

# JESUS IN THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT

DANIEL J. SCHOLZ

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# Instructor's Preface

Teaching about Jesus and the Gospels presents a variety of challenges for today's college professor. Typically, classes are religiously diverse: student profiles include the biblically literate and illiterate, the "churched" and "unchurched." Classes as a whole are neither historically minded nor easily impressed. Some students are budding religious studies or theology majors, whereas others are simply fulfilling a degree requirement. Our challenge is to get this motley mix to make sense of Jesus and the New Testament Gospels.

*Introducing the New Testament: Jesus in the Gospels and Acts* is intended for the "average" student attending a college or university today. It assumes that Jesus and the Gospels can engage readers' curiosity and inform their worldview.

This book also assumes that you, as professor, have one term to cover the New Testament Gospels, Acts, and a handful of other early Christian gospels, as well as the historical Jesus. For this reason, chapters are modest in length and information is organized for ease of readability and review. As an instructor, you will find this book affords ample time to focus on primary sources—the Scriptures and other texts—and to assess as you proceed. There is also breathing room for other materials you may wish to use to supplement the core text.

*Introducing the New Testament* does not supplant the Gospels but complements them, offering literary, historical, and theological insights that can help readers make sense of the biblical text under study.

In addition to the organization of the text, the charts, maps, sidebars, and summaries offer the visual variety and graphic support essential to visual learners. The layout conveys the hierarchy and types of information, calling out core concepts and supplemental information.

Each chapter concludes with questions for review and theological reflection. An annotated bibliography at the end of each chapter provides recommendations for further reading or a starting point for writing a class paper. Recommendations include a range of authors who represent some of the best in biblical scholarship.

For instructors, chapter notes are provided with information about the academic approach used and sources consulted in compiling each chapter. More advanced students may also be interested in these notes.

You will not agree with everything I present in each chapter. This is both unavoidable and preferred. Such areas of disagreement can be teachable moments for students. Students should be exposed to the complexity of current biblical studies, the intricacies of our competing positions, and the collegiality of our discipline.

Furthermore, Jesus and Gospel studies have become increasingly compartmentalized. That is to say, most of us tend to specialize in one area of New Testament studies (such as the historical Jesus, Luke-Acts, extracanonical gospels, and so on). Within each of these specialized areas of study, new and exciting insights are being developed at a remarkable pace. When and where appropriate, the latest research and some of the more significant breakthroughs are presented.

This book concludes with a chapter on the early Christian gospels outside of the canonized Christian Scriptures. Many students are aware of these extracanonical gospels (for example, the gospels of *Thomas* and *Judas*), and so it is appropriate to consider them here in their proper historical and theological contexts.

# Introduction

## Studying Jesus and the Gospels

This book focuses on the central figure of the Christian Scriptures: Jesus. Arguably, no other figure in history has had more influence in shaping many of the religious and cultural norms in the world today. Whether you belong to a specific faith tradition or none at all, possessing a working knowledge of Jesus and the Gospels is important for religious, historical, and cultural literacy. In the Christian Scriptures, the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the primary sources that inform us about Jesus. Other sources close to these Gospels (for example, the Acts of the Apostles, writings of the early Church fathers, and second-century extracanonical gospels) augment them.

Before we begin our study, three points must be stressed about Jesus and the Gospels. First, Jesus of Nazareth was a first-century *Jew* of the ancient Mediterranean world; therefore, any understanding of the historical Jesus must be grounded in situating him within his Jewish social, political, and religious environment. Second, the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the prophetic books, heavily influenced the authors of the four Gospels and Acts; thus, a working knowledge of the entire Bible, as well as of the types of Judaism that existed in Jesus' time, will help make sense of Jesus and the Gospels. Third, the Gospels and Acts were written by first-century authors who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and Son of God. The four Gospels and Acts are, in fact, a complex interweaving of history, literature, and theology that is not easily disentangled. Separate books could be written on each of these areas. They are highlighted



here because much of the content and structure of this book reflects these realities.

For Christians, the Bible divides into two parts: the first testament, also called the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament; and the second testament, also called the Christian Scriptures or New Testament. We will use the New Testament in our discussion here. The writers of the New Testament had both a literary and a theological dependency on the Hebrew Scriptures, as they proclaimed their belief in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and the Son of God. Nowhere is this more evident than in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which narrate the life of Jesus. Jesus is the central figure in the Christian Scriptures, but the Gospel evangelists relied heavily on the Hebrew Scriptures as they shaped and framed the story of Jesus.

While the New Testament authors relied on the texts and theology of the Hebrew Scriptures to support their faith-claims about Jesus, they also employed a new literary form (that is, the gospel form) to tell the story of Jesus. There are no gospels in the Hebrew Scriptures.

What then are these four Gospels on a literary level? Three of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) tell us about the life and death of Jesus. In this sense, the Gospels can be broadly described as ancient biographies, because they essentially provide a written account of a person's life. Many scholars argue that the Gospels are in fact a subtype of an ancient Greco-Roman biography, with a unique focus on Jesus. Yet the claim of the Gospels (for example, Jesus as Son of God and Jewish Messiah) and the mixing of various subgenres (for example, miracle stories, parables, genealogies, and passion narratives) into an overarching genre (biography), likely pushed the Gospels beyond the typical ancient Greco-Roman biographies, which neither made such claims nor mixed genres.

The word *ancient* is stressed with the Gospels because unlike modern biographies that rely heavily on reporting objective facts and offer a context for the information presented, the Gospels provide modest objectivity and selective contextualization. The authors of the Gospels have an agenda: they are trying to convince their audience of what they *believe* about the life and death of Jesus. Often, the Gospel writers assume the audience has the necessary background and information to make sense of the details they offer. At times, this

assumption includes knowledge of and familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as certain other sources, both oral and written.

Again, this is not to suggest that the Gospels and Acts are utterly subjective or that they provide no context at all. It is an objective fact, for example, that Jesus was a Jew and that he was executed by crucifixion. And the Gospel writers do provide some context for the life of Jesus, including events and figures of his day (see Luke 2:1–2; 3:1–2), as well as events and figures from the Hebrew Scriptures (see the genealogies of Matt 1:1–18 and Luke 3:23–38). However, most of the work involved in sorting through issues of objectivity and contextualization belongs to the modern reader of the Gospels and contemporary and evolving scholarship.

What else do the Christian Scriptures contain in addition to the four Gospels? There are twenty-seven “books” in the Christian Scriptures. Twenty of these books are actually letters; these are attributed to the earliest followers of Jesus: Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude. There are also the Letter to Hebrews, which is actually a sermon by an anonymous author; the Acts of the Apostles (part 2 of the Gospel of Luke); and the book of Revelation.

The order of the twenty-seven books in the Christian Scriptures follows the sequence of events beginning with the life of Jesus and ending with the *eschaton* (the end of the age). The chart on page 6 shows the order of the books and the events they narrate.

Just as the four Gospels are a type of ancient biography, the remaining books of the Christian Scriptures are ancient forms of letters, sermons (Hebrews), history (Acts), and apocalyptic writing (book of Revelation). The subject of Jesus and the beliefs of his earliest followers are evident throughout each of these books. Like the Gospels, all of them are complex tapestries woven from the beliefs of the authors, the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the literary forms of the ancient Mediterranean world.

*Introducing the New Testament: Jesus in the Gospels and Acts* addresses some of the contextual and background information needed to make sense of Jesus of Nazareth and the four Gospels. Chapter 1, “Understanding the World of Jesus and Interpreting the Gospels,” bridges the span between the ancient Mediterranean and the twenty-first-century Western (U.S.) world. A distance not only of time (two thousand years) but also of culture (social, political, and

Sequence of events	Order of the 27 books
The life of Jesus	Matthew Mark Luke John
The story of the early Church	Acts of the Apostles
The letters of Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles (from longest to shortest)	Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon
A sermon	Hebrews (anonymous author)
The letters of other apostolic figures	James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude
The story of the age to come	Book of Revelation

religious) must be overcome if we are to understand Jesus and the Gospels. Chapter 1 provides a lens through which to view Jesus and read the Gospel narratives. It also introduces some modern methods for interpreting the Gospels. Chapters 2–6 take up the Gospels of

Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and Acts. The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are included as back-to-back chapters because nearly all scholars are convinced that Luke and Acts were written by the same author and that these two books have a coherent, consistent literary and theological design that is best understood when read as one narrative. These chapters focus on the relevant historical, theological, and literary issues at play in each of the Gospels and Acts.

The order of the chapters, beginning with Mark and ending with John, follows what most scholars think is the chronological order in which the Gospels were written:

Mark:	about 65–70 CE
Matthew:	about 80–85 CE
Luke-Acts:	about 85–90 CE
John:	about 90–100 CE

We use the term *about* above because scholars are not certain as to the exact dates the Gospels were written. It is, however, their near-unanimous opinion that Mark was written first and that both Matthew and Luke relied heavily on Mark in producing their own Gospels. To begin with Mark, then, makes sense.

Chapter 7, “The Historical Jesus,” has a twofold aim: to discuss scholarly attempts to discover the historical Jesus and to offer a sketch of the historical Jesus based on contemporary research. Chapter 8, “The Other Early Christian Gospels,” is included because these writings reflect a developing tradition that reached back to the era of the Christian Scriptures. Gospels such as Thomas, Mary, and Philip warrant our attention because these writings give us a bigger picture of the Christian beliefs and understandings of Jesus well into the second and third centuries. Having some background on these extracanonical gospels can also help us better understand the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts.

# 1

## Understanding the World of Jesus and Interpreting the Gospels

### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is twofold: to provide a lens through which to view the world of Jesus and to introduce some of the methods scholars use to interpret the New Testament Gospels. This dual focus will create a fuller picture of the Gospel narratives as they were read at the time of Jesus and as we understand them today.

### Anachronism and Ethnocentrism

As we enter the world of Jesus and consider various methods for interpreting the Gospels, we should be wary of two pitfalls: *anachronism* and *ethnocentrism*.<sup>1</sup> Anachronism literally means a chronological misplacing of a person or thing. With respect to Jesus and the Gospels, anachronism occurs when we project our twenty-first-century time and culture onto the Mediterranean world of Jesus and the Gospel authors. Ethnocentrism means perceiving something with the attitude that one's own group is superior. Relative to the Gospels, we are guilty of ethnocentrism when we impose our cultural norms and values onto the cultural norms and values of Jesus and his contemporaries. Anachronism and ethnocentrism skew and distort understanding.<sup>2</sup>

## Overcoming the Distance between Us and Them

To be aware of anachronism and ethnocentrism is to recognize that a tremendous distance must be traveled to understand Jesus and the Gospels. The distance is not simply one of time but also of culture: a social, political, and religious distance.<sup>3</sup> The ancient Mediterranean world in which the Gospel authors lived bears little resemblance to our world in the twenty-first century. We have to conceive of these authors on their terms, because in creating the Gospels, they were not thinking of us on our terms.<sup>4</sup> Jesus' call of Levi illustrates the distance we need to travel.

The call of Levi is preserved by three Gospel writers: Matthew 9:9–14, Mark 2:14–17, and Luke 5:27–32 (see sidebar). To answer our twenty-first-century question, “Why did the Gospel writers

consider the call of Levi significant?” we must understand the perspective of first-century Jewish culture.

The Jewish social norms of Jesus' day left the call of Levi nothing short of scandalous. As a tax collector, Levi belonged to a profession despised by most Jews, who saw tax collectors as collaborators in their oppression by the Romans and the Jewish ruling elites. The scandal centers on Jesus' eating and drinking with Levi and his friends, sharing table fellowship with them. In Jewish culture, who you reclined at table with was directly tied to your identity and to the identity of your kinship group. Respectable Jews would have avoided table fellowship with a tax collector. In

### The Call of Levi

After this [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the customs post. He said to him, “Follow me.” And leaving everything behind, he got up and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus said to them in reply, “Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.” —Luke 5:27–32

this story, Jesus not only eats with Levi he also invites him to “follow” him, to join the kinship group that Jesus is forming with his public ministry. Many Jews would have been appalled by such a deliberate

invitation from Jesus. This is a likely explanation for why the call of Levi was remembered and preserved by Jesus' followers. Knowing the social stigma associated with tax collectors, the social norm of sharing meals with your kin, and the personal identification with your kinship group helps modern readers of the Gospels better appreciate the radically inclusive nature of Jesus' invitation to discipleship—a core meaning of this story whenever and from whatever perspective a reader might encounter it.

## Part 1: Understanding the World of Jesus

So what kind of world did Jesus live in? The Hebrew Scriptures that predate Jesus provide us with some valuable clues. But before we consider the development of Israel as told in the Hebrew Bible, let us first consider a few precautions.

### The Hebrew Scriptures and the World of Jesus

We must be careful when speaking of Jewish *biblical history*, because much of that “history” is unverifiable by evidence outside the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures. Although there is a general consensus on many of the events reported in the Hebrew Scriptures (for example, the united monarchy began about 1020 BCE), the cycle of stories found in Genesis 1–11 (creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark, the Tower of Babel) comprise a notable exception. Historians do not attempt to date these stories, which begin the Hebrew Scriptures; Genesis 1–11 remain a “prehistory” due to the mythological nature of the texts.

#### House of David

In 1993 and 1994, biblical archeologists discovered fragments of a stele (a stone slab) at Tel Dan, a mound in northern Israel where a city once stood. The fragments appear to contain the Hebrew letters for “house of David.”

As is often the case with finds such as these, questions have been raised about whether the inscription is authentic or a forgery. If authentic, the discovery of the Tel Dan stele is significant because it offers evidence of a figure recorded in biblical history.

According to the Hebrew Scriptures, David ruled as the King of Israel for about forty years. Most historians date King David's reign from about 1000 to 961 BCE.

Archeological discoveries have helped verify some events narrated in the Hebrew Scriptures. Even though evidence exists that supports the existence of King David (see sidebar page 11, “House of David”), this is not to say that beginning with King David and the monarchy (about 1000 BCE) all of the events and people in the Hebrew Scriptures are verifiable by external evidence. In fact, most of the people and events in

### Changing Names: The Hebrews, the Israelites, and the Jews

**HEBREWS:** The Semitic tribal people who originated about four thousand years ago and followed the leadership of patriarchs including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were first known as the Hebrews.

**ISRAELITES:** After the Hebrews were freed from Egyptian slavery under the leadership of Moses, they founded the nation of Israel. With a newfound national identity, the Hebrews became known as the Israelites.

**JEWS:** After the Israelites’ release from exile in Babylon (587–538 BCE), it is said that only the descendents of the tribe of Judah (that is, the Judeans, or Jews) survived. Thus, the postexilic Israelites became commonly referred to as Jews.

The people of the first-century Jewish world would have understood any of these three names as a legitimate reference to themselves. See, for example, how Paul describes himself in Philippians 3:5–6.

the narrative before and after 1000 BCE await external confirmation. Furthermore, not everything presented in the Hebrew Scriptures can be externally confirmed. For example, the story of the Nephilim (Genesis 6:1–4) is more literary in nature than factually real.

Questions regarding how the Hebrew Scriptures shaped Jesus and the world of first-century Jews can be addressed independently of questions regarding the Scriptures’ historical accuracy. What is more certain than the historicity of the people and events of the Hebrew Scriptures is the influence of the *storyline* of the Hebrew Scriptures, the narration of Jewish biblical history, on Jesus, his fellow Jews, and the Gospel writers. What follows, then, is a brief overview of certain narratives and themes in the Hebrew Scriptures.

### *Abraham and Moses*

Taken together, the Hebrew Bible presents a nearly two-thousand-year narrative history prior to the time of Jesus and the Gospels. According to the *storyline* of the Hebrew Scriptures, the



Jewish people transitioned from a tribal people known as the Hebrews to founders and citizens of a nation called Israel to, after a period of exile in Babylon, a people called the Jews. The politics and religion described in these three periods differ dramatically. What is consistent in the storyline of the Hebrew Scriptures, however, is the Israelites' understanding of themselves—historically and culturally—as a people defined by their relationship with God. This relationship formed Israel's identity as a people and as a nation.

From their origins as a nomadic tribal people (families or clans grouped and traveling together), the Hebrews were *elected* by God to be God's people. According to the book of Genesis, Abraham, a chieftain from a tribe of people in Babylonia, entered into a covenant with YHWH. YHWH offered to bless Abraham with land and descendants if Abraham agreed that his tribe would be God's people. This covenant was sealed by a "mark in the flesh" (circumcision of males). It was the mark of

### God's Name

Out of respect for Jews who do not pronounce the name of God (*Yahweh*), it is common to use the tetragrammation (YHWH) or the alternative vocalization of the name (*Adonai*).

circumcision that confirmed this tribe's identity as YHWH's people. Under Abraham and the mark of circumcision, the tribal members came to be known as the Hebrew people. In the book of Genesis, it is clear that YHWH's election of Abraham and the mark of circumcision had political and religious ramifications. Circumcision was both an outward religious sign of fidelity and a statement of political allegiance to YHWH.

The book of Exodus tells of YHWH's call of Moses to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery and form them into the nation of Israel. With Moses, YHWH established a new covenant, a binding relationship, not just with one man (Abraham) but with an entire nation (Israel), centered on the Law (the Torah, or "teaching," "instruction") that Moses received from YHWH on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 20–23). While other cultures at that time lived by similar codes, Israel's understanding and practice of the Law helped Israel define itself. For Israel, the Law was more than a code of conduct, the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)

also recounted the stories of Israel's ancestors such as Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and his brothers, and the Israelites' forty years of wandering in the desert. Also integral to living the Law for Israel was the practice of offering sacrifice to God, including animal sacrifice, as a means of maintaining a covenantal relationship with YHWH. Following the Law would become the founding doctrine that defined Israel's national identity.

### *Saul, David, and Solomon*

Israel indeed became a nation in the ancient Near East, building itself over time into a united monarchy under the leadership of three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles narrate the events leading to the creation, successes, and failures of this monarchy. These six books are by no means "objective" history in the modern sense of the word. Their final written form came together centuries after the events they are reporting, with historical hindsight and often with an agenda—sometimes favorable, other times not—regarding the monarchy.

Subsequent generations of Jews would look back to the period of David's kingship as Israel's "golden age." During the monarchy period, Israel was enjoying the fruits of the covenantal promises God made with Abraham (the Promised Land and descendents) and Moses (Israel had become a great and purportedly holy nation). Subsequently, David established Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and David's son Solomon built Israel's Temple, the central place of worship for the nation, in Jerusalem. God also established a new covenant with David: "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever" (2 Samuel 7:16).

### **Jesus as "Son of David"**

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell of the story of Jesus' healing of the blind man (men): see Matthew 20:29–34, Mark 10:46–52, and Luke 18:35–43. Although many of the details differ in each Gospel, the reference to Jesus as "Son of David" is consistent. The Davidic covenant from 2 Samuel 7:8–16 tied Jesus' identity as the messiah to the house and lineage of David. The reference to Jesus as "Son of David" was the blind man's confession of faith in Jesus as the long-awaited messiah.

This covenant planted the seed for Israel's later anticipation of the messiah. Together, the city of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Davidic covenant formed the defining characteristics of Israel's religious and political identity.

Solomon reigned as the third and last king of the united monarchy. Known for his wisdom, Solomon secured Israel as an important nation in the Near East of the tenth century BCE. After Solomon's death, the monarchy was divided between Solomon's sons, Jeroboam and Rehoboam.

### *A People Divided*

As powerful and formative as the united monarchy was, under Solomon's sons the monarchy was unable to maintain a united vision and leadership. Consequently, Israel entered a new phase as a divided nation living under two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom of Israel consisted of nine and one-half of the original twelve tribes, while the Southern Kingdom of Judah had the remaining two and one-half tribes. No longer a united monarchy, Israel now lived in separate "houses," the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Roughly coinciding with the development of the nation of Israel was the rise of the prophets. In times of crisis, the prophets attempted to awaken in Israel a sense of social justice and radical monotheism, the belief that YHWH was the Lord of history and the universe. The prophets taught Israel that YHWH alone is their God (see Deuteronomy 6:4–9, later embraced as the heart of

### **The Prophets of Israel**

The Hebrew Scriptures depict the rise of prophets in response to three major crises in Israel's history: the Assyrian crisis, the Babylonian crisis, and the Persian crisis.

- The eighth-century Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel led to the prophets Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and Hosea.
- The sixth-century Babylonian capture and exile of the Southern Kingdom of Judah led to the prophets Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Nahum, Obadiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah.
- The fifth-century Persian release and restoration of Israel led to the prophets Third Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, Malachi, and Jonah.

the Mosaic Law). The prophets envisioned an Israelite people whose strong sense of social justice should be combined with its belief in monotheism.

At the time of the first crisis, the house of Israel and the house of Judah were unwilling to live by the standards set by the Torah, according to the Hebrew Scriptures. The people of Israel lost sight of their singular allegiance to their God of history and the universe and did not heed the prophetic warnings of impending exile. Consequently, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was captured, destroyed, and exiled by the Assyrian Empire. Roughly two hundred years later, beginning in 597 BCE, the Babylonian Empire captured and destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The exile in Babylon (597–538 BCE) marked some of the darkest days in Israel's history. Stripped of the Promised Land, with Jerusalem and the Temple in ruins, what little remained of the united monarchy of the twelve tribes of Israel was now forced into exile.

It was not until the rise of the Persian Empire in the sixth century BCE that the captive and exiled Israelites in Babylon saw hope for a new day. King Cyrus of Persia destroyed the Babylonian Empire and released the Israelites from captivity and exile. This, along with the prophetic visions in Ezekiel and Isaiah, breathed new life into the exiled Israelites. With the Babylonians destroyed and the Persians now in power, King Cyrus of Persia allowed the exiles to return to their Promised Land and begin rebuilding their city of Jerusalem and their Temple. Some of the exiles went back to the Promised Land (Judea), while others dispersed outside the regions of the Promised Land. The latter became known as the *Diaspora*, literally, the “scattering” of Jewish communities throughout the Greco-Roman world.

### *Period of Rebuilding*

Israel now entered another phase of its history, a period of rebuilding. The process of restoring the ravaged ancestral land and rebuilding the destroyed Temple was instrumental in the formation of the political and religious identity of the community of Israel, now called the Jews. Ezra and Nehemiah led the small postexilic community in the restoration of Israel. The priest Ezra refocused the community on fidelity to the Torah, which most likely reached

its final written form during this period. With the support of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Ezra led the community in religious reform. Nehemiah oversaw the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the instituting of administrative reforms that assured the post-exilic community its political and economic survival. The rebuilding of Jerusalem's Temple in 515 BCE proved crucial, as it once again became the center of the religious life of the Jews in Judea and surrounding lands.

According to the Hebrew Scriptures, it was a history of election and covenant combined with a growing awareness of God's fidelity to his chosen people in Israel that preceded and shaped the world of Jesus and the Gospel writers. The awareness of God's fidelity, however, was matched by a growing recognition of Israel's infidelity and failure to keep God's covenant. We turn next to the social, political, and religious realities of Jesus' day.

## **Overcoming Our Social Distance**

In order to grasp the New Testament, we need to travel a considerable social, political, and religious distance and examine the ancient Mediterranean world from which it emerged. We begin with the social distance.

In recent decades, scholars studying the New Testament from a social science perspective have found intriguing contrasts between our modern Western social norms, values, and perceptions and those of the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Honor and Shame***

All cultures have social norms and values that shape and regulate life among their members. These norms and values apply to individuals and groups and help define appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. At the time of the New Testament, people followed social norms and values different from ours. For the ancients, honor and shame were pivotal values that set the standard for all social interaction. Furthermore, God was viewed as the source and arbiter of social values and norms. Honor was both ascribed (set by one's birth) and acquired (gained through social interactions). Upholding and defending the honor of one's immediate family and larger kinship group, as well as protecting them from shame, was paramount.

### ***Collective Identity***

Closely connected to the importance of honor and shame was the ancient Mediterranean's emphasis on collective identity. For the ancients, a person's kinship group, or immediate and extended family members, formed the basis for one's sense of self. The honor and reputation of one's kinship group provided the basis for self-understanding, or identity. For modern Western people, freedom, independence, and individuality are arguably the pivotal norms and values of social interactions. For people of the ancient Mediterranean, honor, shame, and group identity were the pivotal norms and values of social interaction.

### ***Limited Goods***

The perception of resources presents another social disconnect between the people of the New Testament and us. People in the United States and many other modern Western countries enjoy unprecedented wealth and access to resources such as food, water, and land. That sense of abundance also applies to our human resources such as love, honor, and reputation. For people living in the New Testament world, however, all resources, material and human, were seen as limited. To a large degree, the ancients' perception of limited resources was based on the reality of their world: by modern standards, the vast majority of ancient people were extremely poor, with restricted access to natural resources such as land. They carried this perception of limits to human resources as well. In a social network of neighbors and kin, honor and reputation were, like land and food, carefully distributed and never hoarded. This is one reason that Jesus' call to leave family behind and follow him had enormous social, economic, and religious implications and powerfully affected one's relations with neighbors and kin.

Human resources such as honor and shame were exchanged in more informal, less easily measured ways than were material resources such as food and land. For example, the system of patron-client relationships, common in the ancient world, included both human- and material-resource exchanges: a patron could offer a client access to material resources otherwise unavailable to him or her; in exchange, the client could provide the patron with an honorable reputation in the arena of public opinion.

## ***Purity Laws***

In the tightly controlled social world of the ancient Mediterranean, purity laws, many with their roots in Old Testament Scripture, were central to the rituals that defined the Jewish sense of collective identity. Keeping the Law was considered key to keeping Jews clean (pure) in the presence of each other and in the presence of God. Jewish purity laws were intended to separate the clean from the unclean and, ultimately, the sacred from the profane, in religious ritual observances. The purity laws kept unclean Jews (such as menstruating wives and men with seminal emissions) separated from clean Jews; for example, husbands might be separated from wives until both were ritually clean. These Jewish purity laws were deeply rooted historically and psychologically in the desire to be clean in God's holy presence. At the time of Jesus, however, not all Jews agreed on how to interpret and practice the principles of purity. Such debates among Jesus' followers and critics provide an essential background for the story of Jesus' cleansing of the leper (see sidebar).

Jesus' cleansing of the leper illustrates the actual and symbolic value of purity at the time of Jesus, as well as Jesus' allegiance to and respect for his Hebrew ancestry. According to Jewish purity laws in the first century, lepers had to be separated from the community because their contagious disease made them unclean. Notice that upon healing this man of leprosy, making him "clean," Jesus tells the man to go to the priest, for it is the priest alone who determines whether the man can return to the community. When Jesus tells the man to "offer the gift prescribed by Moses," he is referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Leviticus, 14:1–9, which prescribes the procedure for "purification

### **Jesus Cleanses a Leper**

When Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And then a leper approached, did him homage, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I will do it. Be made clean." His leprosy was cleansed immediately. Then Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one, but go show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." —Matt 8:1–4

after leprosy.” In his healing ministry, Jesus clearly works within the context of Jewish purity laws.

Not only purity laws are at play in the story of Jesus cleansing a leper; principles of honor and shame are also important. The leper paid Jesus “homage” in front of the “great crowds,” and the crowds bore witness to this healing (cleansing) event, thus increasing Jesus’ honor and reputation. Additionally, the leper’s shame and separation from the community were removed as he was made clean. The former leper could now identify himself with the “clean” collective community that he had belonged to prior to contracting this disease.

Understanding basic ancient Mediterranean social norms and values such as honor and shame, collective identity, limited goods, and purity laws gives valuable insight into the meaning and impact of Jesus’ words and actions, as well as the intent of the Gospel writers. But we must also travel a great political and religious distance to appreciate the ancient Mediterranean world. To do so, let’s examine some of the religious and political institutions of Jesus’ time, how they evolved, and what they meant to Jesus and his contemporaries.

## **Overcoming Our Political and Religious Distance**

The political and religious institutions and groups that Jesus encountered in his lifetime had roots reaching back centuries. Together, these institutions and groups formed the world in which Jesus lived.

### ***The Greco-Roman and Jewish Political and Religious Landscape***

Jesus lived in a territory known as Palestine, a strip of land on the eastern side of the massive Roman Empire. During Jesus’ lifetime, Palestine stretched about one hundred fifty miles from north to south and sixty miles from east to west. The Mediterranean Sea formed its western shoreline, while farther inland were two smaller bodies of water, the Sea of Galilee in northern Palestine and the Dead Sea in southern Palestine. The Jordan River connected these two seas. Jesus grew up in the northern region of Palestine known as Galilee, in the small village of Nazareth.

The ancient territory of Palestine, which included Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, has a special place in Jewish history and religion. Palestine was Israel’s historic Promised Land and was the territory





held and ruled by the great King David (beginning about 1000 BCE). While many first-century Jews lived and practiced their religion in Palestine, the territory was nonetheless under foreign control. (See table 1 for a time line of events within Judaism from the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile to its destruction by the Roman Empire.)

**TABLE 1: Time Line of Events within Second Temple Judaism**

**Second Temple Judaism covers the years 520–515 BCE to 70 CE, from the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem after the return from the Babylonian exile to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman Empire.**

539–332 BCE	The Persian Empire dominates
520–515 BCE	Jews return from Babylon and rebuild the Temple
336–323 BCE	Alexander the Great conquers the Persian Empire; “Hellenization” begins
circa 300–200 BCE	Ptolemaic rule of Palestine
197–168 BCE	Seleucid rule of Palestine
168–164 BCE	Maccabean Revolt
142–63 BCE	Hasmonean dynasty
63 BCE	Pompey enters Jerusalem
40–4 BCE	Herod the Great rules Palestine
20–19 BCE	The Temple renovated
circa 6 BCE	Birth of Jesus
4 BCE	Death of Herod
4 BCE–39 CE	Herod Antipas rules over Galilee
26–36 CE	Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate governs Palestine
28–30 CE	Public ministry of Jesus
66–73 CE	First Jewish Revolt against Rome
70 CE	Destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple
132–135 CE	Second Jewish Revolt against Rome

In fact, as table 1 demonstrates, foreign domination characterized the Jewish state of Palestine during the Second Temple period (515 BCE–70 CE) and beyond. But numerically speaking, at the time of Jesus most Jews lived outside of Palestine in what is called the Diaspora (or “scattering”). Jewish identity in the Diaspora remained

strong, because most Jews had been living in their locations outside Palestine for generations and consequently had not experienced foreign domination.

### ***Alexander the Great, His Successors, and the Rise of Hellenization***

Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia, ruled for a relatively short time, from 336–323 BCE. However, in that time, Alexander and his armies were able to overthrow the Persian Empire that had stood for nearly two centuries and establish the Empire of Alexander the Great as the dominant force from Greece all the way east

to India. The widespread dissemination of Greek language, ideas, and customs beyond Greece and Macedonia to other peoples and regions is called *Hellenization*. Even after the Roman Empire had conquered the Greeks, Hellenization remained a major influence in the eastern portions of the empire, including Palestine.

As brilliant a military and political leader as Alexander was, the united force of his empire did not last long after his untimely death (possibly from fever) at age thirty-two. The vast territory that Alexander controlled during his life splintered after his death. Large sections of Alexander's empire, however, did remain intact and under the control of his successors. Two of Alexander's successors, Ptolemy and Seleucus, emerged and established their own dynasties beginning approximately 300 BCE. Ptolemy took control of Egypt and Palestine, while Seleucus took control of Syria. For nearly a century (about 300–200 BCE), the Jews in Palestine lived peaceably under the Ptolemaic dynasty. Jewish fortunes in Palestine began to change, however, when the Seleucid kings of Syria took control of Palestine and forced out the Ptolemaic presence. The Seleucid dynasty ruled Palestine from 197–168 BCE. These were difficult years for

### **The Second Temple Period**

The years between the rebuilding of the Temple under the Persians (515 BCE) and the destruction of the Temple by Romans during the Jewish Revolt (70 CE) are referred to as the Second Temple period. This was an important time in Jewish history. Indeed, most of the Hebrew Scriptures came together in their final form during this time.

The First Temple period was the time between Solomon's original building of the Temple in Jerusalem (about 1000 BCE) and the Babylonian destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE.

Palestinian Jews, especially when Hellenization was forced upon them under the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, 175–163 BCE.

Whereas many Palestinian Jews welcomed Hellenization, others fiercely fought for their Jewish ancestral traditions and practices. Jewish resistance to Antiochus and his Hellenization policies was led by the *Hasidim* (“pious ones”). Many Hasidim, refusing to succumb to Antiochus, died for their faith. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day counted themselves as descendents of the Hasidim.

## Jewish Revolts

During foreign occupations of Palestine, the Jewish people marshaled three major revolts, one against the Greek Seleucids and two against the Roman Empire.

Maccabean Revolt  
against the Seleucids: 168–164 BCE

First Jewish Revolt  
against Rome: 66–73 CE

Second Jewish Revolt  
against Rome: 132–135 CE

Only the Maccabean Revolt succeeded. The two revolts against the Roman Empire resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and again in 135 CE. After the second Jewish Revolt (the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132–135 CE), Romans prohibited Jews (and Judaic Christians) from living in Palestine.

Led by Mattathias and his sons, some Jews banded together to fight Antiochus and his Hellenistic Greek army in Syria. Although Mattathias died, his son, Judas Maccabeus, continued the revolt. Beginning in 168 BCE, in what was known as the Maccabean Revolt, Judas Maccabeus and his band of fighters ultimately defeated the Syrian army. In 164 BCE, Judas Maccabeus reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem, used for some two years prior for the religious services of the occupying Seleucid soldiers, and purified it of the “abomination” of the presence of foreign gods (that is, Zeus). By 142 BCE, the Syrians had no other choice but to grant independence to the Jews. Although by no means popular with all Palestinian Jews, the Hasmonean (Maccabean) dynasty was established.

Palestinian Jews maintained their independence until 63 BCE, when the Roman general Pompey occupied Palestine and seized control of Jerusalem, later placing Syro-Palestine under Roman control.