

The Gospels and Christian Life in History and Practice

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CHAPTER ONE



Introduction: Good News Everywhere

Imagine with us an early Christian builder leaving his birthplace, Berytus (modern Beirut), to follow the Roman roads to Rome, the center of empire, where he will help beautify the public buildings with marble. Our Christian, named Theodore (“gift of God”) is an expert in building in marble, and Rome has been intent in the last hundred years to make the city sparkle with the beauty of marble facing in order to display not only Rome’s wealth but also her splendor and power. Theodore has been a Christian now for twenty years and is proud to say whenever he can witness to another, “I am a Christian” (Christianus sum), a phrase later often repeated by the Christian martyrs before their accusers, but which Theodore uses as a marker of his true identity.

As he walks along the roads the Romans built for their armies, Theodore encounters many different kinds of Christians. Many of them seem very strange to his way of thinking about Christianity, but to him, as long as they can say “Christianus sum” that is all that matters to him. Passing through Antioch, Theodore, a Gentile Christian, encounters many Jewish Christians who still observe Jewish customs and who simultaneously honor Jesus as the Son of God. Their weekly Eucharist seems more like a Passover meal, the Jewish festival meal that commemorates the liberation of the Jews from Egyptian servitude. These Antiochian Christians celebrate their “passover” into eternal life through Jesus’s death and resurrection at a passover meal with wine, lamb, flat unleavened bread, and herbs of all sorts. Theodore considers how these Christians seem to have held onto their old roots in their observance.

At a village in Syria, Theodore encounters yet a different Eucharist. Entering the village, he finds that the men and the women of the village do not marry, but remain virgins for life after their baptism. They proclaim proudly “I am a Christian” and “We are a Christian community.” Their challenging way of life is symbolized by the humble

Eucharist they celebrate every day with bread and water, since wine is forbidden to those dedicated to God. Theodore wonders at their ability to live so harsh a life filled with such intense prayer.

Theodore walks to Byzantium (Constantinople, now Istanbul in Turkey) where he will pick up the Egnatia Road, the famous Roman road that traverses Greece, Macedonia, and Albania and connects with the road to Rome. Here those who say “I am a Christian” seem far wealthier and worldly. They have large homes in which to gather and lavish communal meals on the Lord’s Day. They chant the psalms with strange melodies, the men chanting the first verse and the women chanting the second. Their leaders wear rich clothing befitting Roman senators as they preside at the worship service, and there are many deacons who serve them at the table both for the Eucharist and for the festive meal that follows.

Walking the Egnatia Road, he reaches Philippi, a city that Paul had visited a few years before and where he founded a Christian church. There those who say “I am a Christian” seem to be very dignified and wealthy. They are proud of their contribution to Paul’s ministry and they use their wealth to help others in their Christian path. They offer to give Theodore work there for him to live with them and adorn their city, but Theodore was called to Rome. Theodore loved their Eucharist: a rich and sweet bread is offered and a fine wine mixed with water. Their Eucharist is celebrated in the morning, and they gather at night for singing psalms and hymns and for a festive love-feast open to all Christians. After eating well, and sleeping better, Theodore leaves the Philippian Christians and moves on.

Arriving at Thessalonika, Theodore encounters yet a different group of people who say “I am a Christian.” These Thessalonian Christians expect the end of the world at any time. They watch and wait for the time when Christ will appear in the heavens. Their eucharistic meal is one of anticipation of the end-times, the heavenly feast at which Christ will preside after he returns to judge the world, and it is a meal filled with judgment of the evildoers and praise of the sanctified. Their wine and bread at the Eucharist mark the very blood and body of Christ, the body that was sacrificed for them and preserves them as safe and sanctified until the end-times. Theodore, who believes that the end-times are far off (else why would he go to Rome to build majestic buildings?), finds the Thessalonians too intense for his taste. He is eager to move on.

Theodore travels next to Lychnidos (modern Ohrid in Macedonia) where he finds many shepherds who say, “I am a Christian.” Theodore was thrilled to be in the rocky and high mountains among so many humble people. Living on the outskirts of town, these Christians gather weekly for the Sunday Eucharist in the evening. After reading parts of the Bible and singing psalms, their leader offers a crusty bread, cheese, and olives for their Eucharist, a feast that anticipates the wonderful feast when the Great Shepherd Jesus will gather people from the whole world to the heavenly banquet and they will no longer be shepherds but the Lord’s sheep. Theodore loves their understand-

ing of themselves as Christians and longs to stay with them for a while, but his journey is soon coming to a close and he presses on.

Stopping briefly at Claudiana (modern Peqin in Albania), Theodore seeks out the Christians there. He finds very poor people living in small mud homes clustered on the outskirts of the village. Their leader welcomes Theodore as if he were Christ himself and asks him if he were a prophet carrying the words of the Lord, but Theodore admits that he is simply a Christian worker going to find work in the empire's great city. Their leader gives thanks in a Eucharist of bread and fish, and having fed Theodore with the presence of the risen Jesus in their midst, they send him on to Rome.

When Theodore finally arrives in Rome, he is amazed where he hears of Christians. Some are Roman nobles who gather at the grand mansions of the rich and celebrate the Eucharist as he saw it at Byzantium, with all the trappings of Roman wealth and privilege. Others are communities of freedmen, meeting in the apartment buildings called "insulae" and celebrating the Eucharist with humble, coarse bread and inexpensive wine. Some are communities of those who were friends of the apostle Paul and they celebrated the Eucharist in which the presence of Jesus was made known among very diverse people, rich and poor, young and old, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. Theodore chooses this Pauline community to attend the Eucharist. He is overjoyed at the spirit that permeates their meeting, and he is well-fed at the meal that follows.

Theodore reflects on the many different ways that Christians lived their lives under the singular banner "I am a Christian." At times it was difficult for him to understand the ways his fellow Christians lived and it made him feel uncomfortable: some never married and never drank wine; others were rich, many were poor; some were shepherds and others city leaders; some celebrated their Eucharist with bread and wine, others with cheese, olives, and fish. But somehow at its core it was all the same thing: people following Jesus as their Lord and following the way of life that Jesus taught in whatever part of the world in which they lived.

Our imaginary traveler Theodore encountered many different expressions of Christian living as he crossed the Roman Empire from east toward the west to Rome, the center of the empire. We used the example of the different ways of celebrating the Eucharist as a point of comparison and to show the great diversity of practice that marked Christians throughout the earliest centuries of Christian expansion and formation. We know it is shocking to think of such diversity in early Christianity, because we all seem to assume that Christianity started as something unified and cohesive and diversity crept in later. But that is not really the case. Diversity in Christianity preceded the uniform way it became generations later. Think of early Christianity in the first few centuries of its existence as a huge kaleidoscope refracting one stream of light through a prism that makes many different shapes and colors appear. That is what Theodore encountered: Jesus Christ refracted through many different communities, people, parts of the empire, expectations, and understanding. Their kaleidoscopic perspectives found expression in the various ways they celebrated the Eucharist—in that sacred meal different theologies, social organization, models of church leadership, ethics, values, and understanding of the “good news of Jesus Christ” found concrete expression.

Each of the communities that Theodore encountered was very different from one another. This great diversity is the hallmark of earliest Christianity. The question that has fascinated us and propelled us to write this book is “How were individual people trained as Christians in these diverse communities?” We wanted to understand the processes that communities created to make a Christian woman or man capable of living in their communities. What did they need to know? What practices were central to the community’s life? What understanding of Jesus did the community hold? What attitudes did each community express about who should lead them and how that leadership should be honored by their members? Who should eat with the community? Who should be included in the ritual life of the community and what understanding should they have of the rituals the community performed? How did the community understand the Christian values and mores that held their community together? What was the community’s attitude toward wealth, social status, ethnicity, gender, other Christian communities, and the wider world in which they lived out their Christian life?

These are all questions of formation, the processes that communities employ to integrate new members into their lives and to empower their members to participate fully in the community’s life. Every community, both then and now, has such systems of formation in operation, but they are not always made explicit. In order to function as a fully empowered member of a community, a person needs to be initiated into a particular way of living, and formation provides that initiation. Certainly in the writing of the four gospels we study in this

book, the authors, whoever they were, did not address the question of formation directly, so it demands that we tease out those formative practices from their finished books. So we turned our minds and attention to exploring the systems of formation that animated the communities that produced the four canonical gospels, Mark, Matthew, Luke/Acts, and John. In other words, we read each of the gospels as a manual, a written resource, for the formation of each of the different communities that produced it.

This book is about those concrete expressions of the life that early Christians lived. It is a book about the way Christians lived and integrated into their lives the way they thought, read scriptures, prayed, ate, lived together in community, and formed their communities of faith. It is a book that explores the diversity of Christian formation in the four different places where the gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John) were produced to help the people in their communities to live their lives saying, “I am a Christian.”

An Overview of Christian Literature

To make sense of the great diversity of Christian expressions throughout the Roman Empire, our imaginary traveler Theodore would probably have had to take a course in early Christian literature to explain all the differences. It is no different for us. The gospels were written in a particular time in the history of the Christian religion, and we need to understand both what went before their composition and what followed. (All the gospels were written in the Roman Empire, so we use the term “Roman” to refer to all the people who lived in the Roman Empire, not simply to those who lived in Rome.) So we will begin our journey through the gospels with a brief overview of the earliest Christian writings in the first two centuries of the Christian religion.

We start with Jesus who lived from about 4 BCE until around 29 CE. Jesus was a Jew who lived in Palestine, which then was a Roman province. He is remembered as announcing the reign of God, first in this outlying province and extending over all the world. We have no evidence of Jesus traveling farther afield into the Roman Empire. Jesus did not write anything. Later Christians portray him as primarily teaching orally and performing miraculous deeds, but all these traditions were written down much later—at the earliest about forty years after Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection, when Mark wrote his gospel. Jesus was in all likelihood bilingual, speaking the native Aramaic of Palestine and also speaking Greek, which was the common language of all peoples in the eastern Roman Empire from the time of Alexander the Great onward. Only a few traditions record Jesus speaking Aramaic; most of the traditions of Jesus passed down to future generations preserve his sayings and deeds in the Greek language, and so we assume that Jesus was indeed bilingual. That bilingualism

suggests that Jesus probably extended his initial teaching and deeds to include the Roman dominators of his time, or at least that his teaching and deeds very quickly took root in the Roman context. There were many Jews in the time of Jesus who were fully bilingual, and so Jesus was not unusual in that respect. But we must remember that we have little that we can directly connect to the historical person Jesus; most of the information about him comes from later times, after years of oral transmission of his sayings and deeds.

The first period of Christian writing begins with the letters of Paul. Paul, an apostle of Jesus who did not know him when Jesus was alive, received a vision of Jesus around 35 CE—a vision that changed his life and started him on his way to proclaiming Jesus as the inaugurator of a new age. In this new age, God would graft the Gentiles (non-Jews living in the vast Roman Empire) onto the branch of Israel and they would become coheirs with Israel in the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he tells the story of his life in the church, relates that he spent a few years (probably 35–38 CE) in Arabia preaching the gospel, the announcement of the new age inaugurated by Jesus (Galatians 1:17). In 48 CE, roughly thirteen years after his vision of Jesus, Paul met in Jerusalem with known associates of Jesus during his lifetime: Peter, James, and John. This Jerusalem meeting, as Paul recounts it in the first chapter of Galatians, was a stormy meeting with lots of suspicion about Paul and his mission to the Gentiles and genuine conflict about whether the movement Jesus began really applied to anyone beyond the Jews. In the end, the Jerusalem Christian leaders approved of Paul's mission to the Romans. This was an important moment for Paul and for Christianity, because Paul began planting churches throughout the region in Asia Minor and on the Greek peninsula. But the relationship between Paul and these leaders was always a stormy one, because even after this Jerusalem meeting, Paul reports that he had an altercation with Peter around 48 or 49 CE in Antioch, when Peter refused to eat with non-Jews in a community Paul was nurturing (Galatians 2:11–12). Paul's churches, mostly urban, took deep root, and his mission was a very successful one.

In the process of planting his churches and nurturing the Christian communities in this vast region of the world, Paul wrote letters addressing issues that arose after he planted the church. Paul's earliest letter, written about 50 CE, is to the church in Thessalonika, a major Roman city on the Greek peninsula. Paul wrote his last letter, to the Romans, in about 58 CE, so that the roughly eight-year period of his letter writing came at the end of his ministry of proclaiming the gospel. In these years, he wrote a number of letters to the Corinthian churches, as well as those in Galatia in Asia Minor, Philippi in Greece, Thessalonika in Macedonia, and a letter to a friend about a servant named Philemon. The letter became Paul's primary means of staying in touch with his communities and of providing continued leadership to the churches he

founded as they struggled to live out their new lives in the new age Jesus's death and resurrection inaugurated. The tradition holds that Paul was arrested, tried, and sent to Rome where he was martyred about 60 CE.

While Paul engaged in his mission, that is during this first Christian period, ranging roughly from the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus until the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, people began to collect the sayings of Jesus and to create catalogs of his deeds. These collections probably reflect the formative practices and interests of the people who gathered them. Sources that the later gospels used seem to indicate that, prior to the gospels' composition, there were already oral and written sources that circulated among the various and diverse Christian communities. These communities used those early sources to support and form their communities. The later Gospel of Thomas, for example, collected sayings of Jesus, some of which have been argued to be the very words of the historical Jesus. There also seems to have been collections of stories about Jesus's miraculous healing of the sick and raising of the dead. These collections, which were very fluid and easily added to by later followers of Jesus who began to speak and to act in the way Jesus did during his lifetime, continued long after the first gospel was written, but the heyday of gathering them took place in these thirty years or so from the crucifixion of Jesus and the composition of the first gospel. In that same time period, we have only the letters of Paul to document the growth and expansion of the religious movement Jesus began.

Paul's visit to the Christian leaders in Jerusalem preceded a serious Jewish uprising in Palestine that began in 66. In that year, fighting erupted in Palestine that aimed to free the Jews from Roman domination. In 67, the emperor Nero appointed Vespasian, a general who was soon to become emperor, to suppress the Jewish revolt. In 69, the Roman army proclaimed Vespasian emperor while in Palestine, and he left Palestine for Rome to take up his rule as Nero's successor, appointing Titus, his son, to continue the Jewish war in 69. In 70, Titus destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and took the spoils of the Temple as well as many Jewish slaves to Rome. This failed Jewish revolt had serious consequences for both Jews and Christians. Judaism, now without a temple in which to offer the required sacrifices and without a center for the faith, had to find a new road. Any hope of keeping Christianity closely tied to Jerusalem and Palestine, as the Jerusalem leaders who met with Paul earlier had hoped, died with the destruction of the Temple. Both Judaism and Christianity had to find new directions for their movements. After the destruction of the Temple, what we now call Rabbinic Judaism (about which we will speak later in this book) began to mold Israelite religion into the form which we know as Judaism today.

Following this Jewish uprising, the period of Paul's letter writing, and the collection of traditions about Jesus (whether they came from Jesus or from his

followers), we begin the period of the writing of the gospels (68 CE until about 110). We do not actually know the names of the people who wrote the gospels. Early in Christian history, traditions attached names from among the known associates of Jesus to the gospels. That later attribution to a known associate is why the gospels are always “the gospel according to” Mark, Matthew, Luke, or John, and students of the New Testament simply refer to them by their traditional attributions. So Mark wrote the first gospel in Rome around 68 CE. Matthew wrote around 80 CE. Luke wrote his first volume, which we call his gospel, around 90, and John wrote his around 110. The four gospels in the New Testament were written during a roughly forty-year period. The time of Jesus and the time of the gospels were separated by a serious military conflict and a tumultuous period of religious redefinition. In many respects, the gospels reflect various responses to this problem of redefinition, and they reflect the new and various ways that Christian communities found to understand Jesus, themselves, and the new way of living Jesus announced. The formative practices shifted and changed as the political, religious, and social environment changed over time.

During this same period we have letters written by followers of Paul in his name, extending the ministry of Paul to other communities after his death. The letter written pseudonymously, that is under the name of Paul, to the Colossians was written in 80, while the pseudonymous letter to the Ephesians was written around 95 CE. Both the later Pauline communities and the communities that produced the gospels were struggling to find their way, to articulate their new way of living in a decidedly Roman context, and to find ways of incorporating new members in a time of redefinition and discovery.

That period of redefinition and discovery, however, did not end with the books that we now have in our New Testament. There were many other Christian writings that emerged in the beginning of the second century, following the writing of the Gospel of John. We have the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of sayings of Jesus, published around 110 CE. We also have the letters of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch written at the same time. Christian novels, called the “apocryphal acts of the apostles,” were composed during the second century. These novels describe the sayings and miraculous deeds of various apostles (Peter, Paul, Thecla, Thomas, Andrew, and Phillip among others) as they took the Christian religion to the far reaches of the Roman Empire and beyond, as far as India. Christians also began to speculate about the infancy of Jesus and his family life, the years before the beginning of his public ministry. We have infancy gospels attributed to James, Thomas, and Matthew, which all explore the young years of the God-man Jesus, information not contained in any of the gospels we now have in our New Testament. And there were many other kinds of gospels: the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Secret Sayings of James, the Gospel of Judas, and others, which explored the various postresurrection appearances of

Jesus and the teaching that he continued to provide Christians long after his embodied life on earth. Christians were prolific writers whose imaginations and interests seemed only to grow over the years. And, each of these gospels, whether in the New Testament or not, expresses different formative practices, different systems of formation.

It was at the end of the second century that the books we now have in the New Testament were beginning to take shape as we know them. From among these various and diverse sources, Christian leaders began to decide which books were the most basic for all Christians to read and revere. Four gospels were selected from the array of options (Mark, Matthew, Luke/Acts, and John), as well as the authentic letters of Paul, and other letters written under Paul's, James's, and Peter's names. The book of Revelation was slower in being accepted, but in the end it was included among those books that would constitute the New Testament. Although the process of creating a canon of the Bible is a complex one that we will not explore here, we can safely say that the process of forming the canon also reflects a concern for Christian formation. The bishops of the church from the second through the fourth centuries wanted to create a body of literature that would form communities in specific ways around correlative traditions about Jesus. Even though the four canonical gospels differ greatly from one another, they were forged into a cohesive story that every Christian community could employ as the basis for their lives. At the same time the bishops also wanted to rule out other formative practices that they found problematic. Some gospels, such as those of Thomas and Mary, were found to form people in ways the bishops found objectionable, so they were not included in the New Testament. It was this process of formation that guided the bishops in their decisions about the canon of the New Testament.

This book, however, only deals with the formation of the four gospels included in the New Testament. From this brief overview, it is evident that these gospels were composed under very different and often conflicted circumstances. They reflect the creative energies of people and communities across the Roman Empire as they sought to understand Jesus, the reign of God that Jesus announced, the new age that Paul preached, and the new way of life to which they were called to live out their faith. It is to those gospels that we now turn.

Reading Jesus, Reading Gospels

In our times, readers go to the New Testament to find out about Jesus. Readers want information about Jesus because they believe in him, or are curious about what he taught, or are a person of another religion wanting to understand the faith of colleagues or friends. Modern readers assume that the proper place to find information about Jesus is the Bible, specifically the New Testament, yet more

specifically, the gospels. This has not always been the case, though. In the Middle Ages, people went to the Bible to learn about the moral and spiritual messages hidden in the text of the Bible: they knew about Jesus through the liturgical cycle of the church year (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, for example), through stories told in preaching and in the art that adorned their churches, through chancel plays that dramatized stories from the Bible, and through the monks and nuns who taught them the faith. During the Reformation, theologians went to the Bible to learn about justification by faith and to counter theologies that stressed the more Catholic emphasis on works: they knew about Jesus through preaching and education. Even today, people often look to the Bible to “prove” what they already believe, whether that is about the justice of feeding the poor or the wisdom of respecting the environment. Each generation uses the Bible in different ways to gain the knowledge and information they need to live their lives.

In the early days of the church, however, before there was a New Testament or even gospels, people learned about Jesus and the Empire of God (a term we consider a more accurate rendition of the familiar “Kingdom of God”) about which Jesus preached in different ways. Most often, people heard about Jesus’s Empire of God from wandering prophets and teachers who moved from village to village and from town to town in order to spread the news about it. Some very few of these wanderers might have actually known Jesus in person, but most of them probably only had a visionary experience of Jesus that propelled them to begin telling the story of Jesus, and the Empire of God that Jesus proclaimed. In fact, *most* of the early participants in Jesus’s Empire of God were probably this visionary type.

The apostle Paul, whose writings make up a significant part of the New Testament, stands as the best example of this sort of wandering announcer of the divine Empire who did not know Jesus in person, but who had a vision of Jesus after Jesus’s resurrection. Paul moved from city to city, founding communities of those who entered the new life God opened through Jesus Christ, nurturing them through letters, and continuing to connect with them through various visitors and colleagues. After the wanderers like Paul did their work, there were probably also local leaders, both women and men, who kept information about Jesus and the Empire of God in order to teach others, to lead worship, and to train new generations in the Christian way of life. Before there were written gospels, people relied upon information communicated orally for their knowledge of the Empire of God that Jesus proclaimed. Eventually Christians would begin to write down these oral traditions, but at least for the first thirty or forty years the participants in the Empire relied upon these wandering prophets to bring and to produce for them the words of Jesus about the Empire of God, a process that continued in Christian books not included in the New Testament for at least another century.

So what were these formative visionary experiences? What did they see that propelled them into the Empire of God? What they saw was a divinely inspired revelation of a new way to live organized around a different way of understanding God. In the resurrected Jesus, the holy man whose death God made effective for salvation by raising him again to life, they saw the reality of the Empire that God was in the act of creating among both Jews and the other people of the Roman Empire. They knew the Empire of God was a reality because Jesus was crucified and died, but then God raised him from the dead to continue the miraculous work of the Empire of God among both Jews and others. For these visionaries, both itinerant and stable communities, God was not far-off, distant, vaguely related to the fate of the people living in the repressive Roman Empire. God was present, active, engaged, and putting in place a new world order that centered on God as the emperor of the world and Jesus as God's earthly representative. Jesus's ministry, death, and especially his resurrection, pointed to this new Empire. Jesus did not point to himself as the center of his work, but to the Empire of God that was breaking into the world. Jesus was the messenger of a divine, glorious Empire, albeit a very important messenger. In his mission, Jesus initiated the Empire, but during his lifetime and especially in his postdeath appearances Jesus authorized and empowered women and men to continue building that new divine Empire until the entire world was under divine authority. The wandering prophets and the local leaders such as teachers, bishops, and deacons were those people who had experienced the empowerment from Jesus and who continued Jesus's work for generations following Jesus's death.

Although it seems pretty strange to us today, the earliest participants in the movement begun by Jesus to live in the Empire of God were not so much interested in Jesus as they were in the Empire Jesus announced. We, of course, find Jesus infinitely interesting, but the early followers of the divine Empire were more interested in the Empire and the way to live in it than about real, hard facts about Jesus. Paul, for example, actually tells us very little about the person of Jesus: he writes that Jesus was born of a woman (that is, that he was a real human being, and not a phantasm of some sort), born a Jew (Galatians 4:4; Romans 1:5 and 9:4), suffered, died, and was resurrected (Romans 4:24), and then appeared to many people at one time (1 Corinthians 15:5). That is all that mattered to Paul about the person of Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus were important to him, but not the manner of his death nor the manner of his resurrection. Paul was not even interested in what Jesus said or taught, but just the fact that God had raised him from the dead in order to announce the new Empire of God and to build a new world order based in God's Spirit. What was important to Paul and to other early participants in the divine Empire was the new way of living that Jesus instigated and the door to that Empire that Jesus opened to both the Jews and others.

As time wore on, stories about the Empire that Jesus told, or more accurately that Jesus inspired people under the power of the Spirit to tell, began to be repeated over and over again in different contexts. Certainly some of the words spoken in Jesus's name by these emissaries of the Empire of God had actually been spoken by Jesus; they were his very words. But many of the things attributed to Jesus actually came from these authorized people and wandering prophets, the bearers of the news of the divine Empire. They spoke to people in Jesus's name, with Jesus's authority, with Jesus's Spirit within them. Their words came directly from Jesus in a different way, not from the historical figure, but from the divine inspiration emerging from the movement begun by his presence. But the source of the sayings about Jesus did not matter to the early participants in the movement Jesus inaugurated. Jesus was Jesus no matter how he was made present: either through words preserved in his memory; or words produced by prophets who in turn created words of Jesus to accommodate new circumstances not addressed by Jesus himself; or whether through a kind of thinking that brought Jesus's mind to bear on new situations. Ultimately all the teachings came from God, through Jesus, to the world—whether by Jesus's direct speech, or by speech inspired by a vision of Jesus to inaugurate the Empire of God, or proclaimed by Paul, or even refracted and rewritten by the later gospel writers. The presence of God's Empire was what really mattered.

Not everyone heard the story about the Empire of God in the same way, however. These early participants in the Empire Jesus preached, especially in the long period of oral transmission, lived in vastly different communities and contexts and heard the message in different ways. Some communities, like the Thessalonians to whom Paul wrote, heard the message about the Empire of God as something happening immediately. These Thessalonians assumed they were living in the end-times when Jesus would come down from the sky and bring judgment to the world. They waited eagerly for this immediate second coming. These are called "apocalyptic Christians," because they awaited daily the final apocalypse that would bring the Empire of God into physical reality.

Other people during the period of oral transmission heard the Empire of God inaugurated by Jesus as God sending yet another sage, a speaker of divine wisdom. We read in the Israelite scriptural books *Wisdom of Solomon* (chapters 6 through 10) and *Proverbs* (chapter 8) that God sends God's divine mind down to each generation to instruct them in God's law, in the way that God would have God's people live and relate not only to each other but also to those outside Israel. The sage, coming to each generation, carries God's wisdom and interprets it for the people. Many participants in Jesus's Empire of God thought of the Empire as embodying a new wisdom, a new way of living, a new instruction from God about how to conduct one's personal and corporate lives. Many participants considered Jesus to be this Wisdom of God, the Word of God made

flesh as John's gospel calls him (John 1:14), this conveyor of the divine mind to the people. Since parables and other wisdom sayings were produced both by Jesus and by those Jesus empowered in later generations, this interpretation of Jesus's status as the Wisdom of God made perfect sense. These participants in the Empire of God might be called the "wisdom followers" and they were not necessarily completely distinct from the apocalyptic. In other words, participants might have multiple lenses through which to understand the Empire and the role of Jesus in inaugurating the Empire.

Yet another group of these early participants in the Empire of God heard the message of the divine Empire through the filter of healing. Jesus and his followers were known for their healing of the sick without asking for payment (expecting payment was common in the ancient medical professions). People interpreted miraculous healing as a sign of God's presence, or for a Roman, as a sign of an intervening divine power. In an age when medicine was expensive and mostly reserved for those who had financial means, these healing miracles spoke loudly to the common people. That Jesus healed, and that participants in the Empire of God healed others, spoke loudly of the power and energy of the divine Empire. Jews had traditions from the prophets like Elisha and Elijah who healed the sick, so when they heard of the healing miracles of Jesus and his followers, they interpreted those miracles within the context of the prophetic healing in their scripture. The Jewish lens correlated the Empire's healing to the prophetic tradition. Likewise, Romans and Greeks had traditions about the god Aesclepius who could heal the sick with great power, and so when they heard the stories of healing miracles by Jesus and his followers, they correlated them to the god's healing power and authority. Both heard the stories of healing miracles, but each interpreted them from within their own cultural frame.

In this pre-gospel early period, there were also participants in Jesus's Empire of God who had a more school-like perspective. These junior scholars took the wisdom sayings of Jesus and elaborated them with stories that showed how these stories could apply to different circumstances. The process of elaborating sayings formed an important part of the education of the young, so it is logical that these more educated people would use their familiar techniques on the sayings they had received—sayings either directly from Jesus or indirectly from Jesus through other empowered emissaries. The test of the veracity of these elaborated stories rested on the perceived accuracy of the context of the story to the life and times of Jesus and his earliest participants in the Empire. If the story sounded plausibly like Jesus would have acted and spoken, then the story was true for those hearers. Hearers deemed the elaboration true if the story about Jesus or his followers correlated to their understanding of Jesus and the Empire of God. These elaborated stories are called "pronouncement stories" (or *chreiai*

in Greek). These participants in Jesus's Empire of God worked with the sayings so that they made sense to their communities.

Another important lens for both Jesus and the Empire of God demands mention: the Israelite scriptures. Roman and Jewish Christians (then as now) turned to the Israelite scriptures as an important and formative source for what God was doing in their midst through Jesus. The Psalms of David in particular became a constant motif not only on the lips of Jesus and the early participants in the Empire of God, but these psalms were also supplemented with the writings of the Israelite prophets, stories about Abraham and his covenant with God, Jonah and the whale, stories about Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea to let the Israelites pass through on dry land. Christians wove these and many other references into their understanding of Jesus and the Empire so that the story of Jesus, the significance of the Empire, and the early work of the church became one interwoven fabric.

Although oral teaching continued for more than two centuries following the death of Jesus, during the heyday of oral traditions (roughly 30–70 CE), some of these stories and traditions about Jesus and the participants in the Empire of God began to be collected. Some folks began to collect stories about Jesus's and his followers' miraculous healing of the sick. Jewish hearers would mold these stories to fit the way Elisha and Elijah healed, while Romans might tell the stories in the same way that Aesclepius healed. Either way, the stories of miraculous healing began to be written down in collections of healing stories.

Still other communities and individuals began collecting sayings spoken by the person or in a vision of Jesus as the sayings of a sage (a wise man). These collections of the sayings of the wise-man Jesus were very popular, because they were the most familiar way for a teacher to teach new followers. In 1945 in Egypt the Gospel of Thomas was discovered and this gospel consists of 114 sayings of Jesus without any stories attached. The sayings begin with "Jesus said" and then a series of sayings and parables, most of which are familiar to us from the New Testament gospels follows. So, we have examples of these sorts of collections, and we know that Matthew and Luke used yet another collection for the composition of their gospels.

Still other communities and individuals began to elaborate these collected sayings into stories that showed the way Jesus and the early participants in the Empire of God applied their knowledge and engaged with other schools of religious and philosophical thought. These expanded and contextualized sayings began the process of putting the words and deeds of Jesus and those engaged in the Empire of God into narrative form. Early on Christians began weaving stories and sayings together, presumably to remember them and to arrange them to make the biggest impact on their hearers. These early narratives probably served to help form their communities.

And many early participants in the Empire began to collect stories and references from the Israelite scriptures that seemed to connect with their experience of the Empire of God. Some of these collections of scriptural references related to Jesus, like the Suffering Servant poems of the prophet Isaiah (chapter 42); still others related to miraculous events from the Psalms, and from Wisdom. These collections of references helped the participants in the Empire of God to understand how their experiences related to the past deeds of God among God's people. These collections emerged from a kind of meditation on their current experience of Jesus's Empire against the background of their knowledge of the Israelite scriptures.

So now we have two different kinds of material that were available to later participants in the Empire of God. One kind of material related to the elements of the life of Jesus for whom Paul is the best early recorder. These elements included the information that Jesus was born of a woman, that he was born a Jew, that he had a meal with his followers on the night before he was handed over to trial (1 Corinthians 10 and 13), that he was crucified, died, resurrected, and appeared to many people at one time. Later Christians also had this information about Jesus, the one who inaugurated the Empire of God, for their use as they lived out the Empire of God in their own contexts. The information in their writings is sketchy about the details of Jesus's life, perhaps because people simply were not interested in those details. Later (probably beginning around 65 CE, or roughly forty years after the death of Jesus), people wondered about the announcer of the Empire of God and focused on Jesus as the central voice of that Empire, but early on, there was little interest in the details of Jesus's life and ministry.

Later Christians began to write their gospels, nearly forty (the Gospel of Mark) to seventy (the Gospel of John) years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and they used a second kind of source material to relate to the elements for the construction of their gospels. Here the collections of miracles, sayings, pronouncement stories, the Israelite scriptures, and the letters of Paul form the earliest written sources for later writers. Mark, in fact, used all of these sources in composing his gospel. And after Mark's gospel circulated widely, Matthew and Luke used Mark's gospel as a source, in addition to the sources Mark himself had used. We will return, later in this introduction, to explain this process more fully.

The Function and Context of the Written Gospels

So if early participants in the Empire of God got their information about Jesus and the Empire of God from these sources, then why would they write gospels? What purpose did the written gospels serve in a context where oral traditions

(both those stemming from Jesus and from those who had a vision of Jesus) formed the primary means of communicating information about the Empire and the person who inaugurated it? This is where our expectations about the gospels differ from early Christian expectations. Whereas we go to the gospels as a primary means of information about Jesus, early Christians used the gospels as means of forming their communities in the particular way of living in the Empire of God appropriate to their circumstances. We go to the gospels to find out *what* should be believed, while the early Christians developed the gospels to figure out *how* they should *live* in their particular Christian community, to *understand* the Empire of God from their particular community's perspective, and to *interpret* the significance of Jesus who inaugurated the Empire as Jesus is to be understood in their own communities. Communities produced the gospels to help them train their own and future generations in a particular way of living, understanding God, and making sense of Jesus's role in the Empire of God. In this way, the writing process itself became a formative process, and the gospels became formative documents.

To understand the difference between how we approach the gospel and how the early church approached the gospel, we need carefully to attend to the chronology. But we will begin with a correlative situation that will help explain the difference. The American civil rights movement centers in the mind of most twenty-first century Americans on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968). King served as the central spokesman for the civil rights movement at a crucial point in its history and his magnetic personality dramatized the African-American struggle for equal rights. But the history of the civil rights movement extends further back into American history. At one level, it began even before the American Civil War with the movement to abolish slavery. The later nineteenth century also witnessed the growth of the suffrage movement to give equal voting rights to women. In the twentieth century, however, the civil rights movement extended outward to include the work of many other people and organizations that had worked for many years for the civil rights of minority and African-American communities. Some examples include: the executive order of July 26, 1948, integrating the Armed Forces; the May 17, 1954, Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, that ruled racially segregated schools unconstitutional; the December 1, 1955, refusal of NAACP member Rosa Parks to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus for a white person; the 1957 founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; the federal intervention that same year by President Eisenhower forcing the Little Rock, Arkansas, Central High School to allow nine black students to matriculate; the formation in 1966 by Stokely Carmichael and others of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; the organization of the Black Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers; and many other people and

organizations working toward civil rights for African-Americans. But for most Americans the real story of civil rights focuses on Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech during the March on Washington in 1963. From that speech onward, the civil rights movement merged with the life and death of Martin Luther King, who was assassinated in 1968. The story of American civil rights can certainly be told from the perspective alone of Martin Luther King's work, life, and martyrdom, and that story would tell the big picture of the struggle for equal rights for minority populations in the United States. That story remains a true and powerful story, but in telling that story other elements of the civil rights movement, equally important in the history, have been eclipsed. The large story of Martin Luther King overshadows the story of other important people and events in the struggle for equal rights. These other stories become subsumed under the story about Martin Luther King. The same story takes on different meanings according to how the story is told, who tells the story, the context in which the story is told, and the purpose of the storyteller in telling the story. All the stories relate the same larger story, but they tell it from different perspectives, at different times, and for different purposes. The same has occurred in the collection of materials for the New Testament: a particular story of Jesus has been used as the central focus of a story that had a history before the gospels were written.

So now let's look at the chronology more carefully. Jesus was born around 4 BCE and died in 29 CE; he was born under the emperor Augustus and was condemned and crucified under the emperor Tiberius, who ruled from 14–37 CE. Jesus's birth occurred during a kind of renaissance time for the Roman Empire, when it was at peace, experiencing economic prosperity, and exercising extensive power over a large empire. Jesus was born when the concept of empire took deep and abiding interest, since the imperial period of Roman history began with Caesar Augustus. In an ironic sense, Jesus's and Augustus's empires were born at the same time. Jesus's positing of a new Empire, just as Augustus had, could certainly be interpreted by the Roman authorities as a threat to Roman hegemony, and it was. That threat led to Jesus's crucifixion as the "Emperor of the Judeans," whom the Romans ruled with great force.

Paul received his revelation of Jesus in about 35 CE, began to found communities throughout Greece and Asia Minor for over a decade, and wrote his letters to various Christian communities in the eight years between 50–58 CE, during the last years of the emperor Claudius and the first four of the fifteen-year reign of Nero. These were troubled years for the Christians. Paul seemed constantly to be getting into trouble with political authorities, who apparently attempted to arrest him a number of times, as well as with the Jewish religious authorities who were not pleased with his proselytizing and preaching about Jesus. Nero openly persecuted the Christians and blamed them for burning Rome.

The Roman historian Tacitus even says that Nero used Christians as human candles to provide light for a garden party (*Annals* 15:44). When Paul wrote his letters, the times had changed significantly from the earlier Augustan time of Jesus. The difference in context is noticeable in the letters.

The first gospel, Mark, was composed in 68 during Nero's principate. While Paul wrote at the beginning of Nero's troubling rule for Christians, Mark wrote at the end, when Nero seemed far more volatile and hostile to Christians. The chaos at the end of his regime made the political, social, and religious context perilous for those perceived to be hostile to the Roman people and the emperor. It was not a happy time for Christians, although Christian communities clearly seemed to have grown and developed in these perilous times. But the times demanded caution and, as we will see, Mark's community used great caution and skill in presenting their story about Christianity.

Matthew composed his gospel during the reign of Vespasian (69–79) and his son Titus (79–81). Vespasian was proclaimed emperor in Palestine by his army during the Jewish wars, and it was Titus who, upon Vespasian's return to Rome to become emperor, continued the war, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and brought the spoils of the Temple to Rome in a triumphal entry. Titus's triumph has been memorialized in the famous "Arch of Titus" (built in 81 CE) that celebrates the victory of Rome over the Jews. The Jewish world as Matthew knew it had ended. The Temple was no longer, and the Jewish religious rites that centered on the Temple could no longer be performed. Without the Temple, Judaism as it had been practiced could no longer exist. Therefore Rabbinic Judaism itself came into being as the rabbis attempted to translate Temple practice into daily household practices for Jews, who could no longer fulfill their obligations in the Temple. The rabbis inaugurated a new formation for a challenging time in Jewish history.

Luke composed his gospel, the first book of his two-book project that includes Acts of the Apostles, during the stormy reign of Domitian (81–96), another son of Vespasian. Domitian's response to different ways of living and thinking was execution. He executed philosophers, political opponents, and he persecuted Christians—all out of a sense of maintaining and developing the public moral stature of the Roman people. Although ruthless, he maintained high ideals for the people, while at the same time entertaining a very non-Roman sense of his own superiority that demanded a kind of personal adulation by his people. Luke's gospel reflects the high moral standard set by the emperor.

Luke's second book, Acts of the Apostles, and John's gospel were composed during the reign of Trajan (98–117). These books present two very different perspectives on the organization and theology of the Christian communities. During Trajan's reign, the Romans completely decimated Jerusalem, renaming it *Aelia Capitolina*, and brought to a conclusion the long Jewish Wars. From yet

another part of the Roman Empire, we know more about Christian practices in this period than any other because we have a letter from Pliny, a Roman governor, to Trajan asking what should be done to people professing Christianity in his Roman province. Trajan had outlawed secret organizations, and Christians appeared to Pliny as one such secret organization. Trajan did not advocate the execution of Christians merely for calling themselves Christians, but only if they were recalcitrant and obstructive, when, for example, the Christians refused to offer worship to the emperor. Not necessarily a fun time for Christians! Both the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of John reflect this time of growth and renewal of the Christian faith: Acts develops the apostolic authority of the leaders of Jesus's movement, while John refers back to an earlier model of church organization and revelation with diverse leaders and modes of revelation.

Even this cursory chronological outline within its Roman context shows how important it is to read the New Testament in its historical context in order to understand the message that each piece of literature communicates. The Roman history of this period, like the history of the American civil rights movement in our own times, shifted and changed dramatically over the course of the four decades during which the gospels were written. These dramatic shifts over time meant that the early Christian churches organized themselves and produced their gospels in significantly different times and places over a short period of time from about 68 until 110 CE. There was not a unidimensional Roman Empire against which the Empire of God was articulated, but many different empires over the course of the years. As the context shifted and changed, so did the story about the Christian communities, the Empire of God, and Jesus.

In order of composition (the order we follow in studying the history of Christianity and the history of Christian practice), we begin with Paul's letters written 50–58 CE and we read the gospels as later literature reflecting different and later times (from 68–110 CE). So we begin with wandering prophets carrying the word about the Empire of God, beginning sometime during Jesus's lifetime (about 4 BCE–29 CE) and move toward reading the gospels in their historical contexts. Most modern people, however, read the other way. They begin with the gospels and try to fit the unusual Paul into the picture portrayed by the very different kind of writing in the gospels. They read the gospels first, then Paul; but in contrast the early church collected Paul first, then the gospels into the New Testament. The world of the early Jesus movements and the Empire of God look very different if they are read, chronologically, as following Paul. Not only does the chronological reading show the difference between the gospels and their environments, but it also points up the very great difference between the gospels' pastoral context of Jesus wandering about the Palestinian countryside and the urban and sophisticated churches that Paul founded and to whom he wrote his letters.

The difference between the images of the communities to which Paul wrote and the images of Jesus in the gospels has significant impact on how we read the gospels. If we read the four gospels first, and then read Paul's letters, we have an image of a very simple collection of uneducated people following Jesus and eventually converting the whole Roman Empire in the next few centuries. The story from this perspective focuses on the details of Jesus's life, not on the information about the Empire of God that Jesus proclaimed. It is a pastoral and agrarian movement that began in the countryside and had little to do with city life.

If we read the letters of Paul first and then read the gospels (which were written after Paul), we immediately find ourselves in a sophisticated, reasonably literate, rhetorically knowledgeable urban society brimming with energy about the Empire of God. Paul's letters describe messengers moving from large city to large city in the Roman Empire. Paul himself has a staff to whom he dictates his letters, who prepare the letters for distribution, and collect copies for future reference and use. Paul also connects with a large number of people who have various specific functions within the organization of the churches. Just a cursory reading of Romans 16 tells that story loudly: coworkers, leaders of house churches, other apostles, messengers, friends—all relate as people known to Paul in various cities in the Empire. Any interest in Jesus's life was later satisfied with the composition of the Gospel of Mark (68 CE).

One kind of reading based on the gospels argues for a Palestinian rural origin for Christianity among largely agrarian people; the other, following Paul's letters, argues for a more sophisticated urban and educationally advanced origin for Christianity among mostly urban poor and middle-class people. The one reading focuses upon the Jewish and Israelite context; the other focuses on the Greek and Roman context. Both are present in the New Testament, but how we read it becomes an important lens through which to see the development of Christian practice and formation.

The Synoptic Problem

The lenses become even more complicated when we ask why the four gospels in the New Testament were written the way they were. If, as we argue, earliest Christianity was of the Pauline variety, an urban and urbane movement, why do the gospels portray Jesus as a Palestinian peasant leading a largely rural movement? Why did they write like that at a time when that idyllic, rural story contrasted so much with the life experience of urban Christians often living in dangerous circumstances? These are interesting questions. For a variety of reasons that will be addressed in the chapter on the Gospel of Mark, Mark, the first gospel, created the literary fiction of an idyllic time in the history of the

Empire of God, when Jesus walked around as an itinerant prophet and sage of the new world order. This literary fiction became a literary tradition in the gospels that were written later. Matthew, Luke, and John wrote long after the Romans razed the Jerusalem Temple, an important center of the story about Jesus and the Empire. So Mark created the story line that the other gospels followed. So what is the relationship of Matthew, Luke, and John to Mark. The answer to that question relates to a problem of the literary relationship of the gospels. The later gospels, using Mark's gospel, continued Mark's literary fiction; that is, they are literary dependents of Mark. This leads us to something scholars call "the synoptic problem": why do Mark, Matthew, and Luke read so much alike, even though they were written at different times? We turn to the explanation of that problem now.

New Testament scholars have long known that Mark was the first gospel written. We date Mark to a time before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. When you lay the gospels side by side in order to view them together (a synopsis or a "looking together"), you discover that Matthew and Luke follow Mark's narrative order. Not only do Matthew and Luke follow Mark's order, most of the words in Mark are found word for word in Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke sound like they are telling the same story not because they are independent sources for information about Jesus, but because they use the same source document, the Gospel of Mark, as the basis for their gospels. These three gospels, because they show both narrative and verbal similarities that can readily be seen when they are placed side by side synoptically, are called "the synoptic gospels." What makes the stories of Mark, Matthew, and Luke similar is the fact that two of them (Matthew and Luke) use the other, Mark, as the source for their writing.

But there are also verbal agreements between Matthew and Luke that show that they used another similar source in writing their gospels. These verbal agreements and overlapping stories emerge in the sayings and parables attributed to Jesus. Matthew and Luke seem to have used another similar, if not common, source. The two-source hypothesis, an explanation of the sources used by Matthew and Luke to develop their gospels, argues that in addition to Mark, Matthew and Luke each used a similar collection of the sayings of Jesus (often designated by Q, the first letter of the German word *Quelle*, which means "source") to supplement the narrative they found in Mark. These sayings portray Jesus as a sage, a wise person who brings the mind of God to new generations. Matthew and Luke clearly thought that the story they inherited from their written source, Mark, was not sufficient for their purposes. So Matthew and Luke used two sources: the Gospel of Mark provides the outline; the Sayings Source Q provides additional teaching material to fill out their understanding of the Empire of God through the sayings attributed to Jesus. Recall that we said that

these sayings collections were not the exact words of the historical Jesus alone, but also authorized sayings produced by prophets who interpreted the Empire of God in different contexts and periods of time and who spoke in Jesus's name to distant people.

What is interesting about this use of similar sources is the freedom that each community had in rewriting the story. Matthew and Luke freely used and adapted Mark for their own purposes. They changed his language a bit, adjusted the way Mark presented Jesus, supplemented Mark's short sayings and the small collection of parables (mostly found in chapter 4) with a full-fledged and extensive collection of sayings from another source (the Sayings Source Q), and in many ways changed the story significantly to fit their own communities, interests, and understanding of Jesus and the Empire of God. Once again, it is the differences between the gospels, and not their similarities, that leads the way to understanding the communities that produced, read, and worshipped with these gospels.

John's gospel sticks out as something even more different. John's gospel seems to be aware of the story as Mark, Matthew, and Luke have developed it, but seems resistant, if not hostile, to it. John's gospel changes the order of the Markan narrative, reinterprets the healing miracles as signs of the presence of God in Jesus, elevates minor characters in the synoptic gospels to major roles, and portrays Jesus as giving long and involved revelation speeches to a wide assortment of people both inside Jesus's inner circle of followers and outside to Romans and Jews of all sorts. What enabled John to tell such a different story? Why was it possible for John to be different from the others?

Again, when looking at the differences between the gospels, keen observers note the very different perspectives given to familiar things. Clearly each of the communities that produced these four gospels perceived themselves authorized and empowered to tell the story in a different way. Mark, as the first writer of a gospel, produced a remarkable story about Christian origins that at once was idyllic, rural, mostly uneducated, and only occasionally involved in the cities under Roman rule. We will understand more about Mark's amazing skill in producing this image in the next chapter when we study the first gospel, but in the meantime we simply observe that Mark creates an idealized itinerant rural explanation for Christianity with disciples and followers who seem not to understand what Jesus and the Empire of God is really about.

Mark created the story line. Matthew and Luke, however, inherited that story and began to change it to suit their communities. Matthew builds the story into various educational regimes because Matthew's gospel emerges from a kind of Christian rabbinic school, schools that made it possible for Judaism to exist after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Luke goes even further than Matthew. Luke not only reframes Mark's story by adding long speeches of Jesus

taken from the Sayings Source Q, but Luke adds a whole second book, the Acts of the Apostles, to supplement the gospel. The story of Jesus was not sufficient for Luke to explain Christian origins; he needed to expand the story to include the development of the church. Whereas Matthew takes on a more Jewish flair, Luke/Acts takes on a more Roman persona. John takes yet another perspective. We argue that John does not like the directions that Luke/Acts and Matthew have taken and that John's gospel at once criticizes the state of the church in the first decade of the second century CE, and also returns to an image of the earliest Christian communities as communities of prophets who have visions of Jesus and speak in Jesus's name to the whole world. So John's gospel is a kind of second-century renewal movement going back to a different model of Christian origins and a different understanding of the Empire of God and the church that encapsulates it.

The synoptic problem, the two-source hypothesis, and the uniqueness of the Gospel of John all point to an understanding of Christian empowerment that is central to our understanding of Christian origins. The reason we have four very different gospels that use their sources in unique and diverse ways is that each different community understood themselves as empowered to enact the Empire of God in ways appropriate to their context. Jesus did not proclaim a single Empire of God that was uniform in every context, but he authorized people to enact the Empire of God in whatever way they knew how. Jesus empowered the diversity of expressions of the Empire of God, and the proof of that empowerment rests in the diversity and unique perspectives of each of the gospels found in the New Testament. The diversity and the unique perspectives speak of the rich diversity that lay at the heart of the Empire of God that Jesus inaugurated.

The Gospels and Formation

We argue that the diversity and unique perspectives of each of the gospels relate to their community's systems of formation and religious practices that emerged for their particular location and historical context. Historical context as well as regional differences, as our traveling marble-builder Theodore realized, made possible regional variations that had an important impact on the way Christianity developed. The vastness of the Roman Empire combined with the unique environment of every community's enactment of the Empire of God meant that communities at great distances from one another would not necessarily grow and develop in the same way. Variations and differences would develop in response to each community's history and context. Theodore saw this close at hand. Practices such as the Eucharist or baptism might take on local character and express different aspects of tradition. The outline of the actions (eating or

washing) might be the same, but the manner of performing them, the language used, the associations and interpretative systems would vary greatly. Like the diverse practices, there were different Christologies (understandings of Jesus), different ways of reading scripture, multiple philosophical perspectives, and creative ways of reflecting theologically. Christianity in the Roman Empire began and continued to be a very diverse religion for many centuries.

Another way of describing this diversity emphasizes Jesus's authorization for the enactment of the Empire of God. The gospels, both those found in the New Testament and those other early Christian gospels, describe a community's understanding of the enactment of the Empire of God through their teaching about the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Here, like the relationship of Martin Luther King, Jr., to African American civil rights, Jesus became the occasion for talking about a larger movement as it unfolded in a particular location. Although the gospels talk about Jesus, they are really describing how their communities formed people to live the life Jesus called them to live in the Empire of God. In this sense, the gospels are not about Jesus, but they use Jesus as the occasion for working out their particular theology and practices as a community. Each community seemed to understand themselves as capable and authorized to change written and oral sources to reflect their own lives, needs, understanding, location, culture, religious traditions, sacred texts and events, and historical circumstances. This is what we mean by saying that the gospels are formative texts.

Formation stands at the heart of the production of each of the gospels. The primary function of each of the gospels is not to convey information about Jesus, but to provide a manual for training and enculturation in the practices of Christianity for their particular community's context and needs. Enculturation is the process whereby individuals learn their group's culture through experience, observation, and instruction. The gospels are replete with these: we observe as people experience the Empire through healing, conversation, and confrontation with Jesus. Readers observe how Jesus himself inaugurated and enacted the Empire of God and it serves as a model for them in their own lives. And Jesus gives instruction, lots of instruction, through his sayings, pronouncement stories, and in his martyrdom and resurrection. Teaching pervades the gospels. The gospels are a site for just such enculturation and the differences between gospels show the differences in the communities' systems of enculturation.

The gospels also provide direct training. Throughout the gospels, in the voice and actions of Jesus as well as the other characters narrated, readers receive explicit teaching and learning in living a particular lifestyle. Readers are trained to drop everything about their familiar daily life and follow the way Jesus leads. They receive instruction about how they should live, with whom they should eat, how they need to be cleansed (if at all), what is good action, how they should relate to the poor, how they should take revenge (if at all). In

other words, the gospels provided training for communities in specific actions and practices that defined their communities. It was not the same for each community that produced a gospel, even though there may be some overlap. The same saying can be interpreted in one gospel to mean one thing and applied in another gospel to mean another.

Let us provide one example of this training in a familiar passage from the Lord's Prayer. We would assume that something as important as the Lord's Prayer, which was prayed daily by early Christians, would not reflect regional or contextual differences. But it does. Luke relates the prayer as "forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those indebted to us" (Luke 11:4, our translation) while Matthew has "forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven those indebted to us" (Matthew 6:12). Luke, whose community seems to consist of more wealthy folks, wants to train his people in a spiritual sense: to forgive sins the way they forgive debts. Money is important to his community, so spiritualizing forgiveness "of sins" rather than debts makes sense. Matthew, however, who probably has a more Jewish sense of the Jubilee year, when Jews forgave the debts of those who owed them, trains his community in a Christian version of the Jubilee: God will forgive debts in the same way as those who have forgiven debt in the Jubilee year. Money, here, is not as important as the process of continuing a valued Jewish practice of forgiving monetary debt within Matthew's Christian community. Clearly Matthew's and Luke's communities felt that they could change the prayer to reflect their own practices and values regarding forgiveness—and they did. What was important to them was not the exact words that Jesus might have given in the prayer, but the way the practice of forgiveness was to be lived in each community even if that practice did not jibe with other Christian communities.

This is one example of how the gospels use Jesus to provide training to their communities. As you will find in each of the following chapters, there is a rich treasure trove of such practices that provide a wealth of information about Christian formation. The community's gospel encapsulated and embodied the systems of enculturation and training necessary for a person to live authentically in their church.

The formation each gospel presents depends upon the community that produced it. Before the gospels were written, each community had information about the Empire of God and Jesus. This information would have been different for each community depending upon which itinerant prophet had visited them and what traditions they had heard about Jesus. Early Christianity had no means of getting the same information to every corner of the Roman Empire stretching from Persia (modern Iran) to Spain, from Libya in North Africa to Scotland. Each community had their own traditions that they believed were given under the guidance of the Spirit. So each community had a different sense of the way they should enact the Empire of God, a particular sense of the person

of Jesus who announced the Empire, and a different way of making sense of the development of the religion from its earliest days. Those particularities and unique perspectives found in each community were important. A Christian, like our imaginary marble-builder Theodore, could recognize elements of what he knew in other communities, but he also saw significant differences. There was not yet any sense of uniformity to the Christian life. Variety, difference, and regional contexts played an important part in the way the Empire was lived, understood, and communicated.

Each written gospel, then, provides a window into the beliefs and practices of one of those particular communities. Mark's gospel is a window on the Roman church during the chaotic time of the emperor Nero. Matthew provides a window on a community in Antioch of Asia Minor during the reign of the emperor Vespasian and his son Titus, who destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Luke shows us a Roman community somewhere in Asia Minor or Greece during the reign of Domitian. John provides us with information about another Asia Minor community during the reign of the emperor Trajan. Communities produced the gospels at different times and in different places. The gospels reflect these different locales, historical contexts, and understandings of the Empire of God and Jesus's role in it. When reading the gospels, then, it is important not to look for what is the same in each one, but to look for the differences. It is the differences between them that speak loudly about how each community understood themselves, Jesus, and the Empire.

Reading this Book

Our perspective on the gospels, taken from the manner and chronology of their production, differs from the perspective given in a traditional introduction to the New Testament. We look to the formative practices articulated and promulgated by the gospel texts at a later historical time than the lifetime of Jesus. We also highlight the differences between the gospels to mine those differences for an understanding of the kind of Christian community that produced and used the gospel as a formative document in their corporate lives. This means that this book is not a verse-by-verse commentary on the gospels, but rather a study of the formative practices in the gospel.

This book also breaks new ground. It explores the practical theology of the gospels. We study the way the gospel writers read sacred texts of the Israelite scriptures; read other gospels; conformed traditions to the needs of their community; produced social and liturgical structures to sustain their communities; received divine revelation; maintained themselves in an often hostile political and religious environment; lived out the implications of the Empire of God in their particular location and time; and refracted the life, ministry, teaching,

death, and resurrection of Jesus in ways their particular communities could understand. Although we base our study on a thorough engagement with the scholarship on the gospels, we have not attempted to make this a scholarly treatise on the gospels as formative documents. Rather we have laid out a reading of the gospels that honors critical scholarship, but moves in significantly different directions to see how Christians lived out their lives and how the gospels helped them train others to live in their communities. This book is, in that way, a manual for training contemporary readers in ways of understanding ancient Christian practices of formation and training for possible use in their own contexts. We hope other scholars will benefit from our perspective, but our goal is to shift gospel studies away from the strictly historical and exegetical scholarly approach to one that makes gospel formation accessible to a wider audience.

The shift in understanding the gospels emerged from a specific practice we employ in reading the gospels. Rather than breaking down the gospel into its constituent parts (paragraphs, sometimes called “pericopes,” or selected verses), we read the gospel through in its entirety. In reading the gospel straight through from start to finish as a dramatic reading (this is what would have happened in antiquity), the gospel takes on a new meaning because the parts cohere, relate, connect in different ways throughout the reading. In reading the gospels as a whole in one sitting, we observed themes, correlation of stories, and oral structural connections not discerned simply by close reading of small textual units. We recommend a similar practice for those reading this book. Read the gospel aloud at one sitting, preferably even with an audience. It will seem strange at first, because most Christians are accustomed to hearing the gospels in small units read during worship, but the reading of the whole text aloud as a performance opens the text to significantly more subtle and cohesive readings.

The primary questions that emerge from this kind of dramatic reading of the gospels are these: what does the gospel say it means to be a Christian? What are the practices the gospel promulgates to help listeners live the Christian life? In reading the text aloud we literally hear and experience anew the kind of formation that the gospels were intended to produce in the hearer. We begin to sense the way the gospels led their hearers to understand what it meant to be a Christian and what spiritual practices, emotions, social structures, moral values, liturgical expressions, financial arrangements, and social concerns that Christian life demanded. So the practice of reading aloud leads to different questions—in other words the practice of reading the entire text aloud opens the text to new interpretations, and this book is an example of those possible new interpretations.

Although we read the gospels aloud both in their original Greek and in English translations, we understand that our readers will only be using an English translation. Throughout this book we have used primarily the Roman Catholic *New American Bible*. We chose that translation because we consider it

a fine translation, because we agree with the way that it renders the Greek text faithfully in English, and because it is not the familiar sounding text of other translations that normally might be used in classroom and study. It is important to remember that you are reading a translation. In English, the translation evens out the text so that it all sounds the same. A translation cannot capture the fact that Mark sounds more like a truck driver speaking Greek, or Luke speaks in elegant and upper-class Greek, that Matthew sounds more like a New York rabbi, or that John writes in a kind of New Age seductive Greek. These nuances cannot be rendered in English, but they are essential to understanding the text. So keep in mind as you read the text that under it are dialectical nuances that you cannot hear in English.

Four chapters of our book take up the gospels. We also provide a “portal” chapter for each gospel, an entry point of information we think you need to understand the gospel itself. We introduce each portal with a fictional dramatization of some early Christian, Roman, or Jewish situation likely to occur at the time of the composition of the gospel. In Mark we introduce you to a Roman miracle-working philosopher named Apollonius, in Matthew to a philosophical community, in Luke/Acts to a Roman letter writer, and in John to the *Didache*, a late-first/early-second-century book that describes the work of early prophets. The portals describe important information necessary for reading the gospel as a formative document.

Each gospel chapter begins with a reference to popular culture (*The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central, the films *The Matrix* and *Almost Famous*, and the television program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*). These popular cultural events elucidate in modern terms aspects of the formative practices we find in the gospels. Then each gospel chapter takes up the formative practices of the community that produced it.

We conclude this book with a chapter that explores the implications of reading the gospels as formative documents for contemporary religious folks. Here we suggest ways of using this study as a means of exploring religious faith not only in Christianity, but in any religious context.

So now, like our wandering builder Theodore with whom we started this chapter, we invite you to wander through the gospels to discover the riches of the different ways of living the Christian faith that they reveal. Like Theodore, you may find yourselves surprised by what you see, sometimes shocked and, we hope, always fascinated by the practices these gospels promulgate.

Questions for Discussion

1. In modern societies, we often experience a dichotomy between urban and rural settings, politics, and culture. A popular narrative fictional arc has a sophisticated urbanite moving to a rural setting. After a series of mishaps, the heroine herself is converted to the habits and norms of her rural neigh-

- bors (see *Sweet Home Alabama* or *New in Town*). Similar urban fantasies about an idyllic rural existence flourished in antiquity. What do you think is the impetus for these fictions? What difference does location make?
2. Whenever we go to see a production of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, we know beforehand that things will turn out badly. In part, this is because we are dealing with a fixed, written text. The earliest Christians did not have such a text in front of them, and they relied on oral—often fluid—traditions about Jesus. What difference would the use of these traditions make in forming Christians who follow Jesus?
 3. We see the gospels as forming Christian identity. How were you formed as a citizen?

Resources for Further Study

There is a difference between the history of Christianity and the history of Christian literature. The early history of Christianity must begin with the construction of the life and mission of Jesus that in turn depends upon reconstruction of the early sayings of Jesus and an imaginative portrayal of the life and deeds of Jesus. For a reading of the sayings of Jesus, see Richard Valantasis, *The New Q: A Fresh Translation with Commentary* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005). John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) portrays the history of the communities organized around the sayings of Jesus. For a portrayal of the early history of Jesus's mission, see Steven J. Patterson, *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1998). The classic work on the historical Jesus is John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991).

The history of Christian literature, however, begins with the letters of Paul. Our introduction to the gospels takes very seriously the chronological priority of Paul. For an introduction to Christian literature that takes a strictly historical and chronological development beginning with Paul, see *The Chalice Introduction to the New Testament*, ed. Dennis E. Smith (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004) and David L. Barr, *New Testament Story: An Introduction*, third edition (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning, 2002). For a critical introduction to the New Testament that recognizes the priority of Paul and yet starts with the gospels, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, fourth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). A still useful, but older history of Christian literature and the Jewish and Christian backgrounds may be found in Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982) and his *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982).

Helmut Koester's *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) is a comprehensive analysis of the history of the canonical and noncanonical gospels. Lawrence M. Wills's *The Quest of the Historical Gospel: Mark, John, and the Origins of the Gospel Genre* (New York: Routledge, 1997) studies the way the genre of the gospel developed. See also Pheme Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007).

On the synoptic problem and the methods of interpreting it, see E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989). Any of the introductions to the New Testament listed above will provide a thorough analysis of the problems presented by the similarities and dissimilarities of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

Walter Bauer was the first and most influential scholar to argue for the original and early diversity of early Christianity. In his *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), Bauer argues that early Christianity teemed with diverse ways of living and thinking and only later did a uniform and orthodox Christianity emerge. We find the same teeming diversity in the formation of the gospels themselves.

The literature on Paul is enormous. On the relationship of Paul to Roman philosophy, see Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000) as well as Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Pam Eisenbaum's work on Paul is significant; see her *Invitation to Romans: A Participant Book* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006) and her forthcoming *Paul Was Not a Christian* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009). For an intriguing new reading of Paul that emphasizes his rhetorical skill, see Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Paul: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

The fascinating history and process of delineating the canon of the New Testament is explored by Lee M. McDonald who edited the papers in *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002). The classic work on the formation of the Christian scriptures is Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

The question of formation is central to our argument in this book, and we are dependent upon the work of one of our coauthors, Richard Valantasis, for understanding the practices that made communities work and incorporated new members into them. His essays on asceticism, the ancient word for formation, may be found in *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2008). See also his *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century: A Semiotic Study of the Guide-disciple Relationship in Christianity, Neoplatonism, Hermetism, and Gnosticism*, *Harvard Dissertations in Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress,

1991), as well as his *The Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Since religious practice forms such an important part of our reading of the gospels, see also his edited volume of religious texts in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

For those students intrigued by the differences in the Lord's Prayer and who want to study further, see Nicholas Ayo, *The Lord's Prayer: A Survey Theological and Literary* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992). An older but very interesting reading of the Lord's Prayer may be found in Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1967).