

# Survey of the Bible

## Class 5: Intertestamental Period, pt. 2; NT Intro; Gospels; & Acts

*Paul Burkhart*

### **PART 1: Gospel**

*We believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*

*We believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.*

*He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended into hell.*

*The third day He arose again from the dead.*

*He ascended to heaven*

*and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*

*From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

Even though as Christians, we are entering into "safer" territory--into some of these things that are mentioned in this creed, that we all agree on, and that uniquely mark us as "Christians"--it is important that we still hold these things dear. Because, even though we might be (mostly) getting less "controversial" when it comes to issues of historicity, scholarship, and how we are to view the Scriptures, we are now entering into territory that many Christian disagree on *theologically*. And so, let us enter into this, looking at this creed and reminding ourselves that what is *most* important and *most* central to our identity as Christians is *not* our thoughts about predestination, hell, the Holy Spirit, justification, the end times,

## PART 2: Between the Testaments

### Political History

First, Babylon, then Persia, then Alexander the Great of the Greeks, and then Seleucus (one of Alexander's Generals). One of these Seleucid Generals, trying to reassert his control in Israel, pressed a little too hard and caused the Maccabean revolt leading to Jewish self-rule for a little bit. A civil war broke out among the self-ruling Israelites, and the Roman emperor Pompey was asked to intervene. He did, cleaned house, and decided to move in and make Israel a client-state of Rome. Years later, Julius Caesar and Cleopatra were saved by some Jewish troops led by a general named Antipater. As thanks, Caesar said that the descendants of Antipater would be kings in Israel. This first descendant of Antipater who got to be King was none other than Herod the Great--the Herod referred to in the birth narratives of Jesus. He was very paranoid, violent, and did massive building projects throughout the area, including rebuilding the temple even more.

Eventually, Herod died, and the Romans, not wanting to waste valuable intellectual resources, decided to make Israel an official province of Rome, rather than just a self-ruled client state (even though the leaders to this point had recently been appointed by Rome, they were still Jewish and ruled Israel as an independent entity). They renamed it *Judea*, moved the capitol to Caesarea--away from Jerusalem (this is why there seemed to be so little political oversight over the Jewish leadership at this time).

From here the story becomes the story of three of the sons of Herod. Rome split the area into three separate provinces and gave one to each of Herod's sons.

One son of Herod, **Phillip**, had a relatively uneventful reign. At one point, Jesus travels to minister to Caesarea Philippi (or, "Caesarea of Philip")--the only mention of his territory in the gospels.

**Herod Archelaus** got the area that included Jerusalem and Samaria. He was unnecessarily violent (at one point killing three-thousand Jews in response to one small revolt) and very unpopular. He is referred to in Matthew when Joseph is led to move out of Judea into Galilee out of fear of Archelaus' violence. Eventually, the leaders of the area went to Rome itself

to complain about Archelaus to Rome itself, and they agreed that he was a failure of a ruler. They removed him and replaced him by a series of Rome-appointed governors, including Pontius Pilate.

The last son, **Herod Antipas**, was the leader over Galilee where Jesus grew up, and is simply referred to as Herod in the New Testament. He eventually divorced his wife and married his half-brother's wife. This is the "unlawful marriage" that John the Baptist is said to have forcefully spoken out against and for which he was eventually killed. This is also the Herod that was in Jerusalem during Jesus' trial and crucifixion. When Pilate wanted to pass on the verdict to another, this was the Herod to which he sent Jesus, because he was the ruler over Jesus' hometown. This Herod eventually passed the decision back to Pilate.

## Religious History

### Psalm 137

*By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
How could we sing the LORD’s song  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.  
Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,  
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!”  
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!*

*Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!*

This Psalm encompasses well the trauma that the Israelite people went through. It cannot be overstated how dramatic of a change this was--the end of this Psalm (and its presence in the Psalter with that ending intact) would be evidence enough of the place this sentiment held in the core of Jewish identity. As has been said before, the land, the King, the Prophet, and the Temple were the focal point--not simply of Jewish religion--but of Jewish self-understanding and identity itself.

In a very short amount of time, all of these things has been stripped away and the subsequent history of Israel was marked by flirtations with and hopes that these would be restored. Jewish Kings took the throne, but they "ruled" a fledgling country that still leaned heavily on foreign powers. Prophets spoke, but mostly quoted other prophets--none claiming nor carrying the authoritative voice of the Prophets of old. And the Temple was rebuilt--well, sort of, and using foreign money. Further, most Jews were now spread across the entire known world, and many of them had become racially-mixed.

## **Many questions, many answers**

This caused *many* questions for Jewish identity: What makes a faithful member of the people of God? We're tired of this world as it is, so what happens at the end of history? How do we relate to foreign powers that rule over us? How does God relate to us? How do we relate to God?

When we open up the New Testament, we find that Judaism has split into factions (sort of like denominations), each with their own set of answers to these questions.

*Zealots*: a faithful member of the people of God is someone who fights against every force in the world that stands at odds with the independence and power of God's people. Jews should pay no homage, tribute, or taxes to any foreign ruler. Using any means necessary (usually violence and subversion against those deemed political "enemies"). There was a great emphasis on the responsibility of God's people to act rather than passively waiting for God to do so. Theologically, they were close to the Pharisees.

*Sadducees:* The people of God need to work with the powers that be to peacefully rise into power and influence. Sadducees were influential in the more educated and wealthy parts of society and did not support anything that would try and shake the existing social structure. Theologically, they were very conservative, only accepting the Pentateuch as authoritative, didn't accept the "extra" regulations of the Pharisees, and didn't believe in some sort of ultimate, final Resurrection of God's people. Further, they thought that reality was not structured on the simplistic poles of good/bad, but was rather more on a continuum.

*Essenes:* God is working and moving Fate along. He has predestined all things and is about to judge all the disobedient peoples in a great battle. What we need to do as the people of God is withdraw into communal living, learn to know God best we can, become as obedient and ritually-pure as possible, and wait for this judgment to come. There was an important doctrine of "two kingdoms"--a strict dichotomy of reality in which there was only good/bad, righteousness/evil, and light/darkness. Most scholars believe that the Dead Sea Scroll community were Essenes.

*Pharisees:* An early Jewish historian Josephus describes the Pharisees like this: "The Pharisees are a group of Jews who have the reputation of excelling the rest of their nation in the observance of religion, and as exact exponents of the laws." It was a focus on interpretation of, and adherence to, the Mosaic law that characterized them. They advocated for a view of God's relation to humanity in which God has foreordained all things, but it was absolutely in line with the free will of God's people. They believed in the final bodily Resurrection of God's people, and rewards for right living. They had a well-developed theology of angels and demons, and therefore ascribed to an Essene-like "light and darkness"-sort of structure to reality (this also helps explain why all references to hell by Jesus are spoken of to the Pharisees, who would have held to a view of reality in line with this language). The Pharisees believed that God moved and spoke not only through the written Scriptures, but also the verbal tradition of God's people.

## Scribes, Rabbis, & Synagogues

One of the biggest religious differences seen upon entering the New Testament, is the new prevalence of synagogues and scribes/rabbis (yes, they are the same thing in the New Testament).

Both of these developments came into being during the Babylonian captivity. While in Exile, the Jews needed both a place to gather to worship and pray, and the preservation of their Scriptures (now the only place of God's authority). These gathering places eventually became "synagogues". They eventually had a common liturgy of worship and scripture reading (that, interestingly enough, mirrors many early Christian liturgies and those of today). Synagogues were like "little temples", where God's people could assemble and maintain their identity while in exile.

Also during the Exile, scribes that copied the Law eventually garnered much respect, and eventually were seen not only as *copiers* of the Law, but also *protectors*, *interpreters*, and *teachers* of it. In Jesus' time, these scribes had earned titles like *teacher*, *master*, and *rabbi*. They set up elementary schools for Jewish children, and those brightest students they gathered around themselves as disciples and taught them the knowledge, life, and tradition of God's people.

## The Jews & Rome

Due to the effect of Greek philosophy and the Roman assimilation of it into their own faith and philosophies, the world of first-century Palestine and Rome was *very* similar to our own post-modern context. Philosophy had displaced religion as the primary means of worldview formation. And so, the first century Roman world was a buffet of philosophy and faiths and world views one could try on and discard as they please. Religion and philosophy was very cosmopolitan and most people were willing (and eager, even) to hear about, debate, and discuss the latest religious and philosophical frameworks of the day.

For the most part, ever since the Persian King Cyrus had allowed the Jews to return to their land, the Jews enjoyed a widespread respect of their faith and a freedom to exercise it as they wanted. They were often granted special permission by their ruling kingdoms to be exempt from many requirements placed on other nations and religions to pay certain types of

honors to the ruling nation. For example, under the Romans, the Jews didn't have to place an image of Caesar in the temple, or worship him (an agreement was reached where that would pray Yahweh's blessing on the emperor instead).

Not only did the Jews enjoy political favor for their faith. They were also the focus of cultural intrigue over their religion. Judaism was so dramatically different than every other faith the Roman empire had encountered, and so it was pretty fashionable to have your token "Jew friend" and "discuss" the curious beliefs of this "atheistic faith" (the Romans referred to the Jews as atheists because believing in one god was practically atheism for the time, at least compared to the rampant polytheism that existed at the time). Judaism was similar to the way New Age faiths were during the late 90s-- the "cool, new, exotic religion of the day."

For this reason, there was a whole sect of peoples called "God-Fearers" that were gentiles that had decided to convert to Judaism ideologically, but not culturally. They would do the festivals, pray, go to synagogue, and read the Torah, but they wouldn't get circumcised, keep the dietary laws, dress like Jews, etc. These individual sfeature prominently in the Gospels.

## **PART 3: New Testament Intro**

### **Structure**

Similar to Old Testament:

- Law (Gospels, or "New Law")
- History (Acts)
- Wisdom (Epistles, application of "New Law" to specific aspects of life)
  - Paul's letters: organized largest to smallest
  - Then "general epistles"
- Prophecy (Revelation)

### **Dating**

We'll go into this more later, but there's every indication that even from the earliest days after Jesus' Resurrection (within a decade), there were written and orally-transmitted collections of the sayings of Jesus. These became the sources that form the content of the gospels. So, while the written down

sources of information for the New Testament probably reach even earlier, it is generally agreed the New Testament writings span from around the late 40's C.E. to as late as the first decade of the second-century C.E.

## **PART 4: Gospels**

### **Dating**

One word affects it all. The last word of Acts.

But first, some facts.

It is as close to a scholarly consensus as one can get that Mark was written first, then Matthew, then Luke (although which of those two was next is debated). We also know that Acts is written after Luke. So, if you could pinpoint the date which Acts was written, then you could date the rest of the gospels.

We know Paul was killed while imprisoned in Rome in 66 C.E. by Nero. The books of Acts ends with Paul in prison in Rome, but it says he is preaching the gospel "without hindrance". This causes us to ask a few questions:

- Is the book of Acts being written by Luke before or after Paul's death?
- If after, why does he not mention it if he knew it was to occur?
- If before, then is this the Roman imprisonment in which Paul dies?
- If it is, then why does Acts end on such a cheery note?
- What do we do with the other letters attributed to Paul that would have been written after this point in the story if Paul had, in fact, died during this imprisonment?

This has caused many scholars to believe that Paul actually had *two* Roman imprisonments, the other not being talked about explicitly in the NT (although the more depressing "prison epistles" would have been written during this second imprisonment).

Indeed, early church fathers said that Paul was able to preach the gospel to "the farthest reaches of the West". At the time, this would have been Spain,

a place that Paul, in Romans, said he wants to go to and preach. Early church tradition says he made it there.

So, if Paul died in 66 C.E., and *if* he had much more missionary-ing to do, and *if* Paul hadn't died by the time Luke wrote Acts, then this imprisonment at the end of Acts, and subsequently the writing of Acts itself, would be pretty early.

But, that's a lot of *ifs*, so there is much disagreement about this. Most scholars would say that Acts was written in the mid-80s C.E., meaning that Mark was written around 62 C.E. They would say that Luke knew of Paul's death but was just trying to tell the story of Paul preaching to the ends of the known world, and he didn't want to live on a depressing note.

My personal inclination, though, is to say that Acts was written before Paul's execution in 66 C.E., which would ultimately (following the chain of causation), but the writing of Mark, the first gospel, at around 55 to 60 C.E. The book of Acts doesn't seem to reference or have in its background the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 C.E., Romans are seen overall in a very favorable light. They are depicted as a reasonable people that were receptive to Paul's preaching. This is a hint that the book was written before the first major Roman persecutions in the 60s C.E. And lastly, Acts' ending seems to be raise some obvious questions that wouldn't have taken Luke much effort to answer were he writing this far in the future, the most obvious being, "Well? Did Paul end up preaching the Gospel to the Roman emperor himself?" If so, what did he say? Did Paul get out of prison and do even more miraculous things for the gospel in more unreached parts of the world (which would substantiate Luke's goal in writing even more than his current ending). Early Church Fathers say he did, but Luke ends Acts a bit too early for us to know.

## **The Life of Jesus**

As is known, the Gospels are generally based around a rough chronology of the later years of Jesus. There are many discrepancies in chronology among the gospels, throughout their retelling of the story. This can be explained by differing sources, mistaken historical understandings, and intentional literary creativity. At the very least, though, we can point to a general framework to Jesus' life in which the gospel writers freely and

creatively move. There are several “hooks” upon which the story is hung, albeit within each of these “movements” of Jesus’ life, there is much diversity amongst the gospels:

- Birth, ca. 4 B.C.E. (not in Mark or John)
- Baptism and the beginning of his public ministry, between 26 and 28 C.E.
- A three-year long ministry (well, it's three years in John; there's only one year clearly talked about in the others)
- Jesus travels to Jerusalem, endures a week of dramatic events
- Crucified, buried, raised from the dead three days later
- Teaches for 40 days after his Resurrection (not Mark)
- "Ascends" to heaven (neither Mark nor John have this)

Outside the Gospels, Jesus is spoken of by several sources. Josephus mentions him twice in his history (although part of his description seems to have been edited a little by early Christian). A couple of Roman leaders mention Jesus and the group of people he inspired in some letters they write back to Rome. Some early parchment fragments have been found, mainly in Egypt, that contain some sayings of Jesus that seem to date very early and seem to be in line with the New Testament. And the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of rabbinical writings, has in its court documents a record of Jesus having been killed for claiming to be the Messiah; they say that he was the illegitimate love child of Mary and a person named "Pandera" (which may have been a translation corruption of the word for *virgin*, "parthenos") and that he was a sorcerer who who did mighty and miraculous things, but under the influence of the devil. He learned this skill while in Egypt. He called himself God. He had disciples. He was tried for apostasy and executed.

## Some context

At one time, it was believed by archaeologists that Nazareth didn't even exist because no proof of its existence could be found. This eventually changed, but it's a testament to the "small-ness" from which Jesus came.

Further, Nazareth was a town in a region called Galilee. Galilee was *very* diverse. There were several major trading routes that crossed in the middle of Galilee, bringing *many* different types of people from all nations,

ethnicities, faiths, and philosophies. The religious leaders of Jerusalem often derisively called it "Galilee of the Gentiles" (there were in fact more Gentiles that lived there than Jews). The institutional religious leaders in Jerusalem often criticized Galilean Jews for how easily and how often they allowed "non-Jewish" culture to interact with their own, living at peace with those around them, rather than withdrawing from them.

Galilee seems to have been a rare occurrence where Jews were in the minority, as well as very integrated with Gentiles, and yet they still maintained their distinctive "Jewishness" (as evidenced by the seemingly-frequent journeys Joseph and Mary took to Jerusalem). However comfortable Jesus would have been with non-jews, there was still no question at the end of the day: he was a Jew, through-and-through.

Jesus' family would probably have identified more with the Pharisees when it came to matter of faith. James, Jesus' brother would go on to be a leader of the church in Jerusalem, even long after people like Peter had been driven out in the face of persecution. This implies a level of conservative-ness and traditionalism to this member of Jesus' family that he was still able to maintain some credibility with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. While it may at first seem off-putting to consider that Jesus was himself a Pharisee (due to his non-stop criticism of them), given a little more thought, it might make sense that Jesus would be able to point out the flaws and problems from within the group with which he most identified.

Galilee's diversity no doubt would have had a great effect on Jesus' view of faith in a world bigger than one ethnic group. He would probably have been fluent in three different languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. He would eventually go on to frequently criticize those introverted religious leaders, calling them out for having become too self-absorbed with their now Jewish identity, even at the loss of God Himself.

It's common for us to say that Joseph was a "carpenter" but this word is more accurately seen as something closer to a general contractor or construction worker. At the time that Jesus was growing up, the Romans were redesigning and rebuilding an ancient city called Sepphoris, and this wasn't very far from Nazareth. There would have been lots of demand for those in Joseph's (and presumably Jesus') trade. Galilee's willingness to be cosmopolitan and diverse lent itself well to the rebuilding of a hellenistic

city--even among a population of Jews--further testifying to how comfortable these Jews were around foreigners.

Shortly before Jesus began his public ministry, the city was completed, putting many people out of work, right around the time Jesus would have begun his ministry.

## Some Historical Issues

### *Why were the Gospels written?*

Many assume that they had an specifically “evangelistic” purpose. And on one sense they did (the word “Gospel” and “Evangelistic” are the same in Greek). Two of the Gospels have explicit “purpose statements”. Luke says he wants to write this Gospel to this fellow “Theophilus” so he might have an “orderly account” “so that you can know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed”. John says (in most translations) that he writes so the reader “may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah”. But, this can easily be translated “the you may *continue* believing”, and in this is a hint as to why they were written.

All of the Gospels seem to have been written to *Christians* rather than non-Christians. This “evangelization” then, is not of the “conversion” sort, but of the “discipleship” sort. The Gospel is of infinite value not only to those that do not yet believe, but to those that already do. The Gospels were originally and *primarily* written, it seems, to secure and encourage believers in their newfound faith. And so, as believers, as we go on to read the Gospels, let us not read them primarily as writings for “those people”, but instead as *our* writings--writings *for* us and *to* us. It is from this vantage point that we can use these books rightly to best serve those outside the Church.

### *How were they written?*

There exists as close to a unanimous consensus as one can get among scholars that the gospel of Mark was the first to be written. Of the 611 verses in the book of Mark, 601 appear *verbatim* in the book of Matthew and 40% of the book of Luke consists of what’s called “Markan” material.

Interestingly, though, there is even more material that Luke and Matthew have in, but isn't found in Mark. Therefore, it looks like Luke and the author of Matthew were both looking at another source of material about Jesus that we don't have today. In scholarship, this source is called Q (from the German word for "source". Yeah, scholars are really creative). Also, there are even more parts where it looks like the authors of Luke and Matthew were copying other things and departing from their own normal style. Further, it looks like John was looking at an entirely different set of materials in writing his Gospel.

What this tells us is that there were many accounts of Jesus' life that existed before the gospels. Some of these documents may have been oral, and not written, but regardless, there seems to have been a tradition of Jesus' words and works that stretches much further back than when the Gospels were actually written down.

As said above, the general "movements" of Jesus' life are (mostly) found in common among the gospels, although in each of these "movements" there are many differences, especially chronology.

One dynamic that *is* common throughout all the Gospels, though: conflict with Judaism. In the intervening years before the Gospels were written, much happened in the church, especially as it pertained to Christian relations with the Jews. As time went on, Christians were seem less and less like the "crazy cousins" of the Jewish family of faith, and became more and more a perceived that to the substance of the faith itself. These dynamics are seen in the background of all of the Gospels, as many of the confrontations between the Jewish authorities and Jesus foreshadow conflicts that would later arise. All of the Gospels include Jesus prophesying against the temple and predicting its destruction. Stephen's trial and martyrdom in Acts very much mirrors Christ's own.

### *Who wrote them?*

Concerning authorship, things aren't as clear as they seem. Individual books will be briefly touched upon below, but suffice it to say that all of the Gospel are anonymous, and the ascriptions to certain individuals was something that was added to these books many decades after they were written. Add to that the fact that even these added names don't mean much to us today. We don't know for certain that each of these names refers to

people of the same name in other early church writings, and even if they did, we don't much about them! Also, it should be even more shocking to us that *at least* half of the Gospels (and perhaps all four) were not written by eye-witness to the all-important events they describe.

And so, when it comes to the value and authority of the Gospels, we are simply left with the contents of the books themselves upon which to lean. And ultimately, this is probably a benefit to us. The fact that the early Church, regardless of how certain they were of who wrote these books, still found them authoritative is a testament to the strength and authority inherent to the story itself. The early Church found them of great worth to the Church's life and faith as the people of God. This should be an encouragement to the truth of these events, and remind us that this is not some elaborate hoax invented by ancient, superstitious, hallucinatory individuals suffering from the greatest case of wish-fulfillment history has ever known. These writers wrote truth--*the* truth.

## The Books

One of the most common metaphors used to describe each of the Gospels is that they are different "portraits" of Jesus. They are selective pieces of art that hold beauty and theme over and above chronology or "history" in the very strictest, academic sense. Below, you will find an artist/style that I believe captures the nuances and stylistic differences of each of the Gospels. You may agree or disagree with my assessments, but the hope is that this will still be helpful in highlighting the differences between the gospels.

### Mark:

#### ***The Rembrandt portrait: simple, straightforward realism***

In the only statement that Rembrandt ever made about what he was trying to accomplish in his art, he said he sought "the greatest and most natural movement." This certainly encapsulates Mark as well. The Dutch masters were naturalistic and realist, and yet they were still *artists*, capturing beauty and light and perspective in ways that only the canvas could reflect.

Rembrandt's art (and Mark's Gospel) is full of drama, power, and irony, but in a far more subtle way than the other artists we'll mention below. And this is probably the most important distinctive aspect of Mark's Gospel. It's simple, subtle, and straight-forward, and yet that is there very source of its art and beauty.

### *Content/Style:*

The book is very simple, and is in three main parts: A prologue, Jesus' public ministry, and then Jesus' death. Each of those last two sections have three smaller literary components to it.

The ending of Mark: most of our Bible contain endings for Mark that almost certainly were not original. It is still debated whether the "true" ending we have here is what Mark intended or if the rest of it was lost. Some parts of the book anticipate the Resurrection and even hint at things to be talked about after he is. Still,

### *Background/Purpose:*

- This seems to be the first gospel written. As said above, 601 out of its 611 verses are found *verbatim* in Matthew and half of them are found in Luke. It seems like this was a main source used by Luke and Matthew in the writing of their gospels.
- The earliest church history documents say that Mark was Peter's *hermeneutes*. No one is quite sure what this means, but it has something to do with words. "Interpreter", "scribe", "transcriber", and "translator" are all common ways of understanding this. Either way, from the very beginning of church history, Peter has been closely associated with this book. In my opinion, it would be more accurate to call this "The Gospel of Peter", as it seems to follow Peter and include private discourses that only Peter would have been party to.
- There is a definite emphasis in this book on the dimwittedness of the apostles, the receptivity of the Galileans to Jesus' message, and the stubbornness of the Jewish establishment to accept it. See the "details" of Acts for more on why this might be.

### *Interesting Bits:*

- Mark is famous for his word *euthus* that appears *all over the place* in this gospel. It's usually translated "immediately" or "now". Especially in the greek (but in my opinion it comes through in the English as well), Mark reads *really fast*. It's constantly pushing faster and faster until it gets to the passion week and then that word disappears. Everything slows down and we linger on each part, soaking it in and letting it change us.
- One of the more interesting aspects of this gospel is the abundance of completely unnecessary details throughout. In 6:39, during the account of feeding the five-thousand, it says that the crowds sit on the "green grass". 4:36 makes a point of telling us that when Jesus calmed the sea during a violent storm, "other boats were with" them as well out on the water. 14:66 says that while Jesus was being questioned by the Jewish leaders of the day, Peter was "below in the courtyard" letting us know that this trial occurred on the second floor of a building.

### *Application/Why Would You Go Here?:*

- To get the gritty realism of the story of Jesus. Concerning these events, Mark reads like lost footage, rather than a documentary (similar to Luke) or a movie (like Matthew)
- If you want to read a short gospel without getting bogged down. Mark reads *really fast*.

## **Matthew:**

### ***The Monet portrait: impressionism.***

Matthew is a true work of art. His Gospel is one that is clearly "crafted". When you get up close to it and study its constituent parts, it can become almost "blurry" to us, especially compared to other Gospel "Art"--similar to the works of Monet. Impressionism was marked by a singular focus on light. Impressionists, in their intent, did not paint "objects", "scenes", or "people", but rather the light that came off of them. What this means is that you have many times when an object (like a tree, for example) is painted, and yet you find none of the colors you'd expect to see on this object

(looking at our hypothetical tree, many of Monet's trees don't have any brown in them at all, but rather dots of red, green, blue, and yellow). Similarly, especially from a perspective that is comparing the gospels, if you look at the smaller sections of Matthew, they don't seem to be the most "naturalistic", or "literal" in their chronology, logic, or story. This is because Matthew is especially organized by *theme* and not *chronology*. Therefore, just as in Monet's works, it is best to view Matthew from a few steps back rather than in its smaller parts.

### *Content/Style:*

The book of Matthew is most clearly written towards a Jewish audience. Among the Gospels, he has the greatest number of Old Testament references to substantiate his claim of Jesus as the Son of God. He focuses a lot on the idea of Jesus' life fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. His main point in writing is to show Jewish Christians how Jesus is the Jewish Messiah.

The book of Matthew is a *really, really* odd book. It obviously has a structure and a pattern, but scholars can't figure out what it is. It begins with a Prologue and Introduction, then goes through five cycles of Narrative then Discourse. It then shifts to the Passion Week, Death, Resurrection, and Commission of Jesus. That's all we know. Matthew's story is certainly ordered more topically than chronologically, but there's no consensus as to how each of these parts relate to each other or flow from one another.

### *Background/Purpose:*

- Matthew, more so than Luke, relied heavily on the content of Mark for his gospel. If you were to take all the Mark parts out of Matthew, the book would not make sense.
- Honestly, nobody knows who wrote Matthew. It is unlikely that the *apostle* Matthew wrote this book. There are many reasons why this is the case, but the main one is that when the Gospel of Matthew talks about the calling of Matthew, he uses material he pulled directly from Mark, instead of telling his own perspective. Further, other parts of the story to which the apostle Matthew would have been a witness are also pulled from Mark. It's unclear why an apostle would have relied so heavily on a non-eyewitness account for most of his Gospel. In the end, though, Matthew's name was not attached to the book

(and its title) until the very end of the 2nd-century, and so whether or not he wrote it need not have any significant effect on our theological view of the book or the Bible overall.

- Matthew opens up with a genealogy that begins with Abraham in order to root Jesus' lineage as the promised seed of Abraham through which all the nations of the world will be blessed.
- Though there's a definite focus on Jesus' "Jewishness", there's also a definite theme developed around Jesus' welcoming to non-Jewish peoples, thereby further reinforcing the global implications of the Jewish Messiah as promised to Abraham.

### *Interesting Bits:*

- This Gospel is the only one to use the word "Church". This word, in the Greek, is *ekklesia*, and means "assembly of the called-out ones".
- There are many parts of Matthew that attempt to draw a parallel between Jesus and Moses, not the least of which is the similarity between Jesus' delivery of his own "New Law" in the sermon on the Mount and Mose's delivery of the "Old Law" from Mt. Sinai.
- As you read the book, notice the frequency of things that happen in threes and sevens. It is thought that this was to make it easier for early Christians to memorize parts of the book.
- One of the most famous and odd Old Testament allusions Matthew makes is to Hosea 11:1 which says "out of Egypt I have called my son". Matthew writes of this when Mary and Joseph had to flee Herod the Great by taking themselves and the baby Jesus to Egypt. It seems a little forced and odd if the writer means that Jesus' family was called to Egypt just so that God call them back out and fulfill that prophecy. But it seems that the evangelist is making a much more powerful point by actually saying that *Israel* is now like a *spiritual* Egypt out of which the Messiah is being called, so he might find safety in the *geographical* Egypt. It is more meant to be a statement against the waywardness of Israel than it was some forced attempt at prophecy fulfillment.
- One benefit of Matthew's definite structure is that his Gospel quickly became the most widely read and used of all the Gospels in the early Church. It's structure, simplified content, and ease of memorization lent itself to use in early Christian liturgies.
- We will deal with this more later, but in Matthew 23, Jesus prophesies against the temple, saying it will be destroyed. In Matthew 24, Jesus'

disciples ask him what it will look like when *this* happens. In recent decades, Jesus' response has been taken as if he were talking about the end of the world. This has not been the way this has been interpreted by the vast majority of Church History, nor is it the way that most of the Church today views it.

*Application/Why Would You Go Here?:*

- The main reason one would go here would be to get the greatest picture of continuity between the Old Testament and the New. There's a reason why in every ancient list of the Gospels, this book is always placed first, closest to the Old Testament.
- It's structure allows the reader to more easily see Jesus' teachings on various topics grouped together, so one might see how they inter-relate.
- It's focus is teaching more than story, so if your desire is more for the words of Jesus than the events of his life, this is your book.

## **Luke:**

### ***The Caravaggio portrait: dramatic realism.***

An Italian artist painting in the late 15- and early 16-hundreds, Caravaggio's work is characterized by hyper-realism in form, but dressed in an almost theatrical use of light and darkness, called *chiaroscuro*. Luke's Gospel is very much the same. He was a doctor whose concern was to make an "orderly account" of Jesus' life, and so he tried to put together as straightforward and natural of a story as he could, all while making it dramatically enjoyable. Just like Caravaggio, he emphasizes the dark and the light to the point that it move to the forefront as a character in and of itself. More than the other Gospels, Luke focuses on the extreme darkness of poverty and social injustice, as well as the radical light of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus and the early believers.

### *Content/Style:*

Luke conveniently finds itself organized into five, separate sections:

- Introduction to Jesus & John
- Preparation for Ministry
- Galilean Ministry
- Journey to Jerusalem
- Jesus' time in Jerusalem: his Passion week, Death, Resurrection, Post-Resurrection teaching

Luke is written in some of the finest Greek that is closest to the classical style (most of the rest of the New Testament is written in a more common, everyday version of Greek). Luke was a well-educated “physician” (as Paul calls him) and this Gospel is the most “historical” and chronological of the four. It is well-investigated and well-written. He writes as an investigative journalist, containing many historical references throughout the book, most of which have proved that he was a very competent historian (there have been found some mistakes, though these seem to be simple mistakes and misunderstandings rather than outright lies or “twisting the story”).

### *Background/Purpose:*

- Luke seems to have written this Gospel in two (maybe three) stages. Unlike Matthew, if you take all of the Markan parts out of Luke, the book still very much makes sense, making it look like the first “edition” was written when Luke did not know about the book of Mark or have it in front of him. Later, he ran across Mark and added those parts to his already-existing writing.
- Perhaps at this time, or as a “third edition”, it looks like Chapters 1 and 2--the traditional Christmas story--were added later. Chapter 3 looks like what would normally be a good beginning to a book like Luke, and so it looks like Luke ran across these stories and traditions of John the Baptist's and Jesus' birth later on and added them to his Gospel.
- Luke seems most intent to show how Jesus is the Savior of *all* humanity, not just the Jews (unlike Matthew). His genealogy of Jesus goes all the way back to Adam (rather than simply to some hero of the Jewish faith) and roots us in Jesus' humanity.

- This book is just “Volume 1” of a two-volume work that tries to show how the Christian Church swept the known world. This first volume helps show that by telling us the story of the foundation of the Church: Jesus himself. He emphasizes how Jesus is the fulfillment not only of the Jewish story but of Universal human History.
- Because of the global and societal scope of Luke’s story, there is frequent emphasis on non-Jewish peoples, the poor, and other social justice issues.
- Also because of this emphasis, Luke’s favorite title to use for Jesus is “Son of Man”, not “Son of God”.

### *Interesting Bits:*

- The “three wise men” appear in the book of Luke, but they are not numbered as three, nor are they at the manger. They visit Jesus when he’s two or three years old.
- Luke is the Gospel in which the Holy Spirit makes most of an appearance.
- Luke is also the Gospel of *Joy*. Many stories and parables that end on neutral or negative notes in the other Gospels have very joyful endings in Luke.
- Luke has the most written about the post-Resurrection Jesus.

### *Application/Why Would You Go Here?:*

- If you want a greater emphasis on the story of Jesus more than his teachings, this is it.
- If you want to see the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus.
- If you’re about to read the book of Acts, it is helpful to read Volume 1 first.

## **John:**

### ***The Picasso portrait: cubism***

Contrary to popular belief, Cubism, the movement begun and championed by Picasso, is not *really* "abstract art" (at least in its *purest* form). Ultimately, Cubism is still "representational", because it has an object it is trying to "represent", albeit by "abstracting it" in a cubist perspective. It is a matter of

perspective. Cubism is ultimately trying to capture multiple perspective of an object at once. Recall the heads of the people in Picasso's paintings. They all are shaped similarly, right? They are not simply trying to be weird. Instead, Picasso is trying to capture *both* a profile and a straight-on perspective *at the same time*. This is why it looks like their nose is growing out of the side of their head. What does this have to do with John? Well, similarly, John is writing a "representational" piece about Jesus, but is bringing in perspectives that are vastly different than what could be seen by simply looking straight-on at Jesus. John sets out, in a sense, to capture both a straight-forward account of Jesus and his ministry, while also *equally* emphasizing the "profile" view of Jesus, only seen more clearly as time had gone on.

### *Content/Style:*

The writing of John is far more reflective than other Gospels, with the benefit of hindsight in his portrayal of Jesus. It is very different in content, form, style, and ideology than the other Gospels. The book falls neatly into a few sections:

- Prologue
- The Book of Signs: structured around feasts
- The Book of Glory: private discourses with disciples, prayers, death
- Epilogue: restoration of Peter

In this structure, the story of Lazarus forms the transition point between the book of "signs" and the book of "glory".

There are a series of seven "I am" statements throughout the book, highlighting Jesus' nature and relation to his people. This would hearken John's Jewish readers to God's holy name of "I Am" to Moses from the burning bush.

### *Background/Purpose:*

- Throughout the years, many have treated John as (as Clement of Alexandria put it) a "spiritual" Gospel while the other ones were "physical" Gospels. But this denies the theological nature of the other Gospels while undermining the historical nature of John. True, it is an *interpretive* history, but it's a *history* nonetheless. Looking at the

events that all the Gospels share with each other, it is apparent that John's differences are, at many points, not at all because of ideology, intent, or purpose. It looks like John had access to genuinely different historical sources than did the other Gospels. In fact, it seems very likely that John was entirely ignorant of the other Gospels (or else was *very* intentional not to let them have any effect on his own writing). There are several times, in fact, where John provides us with some more historical details to a particular event than do the other Gospels. From John we find out that some of the disciples of Jesus had been disciples of John the Baptist. We know of several other trips to Jerusalem Jesus took. We find out that Jesus gets on a boat after feeding the 5,000 because the crowd was trying to kidnap him. These and other random facts are offered to us from John and not in the other Gospels, therefore demonstrating an historical nature to John that often goes neglected. To further this point, many of the sayings of Jesus are clearly Greek translation of Aramaic, poetically-structured lines, which very much mirrors all that we know of how Jesus' genuine sayings were delivered. John most certainly seems to care about historical accuracy.

- When it comes to who wrote the book, things are a bit complicated. The author is often identified with a person in the Gospel who is cryptically identified as the "beloved disciple". It is never said directly that he wrote it, nor does it ever say that this is even John. Further, 21:24 is a strange line which seems to imply that this "beloved disciple" may have been the source of much of this information, but wasn't actually the writer of it. Add to that the fact that there were several early church leaders named "John" and the picture gets even murkier.
- The date. Most scholars date John to between 90 to 100 C.E. The main reason for this not only theological (under an assumption that the divinity of Jesus wasn't emphasized like John emphasizes it until later), but also sociological. The other Gospels present the main conflict with Judaism in terms of "Judaism vs. Gentiles" (an ethnic difference), whereas John present the conflict in terms of "Judaism vs. Christianity" (a religious difference). It is thought John was written after Christians were expelled from the synagogues and a prayer was entered into the Jewish liturgy that condemned Christians (although the date of this prayer is debated and may be much later). Regardless, John seems to present a picture of great conflict between the *established religions* of Christianity and Judaism. And

yet, still, many scholars argue for a very early date for John--as early 50 to 60 C.E. (making it one of, if not the first, Gospel written). They argue this on the basis of John's historical reliability (in those few places where it can be verified), its supplement of other historical information as mentioned above, its seeming ignorance of the other gospels, and a re-evaluation of an "evolutionary development" sort-of model for a theology of the divinity of Jesus.

- For what it's worth, my opinion (and the opinion of others) is that John went through two editions. The first edition (mainly consisting of 1:19 through the end of Chapter 20) would have been early and mainly for local, Palestinian Jewish Christians trying to figure out how to understand the hostility to their new faith. The apostle John could have very well written this. The second edition would have been issued later when it was decided the Gospel would be distributed to a wider audience, including Greek Christians. It was at that point that the famous *logos* Prologue was written (the *logos* is a distinctively Greek philosophical idea, while the rest of John is *very* Jewish), the religious setting was updated in light of the new facts (the Judaism/Christianity tensions), and the last chapter was added (to talk about the restoration of Peter and to combat some other rumors that had been traveling around the early Church). This second edition would have been authored under the supervision of the "beloved disciple", but actually written down by some second-generation Christians mentioned in 21:24.

### *Interesting Bits:*

- Whereas in the other Gospels, Jesus is very intentional to hide his messiahship due to fears of being misunderstood as a political rebel, in John he has no qualms with sparring with the religious authorities of his day and flaunting his divinity and messiahship before them.
- In John, Jesus does not teach in parables as in the other Gospels, but rather in extended discourses and teachings.
- The author of John seemed to have a fondness and comfort with Peter enough that he felt free to poke fun at him at several humorous points in the book. After the apostles hear about the Resurrection, the writer reports how he and Peter both ran to the tomb. The writer says, "The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first." Later, in the Epilogue, when the disciples are in a boat fishing and they see Jesus on the shore, it

says that the topless Peter puts all his clothes back on *then* jumps into the water to swim to Jesus. The writer goes on to say, "But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off."

- During John's account of the Last Supper, it is obviously a Passover Meal, except the lamb is never mentioned. It is implied, therefore, that Jesus himself is the lamb.
- This was mentioned when we went through Exodus. If you remember, the top of the Ark of the Covenant, on the Mercy Seat, had two angels at either end looking down to where the blood of the sacrifice would have gone. Similarly, after the Resurrection, when Mary Magdalene peers in the empty tomb, she sees two angels, one sitting on either end of the slab Jesus' body would have been on, looking down to where the blood of the sacrifice had been.

#### *Application/Why Would You Go Here?:*

- Whether or not one prioritizes John's historical nature, throughout history, the book has been turned to for the sheer force of its writing. Reading it speaks very deeply to many, many people. In contemporary Evangelicalism, it is probably the Gospel used most often with those that are not Christians.
- If you need to be encouraged of God's love, power, and his presence in Jesus Christ, read this book.
- Having 21 Chapters, I have often heard people encouraged to simply read one chapter of John-a-day for three weeks if they

## **PART 5: Acts of the Apostles**

### **Acts**

Before we go into the content and story of Acts, there are a few things that need to be said.

First, the book is the second volume of Luke's two-volume work chronicling the birth and early years of the church. Technically, the name of this book is "Acts of the Apostles", and it tells the story of the first major movements of the church into the wider world. It might be more accurate, though, to think of this book as the "Acts of the Holy Spirit" for he plays

more of a prominent role than even the apostles (and, the apostles don't even do *everything* in the book).

Secondly, there's a theological point that needs to be made. Acts depicts an utterly unique time in history. It was a one-time period of transition from Judaism into Christianity, Old Covenant into New, and ethnic people into spiritual. Because of that, there are things that occur in these pages that do not seem to have occurred in the life of the church once that period had passed (and before you assume where I'm going with this, know that I'm not necessarily referring to spiritual gifts--those *are* talked about elsewhere in the life of the established church). What this means is that we should read Acts *descriptively*, not *prescriptively*--indeed, that's the stated intent of Luke's writing: to give an "orderly account" of these things, not to apply it to our lives or establish a systematic theology based on it. It doesn't seem to be the wisest thing, therefore, to build your theology of *anything* if it *only* seems to occur in Acts.

### *Content:*

The outline for the entire book is found in the 8th verse of the book: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

### *first, a sketch*

- Intro: Jesus' final encouraging words to the apostles/promise of the Holy Spirit
- *"...receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..."*
  - Pentecost and first mass conversion
  - Life together in the life of the Spirit
- *"...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem..."*
  - Healing and preaching in the city
  - Struggle within: racial tension and elders
  - Persecution from without: Peter and Stephen, the first martyr
  - the Church Scattered
- *"...in all Judea and Samaria..."*
  - Philip in Samaria, and the conversion of the Ethiopian
  - Conversion of Saul
  - The ministry of Peter outside of Jerusalem

- The establishment of Antioch as the new "center of operations"
- Things hit the fan in Jerusalem
- "...and to the ends of the earth...": three missionary journeys of Paul
  - Trip 1 and return to Antioch
  - [Interlude: the Jerusalem Council]
  - Trip 2 and return to to Antioch
  - Trip 3
- Paul's troubles and imprisonment
  - Causing problems in Jerusalem. Captured by Jewish leaders.
  - Escorted to Caesarea, claims Roman citizenship, demands audience with emperor
  - Shipwreck on the way to Rome, eventually getting there and waiting for emperor in jail

*now, some details*

The book begins with Jesus offers some final words to his disciples telling them to be witnesses to what they have seen and heard from him. He tells them to spread his message throughout the known world, but they should wait until the Holy Spirit falls on them in order to empower their work. Jesus is then "lifted up, and then a cloud took him out of their site."

After this Prologue, the book is separated into two main sections, each focusing on the work of a different Christian leader. The first section follows Peter, the second follows Paul.

## **Peter**

As the leaders in the church continue to meet and pray, waiting for the Holy Spirit, Peter leads them in a process of figuring out who should replace Judas as an apostle. They choose Matthias to do so.

## *Pentecost*

Shortly after this, the Jewish festival of Pentecost is occurring and so Jerusalem is filled with many people of the Jewish faith, most of whom are coming from very diverse and distant lands. The Holy Spirit then descends. Peter preaches his first "Spirit-empowered" sermon in a heavenly language that everyone can understand, regardless of the native language. 3,000 people were converted to Christianity that day.

All of these believers devote themselves to living communally and learning more about this new faith they now ascribe to. In the meantime, Peter continues to minister, heal, and preach. And with this preaching comes increased tension with the Jewish authorities, who eventually arrest John and Peter and tell them to stop preaching about Jesus. They refuse. More conflict arises from the outside from the Jewish officials. But conflict also arises from within the Church, as the new Gentile Christians believed that the Jewish Christians were treating their needy differently than their own. The apostles appoint the first ordained leaders of the Church to oversee this distribution of resources.

### *Persecution and Scattering*

One thing to notice: at this point, it seems like weeks, if not months, have gone by, and all of these early Christians are still in Jerusalem. This goes against what Jesus had told them to do. They were to take this message through the world, and not just to Jerusalem. This would change, though.

One of the leaders appointed by the apostles was named Stephen. He was a powerful theologian and the Holy Spirit performed great deeds through him. The Jewish authorities noticed this and charged him with blasphemy and speaking against the temple. He says he is not blasphemous, but instead of countering the charge concerning the temple, he says they are absolutely correct. He then goes through an entire re-interpretation and re-telling of the Jewish story except with a twist: in his retelling, the temple was giant mistake and sign of mistrust on the part of God's people. Having experienced God's *true* indwelling presence by the Spirit, Stephen is certain that no temple could have been God's *original* and *intended* design for his people.

This angers the Jews so much that they drag Stephen out and stone him. One of the leaders of the Pharisees overseeing this execution is a man named Saul.

This brings persecution against the Christians by the Jews, and it ends up scattering them across the empire, and sending many home. The next section of Acts is focused on the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria.

## *From Saul to Paul*

Saul, this leader of the Jewish persecution of Christians realizes that their persecution is only spreading the Gospel message and not destroying it, so he decides to go to Damascus. Damascus had been a place where previous Jewish refugees had fled in years past, and this time is no different. Further, Roman authorities in other time had allowed for the extradition of Jewish religious heretics from Damascus to face trial in Jerusalem. So, Saul gets authority from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to travel to Damascus to see this done.

On the way, the risen Jesus Christ meets Saul and he is converted. Saul goes on to preach in the Damascus synagogue, no doubt confusing the religious authorities that had gathered there to hear his condemnation of the Christians. Saul then returns to Jerusalem, where he is introduced to the Christian Church there and begins learning about his new faith.

## *The Story Takes a Dramatic Turn*

In the meantime, after most of the Christians had been expelled from Jerusalem, James, the brother of Jesus, became the new leader of the Jerusalem Christian Church. No doubt James was a super conservative Jew that believed Jesus was his Messiah, and was traditional enough to retain credibility the Jerusalem leaders at the time. Also, at this time Antioch becomes the new primary center for the Christian Church, rather than Jerusalem.

Peter has been kicked out of Jerusalem, as he was just a rural Galilean fisherman, and not a well-respected Jewish conservative. During this dispersion of Christians, he has been preaching in the outlying areas. During his ministering, he runs across a Gentile “God-fearer” (or, *religious* convert to Judaism, but not *cultural*). Peter watches this man get converted and have the Holy Spirit fall on him even without having taken on any other Jewish customs (such as circumcision). He continues to preach among the Gentiles and more and more of them come to faith in Christ without becoming any “Jewish” at all. Little did he know that this would turn the early church upside-down.

When Peter return to Jerusalem, the more conservative Jewish Christians greet him very coldly, criticizing him. To this point, all *Christian* converts had

been considered, essentially, *Jewish* converts. The work of Peter, though, demonstrated that what God was doing was no mere extension of Judaism, but rather an entirely new thing. This was a development that the more conservative Jewish Christians would struggle with for years.

In fact, this turn in the development of the early Christian Church changed their place in society dramatically. To this point, especially in the eyes of the Romans (and even many Jews), Christianity was seen as merely a “crazy cousin” of sorts to Judaism, but still part of the established and recognized faith of the Jews. With Peter’s preaching, this was enough for the Jews to convince the Roman that the Christians were in fact no longer part of the established faith but were becoming an entirely different cultic movement altogether. Armed with this knowledge, the Jews were able to talk the Romans into helping them begin the first organized Roman persecution of Christians. Some of the early Christian leaders are killed and Peter is imprisoned. Peter is rescued, but this rejection by the Jerusalem leaders (both Christian and otherwise) and the persecution that was more or less a result of Peter’s own actions, leads him to quietly move out of Jerusalem, probably back to Galilee, and somewhat fade from the story of Acts.

## **Paul**

At this point, the story turn back to Paul. But first, let’s rewind a little. Using some of Paul’s letter to fill in some gaps, here’s what we know about what Paul’s been doing during this time. He has his conversion experience on the way to Damascus. He’s there briefly, but while there, the Jews try to kill him but he escapes. He cryptically “goes to Arabia” to pray and learn more about this gospel. He returns to Damascus for three years. He goes to Jerusalem, stays with Peter for a couple of weeks, receiving more training and then a commission by the apostles to be the “apostle to the Gentiles”. It’s thought he then goes around and founds the Galatian Churches, and then returns to Antioch. Paul and another leader, Barnabas, bring famine relief to the Jerusalem church, then returning back home to Antioch. This is now where Acts picks back up after Peter’s exit from the main stage. It is now fourteen years after Saul’s conversion.

There is a lot of narrative that takes place during the rest of the book, and so what follows is only a bare outline, and it skips a lots.

### *Missionary Journey 1*

Paul, while in Antioch, is commissioned to do a missionary journey through Cyprus. Taking Barnabas and Mark with him, he goes through Cyprus and encourages the Galatian Churches he founded. He then preaches in the city of Antioch that was in Pisidia they follow the coast, encountering dramatic events and founding churches, all the way to a city called Derbe. They then back-track, appointing elders in each of the churches they had founded along the way. During this trip, Mark abandons the team and returns to Jerusalem for an unknown reason. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch and continue teaching. We're currently at around 48 C.E. **Paul writes Galatians.**

### *The Jerusalem Council*

While in Antioch, what's called "Judaizers" rose up and started preaching that Gentiles must become Jewish to be Christians (this is the group that was antagonizing the Galatian church, whom Paul had to counter in his letter). They came to Antioch where Paul was and started trying to convince him of this as well. They were causing much confusion and many problems, and so the leaders gather for what's called the "Jerusalem Council" to discuss this issue. Peter stands and boldly repeats from his own experience how the Gentiles need not be made Christians. Paul and Barnabas then spoke of their recent missionary experiences as well. James, the leader of the conservative Jewish delegation at Jerusalem was convinced. They ultimately decided on a compromise that was outlined in a letter they all wrote to the churches. They said that Gentiles don't have to become Jewish, but it would be great if they followed some cultural customs that are especially disturbing to Jews (not out of theology, but love).

### *Missionary Journey 2*

"After some days" Paul decides that he wants to return with Barnabas to the churches they established on their first journey. Barnabas really wanted to bring Mark, but because Mark had abandoned them last time, Paul didn't trust him. So, because of these interpersonal dynamics, they went separate directions for their second journeys (ironically, spreading the gospel even wider than it originally would have been).

Paul, accompanied this time by Silas, revisits Galatia and meets a young, gifted man named Timothy, who also joins them. The most important thing about this second trip is that it marks the entrance of the gospel into Europe. They head to Philippi, where there is a dramatic founding of the Philippian church. They then head to Thessalonica and found that church. They then head to a city called Berea. While there, Paul sees many Jewish converts to Christianity. This causes the Jews to try and find him and stop him, but he flees on fairly short notice to Athens, leaving his friends in Berea.

Once in Athens, he sends word for his traveling companions to join him. While waiting, he preaches in Athens. It is largely an unsuccessful preaching venture. He then heads to Corinth with new zeal and founds that church. **Paul writes 1 and 2 Thessalonians**. He feels he had left too soon, so he checks up on them in his letters. He then stops by Ephesus, then heads to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, and then heads back to Antioch. It is now about the end of 52 C.E.

### *Missionary Journey 3*

This journey begins a whole lot less organized than the last two. Paul decides on his own to travel around and strengthen the Galatian churches again. He then stops and settles in Ephesus for the next three years. His preaching causes a big economic stir there and brings many problems to Paul. In his letters there seem to be references to beatings, imprisonments, and persecutions not specifically talked about in Acts.

While in Ephesus, he hears about the Corinthian church falling apart. He writes a letter to them to check in (not 1 Corinthians). They write back. **Paul then writes 1 Corinthians**. This doesn't solve their issues so he then travels to Corinth to deal with things on his own. Failing to bring about repentance in the Corinthian church, and with people attacking his authority because he wasn't as forceful in person as he was in his letters, he returns to Ephesus and writes a *very sharp* letter to them (**this may be preserved in 2 Corinthians 10-13**). He leaves to meet with them again, but on the way, he hears from Titus that they have finally repented and the crisis is over. **Paul writes 2 Corinthians**. He visits the Corinthians and stays in the area for about three months. While there, **Paul writes Romans**.

He then spends a lot of time making very short visits to many different places in the region. He eventually feels a call to go to Jerusalem, even though he knows it's very dangerous there. He asks the elders of Ephesus to visit him and pray for him before he leaves. Eventually, he sets off to Jerusalem. It is around 58 C.E.

*Paul's arrest and imprisonment (some call this the fourth and fifth missionary journeys)*

Once in Jerusalem, Paul visits James, who is aware of how much the Jerusalem Jews hated Paul. James encourages Paul to go to the temple and do some token purification rites and pay for some new converts to undergo some purification rites. This is meant as a peace offering to the Jews. He agrees. Once there, though, the Jews freak out just seeing him, falsely accusing him of bringing Gentiles into the temple. This causes a riot that the Roman guards have to break up.

They arrest Paul to calm everyone down and figure out what happened. He asks to speak to the crowd to try and calm them down, but only makes things far worse. He is sentenced to flogging, but right before it's to happen, Paul tells the guards he is a Roman citizen. Roman citizens were not allowed to be flogged, and so, embarrassed, the guards then take Paul to the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council, so they can try him. This council is made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. Once he is allowed, he humorously brings up a doctrinal issue each camp disagrees on and starts a big theology fight. They take him away to decide another his fate the next day.

The next morning, some Jews gather and swear an oath that they will neither eat nor drink until Paul is killed, and conspire to do it themselves when the Romans bring Paul to the Sanhedrin for the trial. Paul's nephew hears of this, tells the Romans about the scheme to kill Paul. Two hundred Roman soldiers escort Paul out of the city in the middle of the night, where they head to Caesarea, the Rome-appointed capitol of Judea.

While here, is under the care of the local governor, Felix. Paul testifies before Felix, and Felix believes he is innocent. but, he's corrupt, so he keeps Paul in prison, hoping that he might get a bribe to release Paul. He gives Paul many freedoms (due to his innocence), and he allows him many guests during his stay, but he's still technically "imprisoned". Through the

course of his time in Caesarea, Felix is called back to Rome to account for some personal issues. He is eventually removed and a new governor is set over Caesarea: Festus.

Paul testifies before Festus, who believes him innocent, but asks Paul if he'd be willing to be tried in Jerusalem. Paul instead uses his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his case to Rome's "supreme court", the emperor himself. Festus agrees, and while another governor, Agrippa, is visiting the area, Festus has Paul testify (a.k.a. preach) in front of *him* as well. This governor thinks Paul is innocent also.

Paul has an exciting trip over land and sea all the way to Rome (this is what some call the "fifth" journey). Luke, having shown how the Gospel has reached the furthest reaches of the known world at the time (or, as Jesus put it, "the ends of the world"), ends his book with Paul in prison awaiting his hearing, preaching the Gospel "with all boldness and without hindrance". **Paul writes Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians.** We end the book at around 62 C.E.

#### *Background:*

- This is one of the most historically verifiable books of the Bible. This book shows Luke to be one of the finest historians of all the ancient writings we have today.
- The book admittedly ends quite abruptly. As discussed earlier, many obvious questions remain unanswered. See above discussion on dating the Gospels for more information.
- Acts seems to move very fast and cover a short amount of time, but, in reality, **the book's 28 Chapters cover about 35 years!**
- Full disclosure: the opinion expressed here that Galatians was the first epistle written, and it was *before* the Jerusalem council is definitely a minority opinion. Yet, this theory seems to answer far more of the questions raised by the book of Galatians. The Jerusalem visit, in its details, looks nothing like Paul's Jerusalem Council visit. Further, it makes far more sense to both Acts and Galatians if the epistle is written to the Church in the *Roman* province of Galatia rather than the *Celtic* province of Galatia (which Paul did not visit until his second and third missionary journeys).

### *Interesting Bits:*

- Some scholars accuse Acts of presenting a false picture of Paul, because the content of Paul's preaching and what seems to be his concerns are very different than what you see in his letters. But, if you look closer, you notice that Paul writes letters to Christians at churches, while usually, in Acts, he is preaching to non-believers. In fact, in Acts 20, the only place in Acts where he is addressing a group of believers, the substance of his speech sounds a *lot* like his letters. The lesson? We preach differently depending on our audience. We don't *always* preach to Christians, nor do we always preach to non-Christians. Depending on our goals and context, our preaching will look different.
- As said in the description of the contents, there are hints in some of Paul's letters written during and after his Ephesian stay that tell us that a *whole* lot more happened while he stayed there than Luke tells us.

### *Application/Why Would You Go Here?:*

- Encouragement that Christianity *can* and *does* change the world *no matter* culture, ethnicity, age, or nation.
- Confidence in the Sovereignty of God's plan for and in the world.
- When you're disillusioned with politics. Seriously, Acts can encourage you that Christianity (and Christians) can flourish no matter what political system (or what political leaders) Christians might themselves under.
- To get as close to a modern "history" of the work of God as you will find in the Bible. This is perhaps the only place in the Bible that we can boast of such historical purposes in the author's intent in writing.