomb with its great stone could. Always he goes before us; always he beckons forward to a new appearance in the Galilee of the nations, in the Galilee of our daily lives. We never know where and when we shall see him; we only know we cannot escape him. “He is going before you...there you will see him.” This possibility and this promise makes of Mark the Gospel of expectations still unfulfilled and of a future beyond our control. It inspired in the women trembling, awe, and ecstatic dread. It still has the same impact on whoever has ears to hear. Those who seek, in the resurrection, closure for the story of Jesus and a program for the mission of the church should turn to another Gospel. The significance of Mark 16:1-8 lies instead in its understanding of the basic life-stance of a Christians: expectancy. (Williamson, 285)

Mark 16:9-20 was almost surely not a part of the original text of Mark. The three resurrection appearances and the statement about the world mission in this longer ending appear to be pieced together from accounts scattered in the other Gospels and in Acts. (Williamson, 286)

Spotlight on Matthew

From its first appearance Matthew has been treasured as the Gospel of the Sermon on the Mount. This justly famous compendium of Jesus’ teachings sets Matthew apart from the others. While much of the material in the sermon is found also in Luke, the First Gospel has been so popular that most Christians are more familiar with Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes, the

Lord's Prayer, and the Golden Rule (to take only a few obvious examples) than Luke's. This is not to say that the rest of the Gospel is merely a cradle in which the Sermon on the Mount has been placed. No, the sermon is set in a *gospel*, that is, a passion narrative with an extended introduction. The Sermon on the Mount is important to the Evangelist precisely because it derives from the Messiah, the Son of God. What has made Matthew so precious to generation after generation of Christians is thus its fusion of gospel and ethics, of faith and morality. The dominant characteristic of the First Gospel is its moral earnestness. The concluding warning of the Sermon on the Mount thus sounds the note that will dominate this Gospel: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (7:21, NRSV). We can hear the echo of this clarion call in the Great Commission with which the Gospel ends: "Go, enlist all the Gentiles as disciples..., *teaching them to observe everything that I commanded you*" (28:19-20). It is remarkable that in this commissioning scene there is no reference to preaching the gospel and no demand for faith as a precondition for baptism. Matthew can assume that the gospel will be proclaimed and that converts who undergo baptism will confess faith in Jesus, but he cannot take for granted that they will take seriously Jesus' moral imperatives. The "mixed state of the church" causes him great concern; there are too many in the church whose lives do not conform with their confession. The purpose of his writing is to convince Christians that a genuine faith in Christ must be demonstrated in daily obedience to the way of life he proclaimed. Faith and ethics, Matthew insists, are two sides of the same coin, or the coin is counterfeit. (Hare, 1-2)

The gospel was attributed to the apostle Matthew in the second century as a way of affirming its authentic witness to the apostolic faith. Today, practically all critical scholars consider the evidence against apostolic authorship to be overwhelming. The use of Mark and Q and the apparent second- or third-generation date undercut the later claim to eyewitness testimony. The Greek language in which the Gospel was composed was the native language of the author, and represents greater linguistic skill than the relatively unpolished Greek of Mark. The LXX is his Bible. Though we do not know his name, from the document he has given us we can surmise that the author was of Jewish background, a Diaspora Jew who had grown up in a Hellenistic city (presumably Antioch) speaking Greek and reading the LXX. He knew the traditions and methods of the synagogue. (Boring, 534)

Matthew must have been written after Q and Mark. There are good reasons for dating Mark a few years either side of 70 CE, so Matthew must be enough later for Mark to have become the sacred tradition of a community. The war of 66–70 CE and the destruction of Jerusalem are almost certainly reflected in 22: 7; see also 21: 41; 23: 38. Yet Matthew does not seem to be overwhelmed by the catastrophe, which seems some distance away in both space and time. Matthew seems to be engaged with the developments in formative Judaism in the generation after 70 CE. Matthew, and not merely Matthean tradition, seems to have been used by both the Didache and Ignatius. The Didache probably comes from the period around 100 CE; Ignatius writes about 110 CE. It thus seems that Matthew was composed in the period 80–100, for which 90 may serve as a good symbolic figure. (Boring, 536)

The majority of scholars favor Antioch, for the following reasons: (1) Internal evidence of the Gospel points to some Greek-speaking urban area where Jews and Christians were in intense interaction. Greek was the dominant language of Antioch, which probably had the largest Jewish population in Syria. Matthew seems to breathe a more urbane air than either Q or Mark. Whereas Mark refers to cities eight times and villages seven times, Matthew has twenty-six references to cities and only four references to villages. Peter is prominent in both Matthew and in Antiochene tradition, which made him the first bishop of Antioch. Jerusalem seems out of the question, since James plays no role. The designation of Jesus as a Nazorean (2: 23) speaks for Syria, where Christians were known as “Nazoreans.” The contacts with Ignatius, the Didache, and the Gospel of the Nazarenes, all related to the region of Syria or Antioch in particular, point to this area as the origin of the Gospel of Matthew. (Boring, 536)

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW IS NOT THE product of an isolated individual author, but reflects the life and concerns of a particular Christian community. Matthew has long been known as the most ecclesiastical Gospel, the only Gospel to use the word “church” (16: 18; 18:17). Matthew’s church has obviously been involved in an intense relationship with the surrounding dominant Jewish community. We may picture Matthew himself and some members of his community as Jews who had grown up in the period before the 66 – 70 war, with the synagogue as their spiritual home. Matthew has interests that are distinctively Jewish: his fundamental affirmation not only of the Law but of Jewish tradition (5: 17– 20; 23: 3), of the importance of the Sabbath (24:20), the holy city (5: 35; 4: 5; 27: 53), the validity of temple and Jewish festivals (5: 23–24; 26: 17– 30). He feels no need to explain Jewish customs, as did his Markan source (15: 1 vs. Mark 7: 1– 4). (Boring, 537)

Tensions developed [within synagogues regarding Jesus]. We do not know the details or the issues, but they probably involved disputed interpretations of the Law according to the teaching and example of Jesus, and whether one who had been crucified could be the Messiah. Those who had become disciples of Jesus found themselves becoming an isolated group within the synagogue. Matthew’s group may have eventually formed one or more separate synagogues; if so, they were still synagogues of Jews within the orbit of Judaism, somewhat analogous to the synagogue of the Hellenists in Jerusalem (Acts 6: 1; 9: 29; 11: 20, and § 7.4.2; 9.2.2 above). 22.5.4 The War, Jamnia, Self-Definition, and Polarization In the generation following the 66– 70 war, the destruction of the temple, and the beginnings of reformation of Judaism at Jamnia, Matthew’s group found not only itself, but the synagogue(s) to which they were related, in the process of change, and tensions increased. By the time Matthew writes, he and his community are alienated from these developing structures. They refer to their own gathering as the “church” (ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia*; the word is found only in Matthew in the Gospels, 16: 16; 18: 17). The Matthean Jesus refers to “my church,” but “their synagogues” (16: 18; 10: 17; cf. the narrator’s voice in 4: 23; 9: 35; 12: 9; 13: 54). The restructuring of post– 70 Judaism under the leadership of the Pharisees generated mutual suspicion and hostility between the Matthean community and the Pharisees, against whom Matthew carries on a vigorous polemic (e.g., 5: 20; 6: 1– 18; 15: 1– 20; 23: 1– 36). (Boring, 538)

The Antioch church was the first Christian center in which the Jewish Christian mission openly appealed to Gentiles and accepted them without requiring that they become Jews first. After Paul lost his struggle with the more conservative faction in Antioch and left to begin his Aegean mission, Antiochene Christianity would have become more interested in preserving its Jewish traditions and connections with Jerusalem, without surrendering its Gentile mission. Within this complex matrix, as Matthew's group became increasingly distant from the traditional synagogue, they became more open to the reception of Gentiles. By the author's time, his church is carrying on a full-scale mission to Gentiles. In some ways they now find themselves more oriented to the Gentile world than to the emerging shape of Judaism, while continuing to affirm their Jewish past, of which they consider themselves the legitimate heirs. (Boring, 538)

Some time after 70 CE the Gospel of Mark arrived in the Matthean community, was accepted as part of the community's own sacred tradition, and was used in its life and worship. Mark had been written in and for a Gentile Christian community no longer living under the rule of Torah (Mark 7: 1– 23). While toning down Mark's critique of Torah observance (cf. Matt 15 with Mark 7), the Markan narrative became a fundamental part of the Matthean church's way of telling the Jesus story. Matthew did not merely "combine" Q and Mark. He made the Markan narrative basic, inserting his Q and M materials into the Markan story line, to which they were subordinated. (Boring, 539)

Developments in contemporary Judaism, including especially what is going on at Jamnia and its effects in the synagogues in his own environs, are of deep concern to Matthew. He regards the developing Pharisaic leadership and its program for all Judaism as the chief opponents and alternatives to his own understanding of the way forward for the people of God. His Gospel includes traditional Jewish Christian materials that were important enough for him to include, and that he still in some sense affirms (5: 17– 20; 10: 5– 6; 23: 1– 3). While such texts as 10: 16– 25 express alienation from "their" synagogues, yet the fact that Christians could be beaten in them and brought before local Jewish courts ("sanhedrins") shows the victims of such abuse are still in some sense interior to the Jewish community. Likewise, the debate within Jerusalem Judaism provoked by the execution of James (62 CE) shows that Christian leaders could still be regarded as internal to Judaism a generation after Jesus' death. In this sense, Matthew's church is "Jewish." Though Matthew's church and/ or the Q community from which it sprang had previously carried on an unsuccessful mission to the Jewish people, it has now abandoned a specifically Jewish mission, no longer sees itself as a renewal movement in Judaism, and is now engaged in a mission to the Gentiles, that is, the "nations," of which Israel is now one (28: 18– 20). Matthew understands the present and future of his church to be oriented to the Gentiles and regards developing non-Christian Judaism only as competitor and opponent. In this sense, Matthew's church is "Gentile." (Boring, 539)

The reforms of the Pharisees were intended to renew Jewish piety and to provide a stronger sense of Jewish identity in the face of incursions by Hellenistic culture. Jesus shared the concerns of the Pharisees. In many ways, he was closer to their thinking than to that of the Sadducees or the Essenes. However, he differed from Pharisees in his understanding of the importance of ritual purity, tithing, and Sabbath observance in relation to the "weightier

matters of the law” (Matt 23:23). For Matthew’s community these differences came to be intensified further by historical circumstances. The timing of Matthew’s writing is important for understanding the rhetoric. The failed rebellion against Rome resulted in the burning of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Thousands of Jews had been killed or exiled and the survival of Judaism was in doubt.

There followed very turbulent times within Judaism. The Pharisees sought to consolidate their influence and were in an adversarial relation to minority groups, such as those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Jewish Christian missionaries likely faced opposition from the Pharisees comparable to that described in 23:24. The “woes” that conclude chapter 23 climax in a bitter denunciation of their persecution. The Pharisees’ leadership is being delegitimized in these accounts. The polemical language of several texts in Matthew are extreme in our ears. Pharisees are definitely presented as the “bad guys.” Matthew emphasizes their opposition and records Jesus’ bitter diatribes against them. We are taken aback by accounts of such invective from one who is “gentle and lowly” and loves his enemies. This writing, however, reflects the polemics of [Matthew’s] day. The name-calling is actually very much like the invective employed by the minority Jewish group at Qumran (which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, and was destroyed by the Romans around the same time as the Temple in 70 CE). There the leader of the majority group is called a “wicked priest” and “the Liar.”

In some circles, the harsh criticism of this polemic against one group of Jewish leaders has been generalized to a “verdict on all Jews and Jewish religious leaders for all time.” In point of fact, however, there is no wholesale condemnation of Jews or Judaism in these texts. They cannot even be read as a wholesale condemnation of the Pharisees, because not all Pharisees were guilty of the abuses to which Jesus alludes in Matthew. In early rabbinic writings, Pharisees themselves engage in pointed criticism of those who manifest the flaws that Jesus notes here. The Gospel of Matthew as a whole is not anti-Jewish or anti-Judaism. It does not tell a story of “God’s rejection of Israel or Israel’s rejection of God.” Matthew has been rightly termed “the Jewish Gospel.” The five major discourses follow the fivefold form of the Pentateuch. Jesus is presented as an authoritative interpreter of the law. The Hebrew Scriptures are of central importance in Matthew, which is full of quotations and allusions to the prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah. For Matthew, Jesus is the fulfillment of both the law and the prophets. This Gospel takes pains to show Jesus’ parallels with Moses and his reception as “son of David.” Jesus and Matthew speak as pious Jews.

As we read these sharp-edged texts today we are tempted to let them rest in the past as a condemnation of a particular subset of the Pharisees. We locate ourselves among the righteous and know that Jesus is talking not about “us” but about “them.” What if, instead, we took the texts as an occasion to examine our own religious life and practice to see if the things Jesus speaks so heatedly against are to be found there? Where are the places that we fall into hypocrisy, status seeking, self-importance, and self-delusion? These texts are surely a cautionary tale instructive for all “would-be” followers of Jesus.

The anti-Pharisee texts are the polemics of a fight within the family; there is no repudiation of Judaism. Unfortunately these texts have been used as “pre-texts” for anti-Judaism. This use misunderstands and misapplies the texts. Matthew’s community of faith is a sect within Judaism. The conflict is a conflict within Judaism, with each group claiming that they are the true heirs of Judaism and that the other group is in error. The argument is not with “the

Jews” or Judaism as such but with certain Pharisees who are being accused of misleading the people. And the claim that Jesus is the Messiah and the authoritative teacher of the law is the major point of difference. The extension of the promises of God to Gentiles is a second contentious point. But Matthew’s way of arguing these points is thoroughly grounded in the Scriptures and traditions of Judaism. (Case-Winters, 4-6)

That Matthew appears to represent an urban community is illustrated by the above evidence for Antioch. Additional data suggest a community that had at least some relatively wealthy members. The Q beatitudes to the “poor” and “hungry” become in Matthew “poor in spirit” and “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt 5: 3, 6// Luke 6: 20– 21). References to small-denomination copper coins are replaced by references to gold and larger-denomination coins (Mark 6: 8// Matt 10: 9; Luke 19: 11– 27// Matt 25: 14– 30), and stories are told of high finance (e.g., 18: 23– 35) and lavish dinner parties (22: 1– 14). Matthew specifically adds to Mark that the Joseph of Arimathea who buried Jesus was both a disciple and a wealthy man (27: 57). (Boring, 542)

Theologian Jung Young Lee draws on sociological meanings for marginality as living in two societies or cultures that are different and often conflicted. This situation is more complicated if one of the two societies or cultures is dominant and has the power to define the normative center and to exclude the other. This is the situation of Matthew’s community, and of the persons with whom Jesus engages in ministry. They are “in-between,” marginal by virtue of their situation. However, a different kind of marginality is open to them: they can define themselves and choose to be an alternative community. There may even be a sense of “over-against” in this relation if the alternative community has values and vision that are in tension with the values and vision of the dominant group. Warren Carter proposes that Matthew’s Gospel is in fact challenging the community of disciples to embrace a “more consistent and faithful marginal identity and alternative way of life in anticipation of the completion of God’s salvific purposes.” The margins are not only the standpoint for ministry but also the focus of ministry for Jesus and his disciples. It is a ministry that overturns expectations about “insiders” and “outsiders.” The socially, religiously, and politically marginalized are at the center of Jesus’ ministry. (Case-Winters, 8-9)

The plot is dominated by the conflict between kingdoms – between Jesus and the Jewish leaders and between the Roman Empire and the kingdom of God, but these are the earthly, historical segment of a cosmic story. God is the hidden actor in the story throughout, and Satan is the hidden opponent. (Boring, 542)

Matthew is supremely interested in ethics, by which he means the will of God summed up as δικαιοσύνη (dikaiosunē, righteousness, justice, 3: 15; 5: 6, 10, 20; 6: 1, 33; 21: 32). To do right is to do the will of God. The will of God is revealed in a life of discipleship to Jesus, with the command to love God and neighbor as its essential norm. (Boring, 542)

Matthew directly quotes the Scripture forty times with an explicit indication such as “it is written” (e.g., Matt 4: 4 = Deut 8: 3). Matthew also contains several other direct citations not

explicitly so identified (e.g., Matt 27: 46 = Ps 22: 1; their exact number depends on how strictly one distinguishes between quotation and allusion), making a total of sixty-one direct quotations in twenty-eight chapters, plus a plethora of biblical paraphrases, allusions, and imagery. The Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament lists 294 allusions, more than ten per chapter. A special category is formed by ten “formula quotations,” sometimes called “reflection citations” or “fulfillment quotations”. (Boring, 543)

From the beginning of his composition, Matthew has narrated the story of Jesus so as to evoke the images of Moses from both the Scripture and Jewish tradition.

- 1: 18– 21 In a dream an angel announces Moses’ birth and that he will work miracles and save his people (cf. Exod 2: 1– 10; Ps Philo, Bib. Ant. 9.10).
- —2: 1– 15 At his birth he is threatened by the wicked king (Exod 1: 8– 22).
- —2: 1– 4: 11 He comes out of Egypt; passes through the water, and is tested in the wilderness (Exod 12– Deut 34).
- —5: 1– 7: 27 He ascends the mountain and gives authoritative commands (Exod 19– 23).
- —8: 1– 9: 34 He does ten great deeds of power in liberating the people of God (Exod 7– 12). But Jesus’ mighty deeds are all acts of mercy and deliverance— even for the Romans— rather than judgment on the oppressor. As Matthew has transformed the violent, conquering “Son of David” into the healing king who does not retaliate but withdraws (see on 12: 9– 21), he has transformed the violent acts of deliverance into acts of compassion.
- —Chapters 5– 7, 10, 13, 18, 23– 25 Given the other evidence, the five great discourses of the teacher Jesus in Matthew probably also have a parallel in the five books of Moses.

(Boring, 544)

We have seen the role of the theme of the messianic secret in the formation of Mark, the first Gospel (§ 20.1.2), and that the secrecy theory required that Jesus be portrayed as an enigmatic teacher whose message could not be understood until after the resurrection. Matthew has other concerns, one of which is to present Jesus as authoritative teacher for the community, a teacher who wants to be understood, and who is understood. Matthew thus dismantles and/ or reinterprets the Markan texts that express the messianic secret:

- —1: 18– 2: 12 Jesus’ birth as Messiah and Son of God is a revelation of his identity. Astral phenomena indicate his significance and guide the magi.
- —3: 13– 15 John the Baptist recognizes Jesus and is hesitant to baptize him until Jesus authoritatively commands him. John and the others present hear the voice from heaven, “This is my beloved Son” (Mark 1: 11, “You are my beloved Son,” to Jesus; the others, including John, do not hear).
- —9: 25– 26 Matthew omits the command of Mark 5: 43 not to tell anyone of the miracle of raising the little girl from the dead (difficult to imagine historically in any case). In some places, Matthew retains the Markan command to secrecy, but they either play a different role in Matthew than in Mark or are simply vestigial.

- —13: 10– 17 Matthew greatly expands and rewrites the difficult Markan “explanation” of why Jesus taught in parables, eliminating the idea of Mark 4: 10– 12 that the parables were intended to keep people from understanding.

The modification of the secrecy theory allows Matthew to present Jesus as an authoritative teacher whose interpretations of the Torah and directives about the will of God are understood and practiced by the disciples. This image then becomes a central aspect of the church’s continuing mission: to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that Jesus, the supreme teacher, has commanded (28: 16– 18; see 23: 8). (Boring, 545)

Like the other Synoptics (in contrast to John), Matthew has little to say about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the post-Easter community of faith. His way of doing this is to speak of the continuing presence of Christ, equated with the presence of God:

- —1: 23 Matthew quotes the promise of Isaiah in relation to Jesus’ birth: “they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God-with-us.’”
- —28: 20 The last words of the risen Jesus are “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” There is no ascension in Matthew; the risen Christ remains with his disciples. With 1: 23, this text forms a bracket for the whole Gospel, affirming the continuing presence of God.
- —10: 40 Jesus sends out his disciples, authorizing and empowering them to continue his own work (10: 1– 5). Those who receive Jesus’ disciples receive Jesus himself.
- —18: 20 Christ is present when the church convenes “in his name.”

(Boring, 545)

Spotlight on Luke

Assuming that Luke– Acts uses Mark and looks back on the destruction of Jerusalem, and is therefore post-70, but does not reflect a knowledge of the Pauline letter collection, the majority of scholars continue to date Luke– Acts about 80– 90 CE. If, as here, one is persuaded that the author was aware of the Pauline corpus and the writings of Josephus, the Lukan double work fits best into the early second century. This is the same period as the Pastorals. (Boring, 587)

Luke– Acts is anonymous, like the other Gospels and like the biblical narratives that served as his model. This is in contrast to the Hellenistic historians, including Josephus, who signed their names in the preface of their works. The earliest extant attribution of Luke– Acts to Luke the companion of Paul is from Irenaeus and the Muratorian Canon in the latter part of the second century, followed by Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius. 4 This attribution could represent historical memory. It could also have been deduced from the narrative itself. The “we” that appears intermittently in Acts 16: 10– 28: 16 suggests a companion of Paul. Those mentioned in the third person in the narrative can be eliminated (Timothy, Barnabas, Silas, John Mark, etc.). The Luke of Philemon 24, Colossians 4: 14, 2 Timothy 4: 11 remains. The argument that Luke– Acts was written by a companion of Paul consists of (1) the title, (2) the second-century church tradition, (3) a particular understanding of the “we” passages, and (4) the purported “medical language.” [However, the significant differences between Luke-Acts

version of events and the way Paul describes them in his own letters calls into question that Luke-Acts was written by a companion of Paul. Plus, the preface of Luke and Acts clearly indicates that the author has investigated the events and compiled sources rather than being an eye witness. Also, it has been shown that the supposed “medical language” was common terms that would have been common among any educated people of their day.] We know a good bit about the author of Luke– Acts, but all that we know for sure is derived from the text itself. The book was composed by a well-educated, well-traveled man with a good command of Greek, at home in the upper-middle class of the Hellenistic world. The author was not an eyewitness of the things he recounts. He is an admirer of Paul, but does not share Paul’s own view of himself as an apostle; his own theology is considerably different from Paul’s on key points and does not represent Paul’s own views accurately. (Boring, 589-590)

Rome? Ancient traditions connected Luke– Acts with Rome. Even ancient authors such as Jerome, who accepted the tradition that Luke came from Antioch and was a personal companion of Paul on his journeys, regarded Luke– Acts as having been written in Rome. This tradition may have originated on the basis of Acts itself, which begins in the east and traces the missionary course of Christianity to Rome, where the story ends. However, strands of evidence support the view that the author did in fact come from the east, collected traditions from Antioch through Asia and the Aegean mission, and finally composed his two-volume work to address the situation of the third-generation church in Rome. The Roman church began with a strong orientation toward the Jewish Christianity sponsored by Jerusalem, with Peter and especially James as its heroes. This general view of a Roman provenance is supported by incidental observations:

- Luke’s emphasis on the large numbers of Jewish Christians in Palestine/ Jerusalem (Acts 2: 41; 4: 4; 21: 20, “myriads” there when Paul arrives) would be particularly encouraging to a church in Rome that understood itself as heirs of the Jewish Christian tradition, but where local Jews had mostly rejected Christian preaching. 12
- Luke– Acts seems unconsciously to presuppose the geography and weather of the western Mediterranean. It is the south wind that brings heat, not the east wind off the desert, as in Syria and Palestine (see Luke 8: 22– 23, 33; 12: 54– 55). Houses have tile roofs in which individual tiles can be removed, not the mud and straw mixture that must be “dug through” (Luke 5: 19; cf. Mark 2: 4). Luke’s consistent designation of the “sea” of Galilee as a lake (Mark’s θάλασσα, thalassa replaced with λίμνη, limnē) suggests a cosmopolitan perspective.
- The farewell scene in Acts 20 brings Paul’s work in the east to a close. The narrative has constantly looked toward Rome as its divinely directed goal (19: 21; 23: 11!).

These general indications of a Roman provenance are strengthened by literary and theological contacts between Luke– Acts and Christian texts known to be, or very likely to be, of Roman provenance. Numerous scholars have carefully documented the phenomenon that the linguistic contacts between Luke– Acts and Hebrews are numerous and striking, closer and more numerous than the contacts between either and the Pauline letters. the striking linguistic phenomena are weighty evidence that the two authors are from the same literary milieu, namely, Rome. Numerous linguistic points of contact also link Luke– Acts and 1 Peter. The

author of 1 Clement was certainly a teacher in the Roman church. Here too there are numerous points of contact with Luke—Acts. (Boring, 591-593)

Luke has a particular view of Christian history. He would certainly agree with the other Gospel writers that the culmination of all of history is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, as we shall see as we look at his chronology, he carries this point beyond Mark and Matthew. But this does not mean that history has ended, that whatever happens from that point on is not significant. On the contrary, Luke is concerned with how history now unfolds, particularly among those who share the common Christian faith that Jesus Christ is the end of history, and with placing this in the context of all of human history. Luke did not write his two volumes to be read piecemeal, as we do today in church, in private devotions, and even in our commentaries. They involve an overarching argument, a grand narrative that gives meaning to the whole. The chronological dimension of that narrative—as in any story well told—is obvious. The geographic dimension, though not as obvious, is just as important. The story begins in Galilee; slowly winds its way to Jerusalem, where it settles for the last chapters of the Gospel and the first chapters of Acts; and then moves on to Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, and eventually Rome. Yet neither chronologically nor geographically is the story finished. Chronologically, we are left with Paul under house arrest in Rome, and are told nothing about the final outcome of his appeal to Caesar. Geographically, though Acts 1:8 promises the disciples that they will be witnesses “to the ends of the earth,” the narrative takes us only to Rome (hardly “the ends of the earth”!) and there it leaves us, with no hint as to how the promise of Acts 1:8 is fulfilled. On that basis, it might be appropriate to call Luke—Acts “the unfinished Gospel.” My own inclination is to think that Luke—Acts is unfinished because its author was seeking not only to inform but also to invite. Theophilus and all subsequent readers of Luke’s two volumes would learn about the story of Jesus and of the early church; but they would also be invited to see themselves as the continuation of that story, and to become witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” (Gonzalez, 3-4)

An element in this unfinished history that is of particular concern for me and for many believers is that the church itself is unfinished. As an historian of Christian life and doctrine, I well remember the first books that I read on the general history of the church. They were all written by North Americans or by Western Europeans. Reading them, one received the impression that in the Protestantism of the North Atlantic, Christianity had come to its full fruition, and that all that remained to be done was taking that form of Christianity to the rest of the world. Today very few church historians, even in the North Atlantic, would write history in such a manner. There is no doubt that the North Atlantic is becoming less and less Christian, and that the centers of vitality in the church are moving to other lands. From the point of view of many Christians in the North Atlantic, this seems to be the sad end of the story. But others, both in the North Atlantic and elsewhere, see it as a new beginning. On this point, Luke’s narrative may provide significant guidance, for just as today we have to write about the passing of the centers of Christianity to Asia, Africa, and Latin America, so did Luke write about the passing of the center from Jerusalem to Antioch, and about Paul’s passing over to Macedonia. (Gonzalez, 4-5)

Reversal is a central theme of Luke—Acts, and this too is of particular interest to us today. A grand reversal is part of Luke’s geopolitical narrative. In a world where all power and all

important decisions were expected to come from Rome, and within the context of a Judaism centered in Jerusalem, Luke tells a story that begins in Galilee—a marginal land by both Roman and Jewish standards—and then moves on to bring its message and its power first to Jerusalem, and then to Rome itself. Within the context of that geopolitical reversal, Luke offers numerous instances of other reversals no less astonishing. Mary announces this at the very beginning of the Gospel: “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:51b–53). In the parable of the Prodigal, it is the supposedly good son who is left out of the feast, while the prodigal has a banquet celebrated in his honor. Jesus shows particular compassion for those whom his society would consider the worst sinners, and has harsh words for good religious people. The hungry will be filled, and those who weep will laugh; but those who are now full will be hungry, and those who now laugh will weep (6:21, 23; see also 16:19–31). The first shall be last; and the last, first. Things hidden to the wise have been revealed to babes. The greatest is the one who serves. While this great reversal appears also in the other Gospels (for instance, Matt. 21:31) it has particular power in Luke. This is a theme we sometimes like and sometimes detest, usually depending on whether we are the wronged or the wrongdoers. If we feel wronged, we call for reversal. But if others claim we have wronged them, and call for a reversal, we reject their pleas as unjustified, ungrateful, inordinately proud, or even violent. It is at this point that the Gospel of Luke both encourages and confronts us. It encourages us if we seek a just reversal, and it confronts us if we resist it. Luke’s unfinished history includes a grand reversal as a sign of the reign of God, and invites us to consider the reversals that we encounter in our day as possible signs of that reign. (Gonzalez, 5-6)

While the theme of poverty and responsibility toward the poor is central throughout Scripture, and particularly in the Gospels, the Gospel of Luke is noted for its particular emphasis on this theme. Jesus’ calling, according to his reading in the synagogue, is to announce “good news to the poor.” The word “poor”—*ptōchos*—appears repeatedly in Luke’s Gospel (4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 18:22; 19:8; 21:3). (Gonzalez, 7)

Throughout the world, our age is characterized by the emergence of women claiming their right to be protagonists of their own lives. This takes many different forms in various cultures, but even so is a universal phenomenon, often resisted by those who would keep women “in their place.” Unfortunately, in the face of this struggle many Christians claim the Bible as a source of opposition to the hopes and aspirations of women—in the church as well as in society at large. Here again the Gospel of Luke is particularly relevant to our time. Women have a significant role both in Luke’s Gospel and in Acts—which, given the conventions of the time, may well be seen as one more instance of the great reversal. In the Gospel, the first person to hear the good news of the birth of the Messiah is a woman; and the first people to hear the good news of his resurrection are also women. Luke is the only Gospel writer who informs us that the early Jesus movement was financed by women (8:1–3). In the first chapter of the Gospel, Mary and Elizabeth are much more important than Joseph and Zechariah. Acts begins with the story of Pentecost, in which women as well as men receive the Spirit and announce the gospel. In Acts Priscilla is normally named before her husband Aquila, and Lydia is one of Paul’s main

supporters. Throughout the Gospel, Luke often couples a story or a parable about a man with one about a woman. In 2:25–38 it is Simeon and Anna. In 4:31–39 Jesus heals first a man and then a woman (Peter’s mother-in-law). In 8:26–56 once again Jesus heals a man and a woman. The parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10 is followed by the visit to Mary and Martha. In 13:18–21 someone (apparently a man) plants a mustard seed, and a woman adds some yeast to the dough. In 15:1–10 a shepherd loses a sheep, and a woman loses a coin. There are so many such pairings that it is difficult to imagine that they are not done on purpose. (Gonzalez, 8)

There can be little doubt that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit will be a central issue in our century as it has never been before. While many of the more traditional churches are losing membership, and some even seem to have lost hope, vibrant and growing churches throughout the world stress the work of the Spirit in their midst. Luke–Acts stresses the role of the Holy Spirit, both in the life of Jesus and in the life of the early church. There are seventeen references to the Spirit in the Gospel of Luke, while there are six in Mark and twelve in Matthew. And the main protagonist of the book of Acts is not any of the apostles but the Spirit, who is mentioned no less than fifty-seven times. This has led some to declare that Acts is the Gospel of the Spirit. Significantly, early in Luke Jesus’ mission is based on the scriptural declaration, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (4:18), while Acts practically opens with Jesus’ promise that the disciples would receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and the fulfillment of that promise at Pentecost. We study Luke because, through the agency of that same Holy Spirit whose work and power Luke emphasizes, his Gospel becomes God’s Word to us, leading and accompanying us as we seek to join Jesus in the great reversal he announces and brings about. (Gonzalez, 10)

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