



# JESUS

A BRIEF HISTORY

W. BARNES  
TATUM

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# Jesus: A Brief History

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# Jesus

*A Brief History*

W. Barnes Tatum



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# Preface and Acknowledgments

Much of my classroom teaching and most of my professional writing have been related to that historical figure named Jesus whose best-known title of honor “Christ” has often functioned in popular usage as his last name: Jesus Christ. The English word “Christ,” of course, comes from the Greek *christos* and translates the Hebrew *mashiah*, or messiah (literally, “anointed one”). Within ancient Israel, the designation honored the reigning king as God’s anointed, but after the Babylonian exile it could be used to honor any expected redeemer figure, whether royal or otherwise.

That Jesus would be remembered as the Christ represents something of an irony since the earliest written narratives about his life – the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke – often indicate Jesus’ reluctance to use or to accept this complimentary designation. But it is this title of honor that underlies the name of the religion that traces its beginnings to Jesus: Christianity. This title also underlies the name of the adherents of this religion even today: Christians.

Recent decades have witnessed a phenomenal renewal of interest in the question of what Jesus was like as a historical figure. However, my “brief” history does not represent another biography about Jesus. It is not another attempt to reconstruct historically Jesus’ life within its first-century setting. I am much more audacious and foolhardy than that! I envision this relatively small book to provide a readable account of how Jesus and his story

have been received over the past two millennia – especially by those who confess him to be the Christ. This brief history constitutes in its own abbreviated, highly selective, way a “reception” history. I trace how Jesus, a Galilean Jew, born when ancient Rome ruled the Mediterranean world – including the Hellenized eastern sector – had come to be received as the Christ by more than 2 billion believers around the globe by the first decade of the twenty-first century. I situate my story of Jesus’ reception within the framework of a brief prologue and a briefer epilogue, and I narrate the story in seven chapters.

The chapters themselves generally follow a chronological sequence. Chapter 1 surveys the diverse ways Jesus was viewed in the years of the Christian movement before Constantine (first to fourth centuries). Chapter 2 describes the debates about Jesus that resulted in his being defined as one person of the divine Trinity, with two natures, both divine and human – doctrines that remain foundational for Christian orthodoxy (fourth and fifth centuries). Chapter 3 highlights the many institutional and cultural expressions of this orthodox understanding of Jesus within Christianity during the Middle Ages (from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries). Chapter 4 delineates three cultural and ecclesiastical challenges to this orthodox understanding of Jesus – the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment (since the fifteenth century). Chapter 5 provides an overview of the new historical consciousness and the resulting quest for the historical Jesus (since the eighteenth century). Chapter 6 considers the diverse ways in which Jesus has been received as the Christ, and otherwise, in the modern and increasingly postmodern world – with a focus on recent special-interest theologies (since the eighteenth century). Chapter 7 identifies the ongoing relationship of Jesus to other religions of the world (since the first century).

The recurring questions presupposed by my version of the Jesus story are those of traditional theology: Who was he (Christology)? What did he do (soteriology)? But the answers to these questions are grounded in a response to a third question: Whose was he (contextualization)? Where appropriate, consideration of Jesus’ reception will be supported not only by ancient

texts, creeds, and theological treatises, but by liturgy and practice and by the arts – visual and dramatic.

I am indebted to the staff of Blackwell Publishing, now Wiley-Blackwell, who guided this project into print. I am especially grateful to Andrew Humphries, who first approached me about my undertaking mission impossible and who later met with me during the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) meetings in Edinburgh, in Washington, DC, in San Diego, California, and – along the way – over lunch with Linda and myself near Carfax in Oxford. Other contributors to the production process have included Annette Abel, Charlotte Frost, and Janet Moth.

As a faculty member in a Methodist-affiliated, liberal arts college in the United States, I have had opportunities both to teach a broad range of courses in religion and to teach collaboratively with faculty from other academic disciplines. My presentation herein has been strengthened by my participation with students and faculty in these settings, whether apparent or not. I also wish to thank others at Greensboro College for their continued professional support. These include Craven E. Williams, President; Paul L. Leslie, Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty; Michael Simmons and Virginia R. Hunt, Reference Librarians; Cathy Vail, Proctor Hall Secretary; Daniel Chambers, Information Technology Assistant; and The Royce and Jane Reynolds Endowment Fund for Faculty Development.

I am appreciative of encouragement and support from fellow academics who have been involved in the development and the refinement of this writing exercise. These include Mahlon Smith, a long-time friend and fellow participant in the Jesus Seminar now actively retired from the faculty at Rutgers University; Chris Frilingos, a once-upon-a-time student in my classes at Greensboro College and now a member of the religious studies faculty at Michigan State University; and Richard Ascough of the religious studies faculty at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, who graciously agreed to have at least a three-time go at my emerging manuscript. April L. Najjaj of the history faculty at Greensboro College also read portions of the manuscript.

Once again, my colleagues Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, of the Greensboro College religion faculty, and Walter Beale, of the English faculty at our neighboring institution, the University of North Carolina Greensboro, have provided helpful comments by reading chapters of the manuscript in progress. As I like to say, GC is the older institution (chartered 1838); but UNCG is the larger of the two (current enrollment around 17,000).

I also wish to acknowledge my having reworked material for Chapters 5 and 6 in this volume that originally appeared in my *In Quest of Jesus*, published in a revised and expanded edition by Abingdon Press (1999), and in the two editions of my *Jesus at the Movies* published by Polebridge Press (1997 and 2004).

Then, above all, and especially in this undertaking, Linda my spousal partner has been supportive in ways that defy explanation. Her considerable theological sensitivity and literary acumen are evident in all that I have written well.

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## *Prologue*

# Jesus, a Jew from Galilee

Jesus was a Jew. He hailed from that northern area of the land of Israel known as Galilee. This claim about Jesus' identity and place appears obvious from even the most casual and uncritical reading of the earliest written narratives about his life – the familiar gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

These four gospels identify Jesus as a Galilean and point to Nazareth as his home village, although Matthew and Luke place his birth in Bethlehem of Judea. Matthew and Luke also provide Jesus with family genealogies indicating descent from King David; and the author of Luke further underscores Jesus' Jewishness by including a notation of his circumcision on the eighth day.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke have come to be known as the "Synoptic" Gospels because they together ("syn-") view ("optic") the ministry and message of Jesus. When Jesus in these gospels becomes a public figure, after his baptism and his calling of twelve disciples, he confines his "kingdom" activities of teaching in parables and healing the sick primarily to Galilee. Only occasionally do Jesus and his disciples undertake forays beyond Galilee – northwestward toward Tyre and Sidon, northward into the environs of Caesarea Philippi, and eastward beyond the Sea of Galilee. These three gospels describe only one journey of Jesus – from Galilee to Judea and the holy city of Jerusalem.

However, the Gospel of John identifies several journeys of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem over at least a three-year period (based on



the number of Passovers cited). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' message does not center on the "kingdom of God" nor does he speak in parables. Instead, Jesus himself constitutes the center of his own message as he punctuates long discourses with striking self-referential sayings introduced by the turn of phrase used by God in the Jewish scriptures, "I am ..." (compare "I am the LORD your God," Exod. 20:2, with "I am the resurrection and the life," John 11:25).

All four of these narrative gospels conclude with accounts introduced by Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on an ass, although Matthew has him riding two animals. The following sequence of events encompasses Jesus' final meal with his followers, his subsequent arrest, his legal hearings before the Jewish authorities and the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, his execution by crucifixion, and his burial in a tomb. And so this Jew from Galilee dies on a Roman cross in Judea outside Jerusalem. But the gospel accounts themselves end with stories about an empty tomb and about Jesus' after-death appearances – stories about Israel's God having resurrected Jesus from death.

Historians today usually circumscribe the life of Jesus with such dates as 4 BC–AD 30 (or 4 BCE–30 CE). This method of numbering years from the date of Jesus' birth originated in the sixth century with a Scythian monk who lived and wrote in Rome: Dionysius Exiguus, or Dennis the Little. Thus our contemporary calendar itself serves as a reminder of the influence this Galilean Jew has had on emerging western culture and increasingly on world culture, wherever this calendar is used. But the contradiction of having Jesus born in 4 BC or 4 BCE, four years before his birth, stems from Dennis' miscalculation by at least four years.

What was the world like into which Jesus was born? The Mediterranean world of Jesus' day was culturally complex and represented three principal strata: Jewish, Greek, and Roman.

The Jews traced their descent from antiquity, from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the events centered around the later figure of Moses. The Judaism of Jesus' day, often referred to as Second Temple Judaism, had emerged following the Babylonian exile, 587–539 BCE, after the ruler Cyrus the Persian decreed that the displaced Judeans, or Jews, could return to their homeland and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem dedicated to their God, Yahweh. Many Jews did return, but others did not. The Jewish *diaspora*

(literally, “scattering”) had begun. The temple was rebuilt and established itself as a focal point for Jewish identity at home and abroad – with a hereditary priesthood, the growing importance of the high priest, and a regularized pattern of sacrifices on behalf of God’s people.

Within a century, the priest and scribe named Ezra had returned to the homeland with what would become the Torah, the five books of Moses, written in Hebrew, the ancient language of the Israelite people. Now, with the Torah, a scribal class and synagogues would appear. The Torah was soon complemented by other writings, and Judaism’s scriptures eventually became threefold: Torah (Law); Nebi’im (Prophets); Kethubim (Writings). Thus Israel’s experience of exile and return served as the catalyst for transforming the religion of pre-exilic Israel into post-exilic Judaism.

In 334–333 BCE, Alexander the Great crossed over from Greece into Asia Minor and swiftly conquered the entire Persian empire. Along with Alexander came the Hellenization of the eastern Mediterranean world – the bringing of the Greek language, literature, philosophy, and the arts to the peoples of his subjugated territories. After Alexander’s untimely death in 323 BCE, his empire was divided among his generals, with the Jewish homeland first falling under the aegis of the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt and then under the Seleucid dynasty of Syria.

In the third century BCE, the Torah and other writings of the Jews began to be translated from Hebrew into Greek, probably in Egypt, in Alexandria. But a major crisis occurred when the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, in 167 BCE, adopted a policy aimed at eliminating Judaism: an altar to Zeus was set up in the temple; copies of the Torah were burned; the practice of circumcision was forbidden. In response, a priest, Mattathias the Hasmonean, initiated armed resistance to the Seleucids, and his son Judas (called Maccabeus, “the hammer”) led his people to improbable victories and joyously rededicated the temple to Yahweh in 164 BCE. Judas became the first of the Hasmoneans or Maccabeans to briefly give his people an independent Jewish state in the land of Israel, in 164–163 BCE. This period of Hasmonean rule saw the appearance among the people of Israel of various Jewish sects – including the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. Ironically,

the Hasmoneans precipitated the next major culture shift by establishing a friendship treaty with the ambitious Romans, and eventually invited Roman intervention to settle a dynasty dispute among themselves.

In 63 BCE the Roman general Pompey entered Jerusalem with his legions and profaned the temple itself by allegedly riding his horse into its sacred precincts. Thus began Roman political domination of the Jewish homeland. Rome, in transition from republic to empire, soon replaced the Hasmoneans with a client ruler and dynasty of their own choosing. Herod was named king (40–4 BCE) to be succeeded by his sons, among whom his kingdom was divided three ways. Archelaus became ethnarch over Judea and Samaria (4 BCE–6 CE) with Herod Antipas as tetrarch over Galilee and Perea (4 BCE–39 CE) and with Philip as tetrarch over the territories to the northeast (4 BCE–34 CE). Between the affirmation of Herod the Great as king by the Roman Senate (40 BCE) and the outbreak of the first Jewish revolt against Rome (66–70 CE [some would extend the end date to the fall of Masada in 74 CE]), the Romans had effected a transition from governing the Jews through local vassals to ruling them by Roman administrators. The best-known of these bureaucrats was Pontius Pilate (26–36 CE).

In Rome's political expansion to the east, Rome herself had been Hellenized so that the hyphenated expression Greco-Roman seems quite accurate at the broad cultural level. Although Latin was the language of Rome, Rome used the Greek language administratively in the provinces and territories of the eastern Mediterranean. Rome not only imitated Greek architecture, art, and literature, but adopted and renamed the gods of the Greek pantheon, admired Greek philosophy and literature, and began making claims of divinity for the emperors, recalling a precedent established by Alexander.

Because of the rise of sects within Judaism during the second century BCE, and their continued presence in the first century CE, first-century Judaism has often been described in the plural as Judaisms. Nonetheless, there was a core of beliefs and behaviors that provided Jews with a common identity in contradistinction to non-Jews, or Gentiles. Jews believed in the oneness of God, as

affirmed by the *Shema* (“Hear O Israel . . .,” Deut. 6:4–5). Jews had a strong sense of identity as a people chosen by Yahweh and separated from the nations, as recognized by such practices as male circumcision (Gen. 17:11), sabbath observance (Exod. 20:8 and Deut. 5:12), and dietary restrictions (Lev. 11:1–47). In summary, Jews lived in accordance with God’s commandments mediated through Moses. In the Greco-Roman world, Jews were often called *atheoi* (“atheists”) because of their refusal to honor publicly the Roman gods, and “people haters” (*misanthrōpoi*) because of their ethnocentric practices.

Such was the first-century world inhabited by Jesus, the Galilean Jew, from the village of Nazareth. The recognition of Jesus’ Jewishness can be reinforced by noting three occasions of silence in the four gospels, although arguments from silence can be less than compelling. First, the four gospels report incidental contact of Jesus with Gentiles in the course of his travels, but they contain no references to Jesus’ association with the two major cities of Galilee both of which had been built or rebuilt by Herod Antipas following Hellenistic models: Sepphoris, located only four or so miles from Nazareth, and Tiberias, on the southwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Secondly, the four gospels contain no polemic by Jesus against Greco-Roman gods. His proclamation and teaching of “the kingdom of God,” pervasive in the Synoptic Gospels, presupposes a characteristically Jewish monotheism. The *Shema* itself appears on his lips in Mark (12:29–30). Thirdly, there are no references to Jesus’ belonging to one of the Jewish sects contemporary with him. He was not a Sadducee, not a Pharisee, not an Essene. In this, Jesus differs from Paul, the diaspora Jew, who two decades later identifies himself as a Pharisee in his own words (Phil. 3:5).

We now turn to the story of how Jesus the Galilean Jew has been received over the centuries. We begin with the beginnings – Jesus and Christian beginnings, the period from his life and death to the peace of Constantine in the fourth century.

## Chapter 1

# Jesus and Christian Beginnings (First to Fourth Centuries)

There is no evidence that either Jesus or his disciples wrote anything about him and their shared activities during his lifetime. Even if Jesus' followers had written something, they could not have composed those Jesus books called "gospels." As confessional documents, the four earliest gospels presuppose a "faith perception" that even Jesus' closest associates seemingly lacked until their professed experiences of the living Jesus after his crucifixion and resurrection. Only then did they receive Jesus with conviction as "the messiah" and "the Son of God" and confer on him many other honorific names, and begin proclaiming the message of what God had accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus the Jew belonged to no sect. But after his life, death and resurrection, his movement became a Jewish sect alongside such groups as the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. What distinguished this new community, centered in but probably not confined to Jerusalem, was its commitment to Jesus as God's messiah in fulfillment of promises made of old to Israel. But forty years would pass before Jesus' followers began writing narratives about him, sometime ca. 70 CE. By then, the story of Jesus was no longer confined to the land of Israel. The oral tradition of Jesus' words and deeds was no longer passed on solely in Aramaic, but had been translated into Greek. Just as Jesus came to be called "Christ" so the tellers of his story came to be called "Christians." This first occurred in Syrian Antioch, according to one source

(Acts 11:26). However, the gospels, which narrate Jesus' story, would not represent the earliest writings of the Christian movement.<sup>2</sup>

### *A Strange Case: Paul and his Letters*

Paul, a Jew from the diaspora, possibly from Tarsus in Cilicia, had in all probability not known Jesus during the latter's lifetime. How strange! In fact, Paul had become a persecutor of "the church of God" when he experienced from God a transcendent "revelation of Jesus Christ" and received God's call to announce "good news," not to his own people the Jews but as "an apostle," to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:11–17). There followed three decades of Paul's itinerant activity around the northeastern region of the Mediterranean – from Damascus to Antioch, from Ephesus to Corinth, and finally to Rome, where he was most likely executed during the rule of Nero (mid-60s CE).

Paul's success in creating small communities of believers among the Gentiles necessitated his continuing oversight of these groups, which he exercised through revisits and an extensive correspondence. Thirteen letters attributed to him eventually found their way into the New Testament – nearly half of the writings in the twenty-seven-book collection. Biblical scholarship today considers a core of seven letters, all written in the decade of the 50s CE, as being undisputedly from Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon). Three letters are often disputed (2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians). Three are nearly universally considered not to be by Paul (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus). However, all thirteen can be plotted along a "Pauline trajectory" extending from the 50s CE into the second century. My comments on the letters are here confined primarily to the undisputed seven.

Paul's letters were not written as missionary tracts for unbelievers but as pastoral directives to his own struggling communities, although his letter to the Romans was addressed to a congregation he had neither founded nor yet visited. As a letter of self-introduction, Romans represents the longest, most systematic,

and for later generations theologically the most influential of all his letters. Along the way, many future Christians would be introduced to Jesus through the words of Paul.

Although Paul's correspondence reflects the traditional literary form of Greco-Roman letters, he adapted the form for his apostolic purposes. Paul characteristically greets his recipients with: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He concludes his letters with benedictions that, in one letter, are expressed in a threefold formula: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor. 13:14). Paul's most frequently used titles for Jesus are "Christ" and "Lord." His identification of God as "Father" also serves notice that he understood Jesus to be God's "Son," although he uses this title less frequently (Gal. 1:16). These brief excerpts make the point: Paul does not grapple with the specific issues related to the later debates that resulted in the doctrine of the Trinity, but he certainly has the theological vocabulary: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul's claimed apostolic authority came from the resurrected Christ (Gal. 1:1). His preaching centered on the crucified Jesus (1 Cor. 2:2). His letters presuppose and invoke the crucified and living Christ until he returns (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:51–8). However, Paul learned details about Jesus as a historical figure from others, including Peter, whether in Jerusalem or elsewhere. Jesus was human and a Jew (Rom. 5:15, 9:5). Jesus had been born of a woman under the law (Gal. 4:4). Jesus also had brothers, one of whom was named James (1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19). Presumably, Jesus had twelve disciples (1 Cor. 15:5). On three occasions, Paul indicates knowledge of Jesus' teachings by citing sayings without directly quoting them (1 Cor. 7:10–11, 9:14; 1 Thess. 4:15–17). Paul also reports Jesus' words at the Last Supper over bread and wine – the earliest written account of the communal ritual later known as the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:23–6).

Within Paul's letters are also various expressions of presumably pre-Pauline traditions related to other liturgical practices of the early church. First, there is an invocation in Aramaic, which has been transliterated into Greek letters: *marana tha* "Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor. 16:22) Secondly, there is a confessional formula in

Greek: *kyrios Iēsous*, “Jesus [is] Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9). Thirdly, there is an ancient hymn about Jesus’ humiliation and exaltation, in six stanzas of three lines each, into which Paul has probably inserted at the end of the third stanza these words: “even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6–11). Fourthly, there is a credal formula that Paul had received, expanded, and passed on to the Corinthians identifying what was to him of utmost importance: “that Christ died ... that he was buried ... that he was raised ... that he appeared ...” (1 Cor. 15:3–5).

Paul’s letters give explicit confirmation that he was the authority over the congregations he had called together as “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27). Women play significant roles (Rom. 16:1, 3, 6, etc.). Paul can, and does, order the expulsion of a man for immorality from the community at Corinth (1 Cor. 5:1–8). However, the authority within his congregations appears to be based on a charismatic model of personal gifts rather than on a hierarchical model of specific offices (1 Cor. 12–14). But he does address one letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus ... with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). By the mid-second century, when the three pseudonymous letters of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus were probably written, churches had offices designated as bishops, elders, and deacons with women expressly subordinated (1 Tim. 2:8–3:16; Titus 1:5–9).

### *Anonymous Narratives: Three Gospels and One Sequel*

As we have seen, Paul’s letters grew out of his mission to preach the “good news” about what God the Father was doing through the Lord Jesus Christ. The salvation offered first to the Jews was now available to the Gentiles – to all who receive Jesus Christ by faith. Paul’s mission and message presupposed a Jesus story. But in his occasional writings there are only glimpses of a back story to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

However, with the gospels included in the New Testament, we finally get narratives about Jesus and his story – or stories. Each author uses available tradition, some oral and some written, to fashion a Jesus story appropriate for the interests and needs of



that community. By contrast to the letters of Paul, the canonical gospels are anonymous documents. Not one writer identifies himself by name. The titles by which they are known today were added in the second century when they were collected together, to distinguish them from one another (“according to Mark,” etc.). The chronological parameters of their composition are 65 to 100 CE. Furthermore, the specific places and circumstances of composition are not divulged. These are indeed Jesus-books, with Jesus himself front and center. Implicit in these narrative gospels is the recognition that Jesus beckons the reader through his words and his deeds to journey with him. Nonetheless, like the letters of Paul, the gospels themselves are theological statements. They are narrative theologues. The structure and the content communicate the Christological distinctiveness of each narrative. Structure and content also provide clues about those for whom each gospel was first written.

The Gospel of Mark, the shortest and earliest of the four (according to the dominant view of modern biblical scholarship) focuses on Jesus’ activity as an adult. After baptism and testing, Jesus begins proclaiming the coming kingdom of God and performing mighty works in Galilee (chs. 1–9), followed by a brief journey (ch. 10) that takes him to Jerusalem, where he experiences crucifixion (chs. 11–15). Along the way, there is a discourse of parables in Galilee (ch. 4) and in Jerusalem a discourse of sayings about the end-time (ch. 13). Throughout the gospel, there is an enigmatic secrecy about Jesus’ messianic identity involving his presumed self-designation as “the Son of Man” that extends to the brief resurrection account, which originally ended abruptly with an empty tomb to which post-resurrection appearances were subsequently added (16:1–8, 9–20). Increasingly, Jesus becomes alienated and rejected by family and foe; and he begins talking cryptically to his disciples about his impending death and resurrection (8:31, 9:31, 10:32–4). As Jesus hangs dying on the cross, he cries to God with an exclamation of abandonment (15:34, cf. Ps. 22:1) to which the Roman centurion responds, “Truly, this man was the Son of God” (25:39). As this soldier recognizes, Mark’s Jesus is indeed the Christ, the crucified Christ, the Son of God. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ divine sonship is defined in terms of his obedient suffering and death. Theologically, the Jesus in Mark’s

narrative presentation corresponds closely to the Jesus of Paul's letters, given their shared focus on the crucifixion and resurrection.

On the horizon for the readers of this gospel appear the desecration of the Jerusalem temple (13:14) and the imminence of Jesus' eschatological coming as the "Son of Man" (13:26, cf. Dan. 7:13). This gospel represents a call for its community to follow Jesus unto death with the attendant promise that faithfulness will bring salvation (13:13). The emphasis in the gospel on suffering messiahship and suffering discipleship suggests a work having originated out of a situation of suffering such as occurred during the first Jewish revolt against the Romans and the persecution of Christian believers in the city of Rome by the Emperor Nero during the decade of the 60s.

The Gospel of Matthew derives its narrative framework for the Jesus story from Mark, and Jesus again undertakes only one journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (chs. 19–20). However, there are significant literary additions and modifications. The author of Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy and infancy stories (chs. 1–2) and concludes his gospel with stories related to the resurrection of Jesus (ch. 28). On a mountain in Galilee, Jesus affirms the divine authority given to him, commissions his eleven surviving disciples to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and by teaching them, and finally promises to be with them until the close of the age (28:16–20). Interestingly, the baptism is to be performed with a three-part formula: "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This was the formula that became associated with the baptismal rite by which initiates received Christ. Equally interesting is the subject of the teaching: "all that I have commanded you." The body of the gospel itself has been organized into five blocks of Jesus' teachings, reminiscent of the five books of the Jewish Torah, each with its own theme: the higher righteousness (chs. 5–7); discipleship (ch. 10); secrets of the kingdom (ch. 13; cf. Mark 4); the church (ch. 18); and the end of the age (chs. 24–5; cf. Mark 13). These teachings, especially the so-called Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5–7), became of abiding importance as followers of Jesus acted out their reception of him as the Christ by imitating him – the theme of the *imitatio Christi*.

The Gospel of Matthew recalls Jewish manuals intended for instruction, such as the Manual of Discipline, among the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, or the rabbinic Mishnah, promulgated several decades after the second Jewish revolt against Rome during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian (132–5). I view the Gospel of Matthew as a similar guidebook that gives instruction in Jesus' own words. Themes and emphases in Matthew suggest that this Jesus book was written for a community of Jewish believers in Jesus as the Christ, the teaching Christ, who is also the crucified Son of God (Matt 27:45–54).

The Gospel of Luke also uses the Gospel of Mark as the literary source for its narrative framework and perhaps acknowledges this in the formal prologue (1:1–4). In Luke, Jesus also takes one journey from Galilee to Jerusalem; but it seems that he will never arrive because of the greatly expanded travel narrative (chs. 9–19), seemingly through the territory of Samaria (9:51–6, 10:28–37, 17:11–19). Like Matthew, Luke has also prefaced his story with infancy accounts, although very different traditions (chs. 1–2). Also like Matthew, he has augmented his narrative with resurrection-appearance stories – but with different stories located in and around Jerusalem, not Galilee (ch. 24). Throughout the gospel appear stories and sayings – particularly parables – that indicate Jesus' concern for representatives of the diverse society of his day: not just outcasts (poor people, women, tax collectors, Samaritans), but also insiders (Pharisees) and outsiders (Gentiles). In Luke, Jesus appears as the universal Christ of God (9:20) who has been crucified as an innocent man (23:15–16, 22, 47).

However, this writer does not stop there. Where the first volume ends the second volume begins – with the ascension of Jesus into heaven outside Jerusalem (Luke 24:50–2; Acts 1:1–11). The book of Acts narrates the story of Jesus' subsequent reception, as the proclamation of him as Christ and Lord was carried from the center of the Jewish world to the center of the Gentile world, from Jerusalem (ch. 1) and eventually to Rome (ch. 28). The mission to the Gentiles is anchored in the leadership of the twelve apostles, with Peter running the first leg (chs. 1–12) and Paul receiving the baton for the final, more difficult, leg (chs. 13–28). That which empowers the outreach to Gentiles is that which

provides thematic unity throughout Luke and Acts: the Holy Spirit. (Luke 1:15, 35, 67, 2:26, 3:16, 22, 4:1, 14, 18, 9:20, 23:46; Acts 1:8, 2:4, 10:44, 11:16, 19:6, 28:25). In Acts, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues provide evidence that the recipients have indeed received Jesus.

Both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are addressed to one bearing the Greek name Theophilus (“God-lover”) – whether an individual or any “God-lover,” Jew or Gentile. I view the context of both works to be the Christian mission to Gentiles. They also reflect a political apologetic on behalf of Jesus’ innocence before the governmental authorities and take a swipe at the Jews who harass Paul every step of the way.

Unlike Paul’s writings, these books are not letters. However, within their narratives about Jesus also appears the language evident in the letters of Paul that would be used years later to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### *An Author Called John: A Fourth Gospel, More Letters, and an Apocalypse*

Among the four gospels, the Gospel of John was the last to be written and is the odd gospel out. I have already sketched differences between the earlier Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel. Now I will elaborate more on the distinctiveness of John’s story of Jesus.

First, there is the distinctiveness of John’s theological and chronological framing of the Jesus story. John opens with a prologue whose words recall the opening of the book of Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word ... And the Word became flesh ...” (1:1–18). The pre-existent Word has become incarnate as a human in Jesus; and confirmation that Jesus as a human has died comes from the piercing of his side and the resulting flow of blood and water as he hangs on the cross (19:34). The story of Jesus’ public activity extends over three years insofar as three Passovers are mentioned (2:12, 6:4, 12:1), and Jesus makes at least four trips from Galilee to Jerusalem (chs. 2, 5, 7, 12).

Secondly, John’s characterization of Jesus is distinctive. As the incarnate Word, Jesus talks both publicly and privately about

himself through a series of sayings that begin with “I am ...” (6:35, 48, 8:12, 9:5, 10:7, 11, 14, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1), much like God talks in the Jewish scriptures (Isa. 40–55). These sayings are woven into larger discourses, and the central theme becomes “eternal life” (3:16) or simply “life,” as expressed in the gospel’s statement of purpose (20:30–1). Also, as the incarnate Word, Jesus punctuates his talk with references to God as Father, to himself as the Son, and – in the so-called farewell discourses (chs. 13–17) – to the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete (variously translated into English as “Comforter,” “Counselor,” “Advocate”). Jesus also promises that after his return to the Father, the Holy Spirit will come, which does occur on the evening of the resurrection (20:19–23). By contrast to the eschatological perspectives in the authentic letters of Paul and in the Synoptics, the Gospel of John does not anticipate a future coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The distinctiveness of John’s characterization of Jesus is further thrown into relief with the observation that the Jesus figure in John’s Gospel talks more like the author(s) of the three letters attributed to John, especially 1 John, than he talks like the Jesus of the Synoptics. Furthermore, in spite of great differences between the Gospel of John and the Revelation to John, the latter contains one of the best-known “I am” sayings. Both God and the exalted Jesus declare, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:8 and 22:13). Perhaps the Fourth Gospel, by contrast to the three Synoptics, originated out of the experiences of a charismatic community to whom Jesus as the Word become flesh continued to speak after his exaltation through Christian prophets in the first person just as, in the past, God had spoken through prophets to Israel: “I am ... .” John’s community seems to live at a juncture between its synagogue past (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2) and the threat of those who deny Jesus’ having come in flesh and blood (1 John 4:2–3, 5:6).

The New Testament today includes five writings which bear the name of John: the gospel, three letters, and the book that concludes not only the New Testament but the entire Bible. The book at the end appears to be all about the end: Revelation is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament. Its author has drunk deeply from the well of apocalyptic imagery and symbolism, especially from the books of Daniel and Ezekiel. The book of Revelation