Chapter

Peter, Paul, And The Apostolic Age

“Wait,” you may ask after reading the title of this chapter “aren’t you missing something?” and rightly so. But this work is an examination of theology and not so much of the details of theology. We might want to take a minute and examine Jesus as a theologian, but only if he were one – instead we will go the route that he is the Son of God, and not really a theologian but a *means* of *Revelation*. Therefore, after Judaism, one of the earliest direct influences on Christian theology is Paul and the Apostles.

Paul The Man

“Wait,” you may well ask again. How can Paul be ahead of the Apostles? Without discounting Oral Tradition, the earliest contributor to the written Tradition of Christianity is Paul, and so we will start here rather than with the Apostles. Outside of his own writings our main source is Luke the evangelist’s ‘second’ book, what is known as the *Acts of the Apostles* (*Acts* 9-28). Paul, born Saul, was from “Tarsus of Cilicia” (*Acts* 22:3) in the south of what is present-day Turkey. As credentials he states that he was of the tribe of Benjamin (the youngest son of Jacob/Israel) and he tells us he was a Pharisee, ‘zealous for the Law’ in his religious/political leanings. If we know our Christian history, then we know that he explains the effects of that zealousness. The story goes that he was exposing Jews who followed Jesus and was even acting as the official witness for their stoning until one day on the road to Damascus (in Syria) he had some sort of vision of Jesus, was ‘blinded’ and then secured within the very community he was persecuting. After this change of heart, what he calls a “transformation”, his previous zealousness was put into exposing the message of the gospel to the gentile world. He became a prolific writer and traveler until his death in about 64 AD in Rome under the Emperor Nero.

What defines him as a theologian though? How did he grow up and what formed his understanding of Judaism, and therefore of Jesus? Fortunately we can turn to some of his ‘own’ words. While he says he is a Pharisee (*Philippians* 3:5), Pharisaism was more a rule of conduct rather than a system of dogmas, and great diversity of opinions existed among Pharisees; in addition, for the most part, it did not exist outside of the Palestine region. Paul declares though that the he was taught by Gamaliel (c.f. *Acts* 22), a famous Pharisaic rabbi who was active between 22 and 55 A.D. Several of whose rulings of appear in the *Mishnah* (which in turn also identifies him as one of the holiest teachers in all of Judaism), mostly having to do with marriage and divorce (c.f. Paul’s comments on marriage in *1 Corinthians* 7) though a somewhat misguided 12th century Christian tradition credits him with the whole of the *Talmud*. He is also considered by both Orthodox and Roman tradition to be a convert and saint, though that too may be of dubious validity.

Gamaliel was a Pharisee in the tradition of the great Hillel[[1]](#footnote-1), who was more open to ‘Hellenism’ (Greek influenced Judaism) than the other more prevalent (at that time) and conservative school of Shammai. This is an important note in understanding the overall influence of Gamaliel because within the first decade after the birth of Jesus the Hillelite view was the prevailing one, as reflected in the *Talmud*. Hillel espoused a broader interpretation of the Law, which produced rulings based on concern for the day-to-day welfare of every Jew. As is still the case, it was difficult for the poor and powerless to get justice and Hillel’s attitudes produced what were considered fair and just results for the marginalized. Several aspects of Jesus’ message reflect Hillel’s attitudes and writings (Hillel considered ‘love of man’ the kernel of Jewish teaching, if that sounds familiar at all). We can see this same emphasis on justice in Paul’s writings as well as the principles of scriptural exegesis[[2]](#footnote-2) used by the rabbis of his time. It is possible then that Paul’s earlier militarism against the followers of Jesus is perhaps based in his ‘traditional’ Jewish upbringing outside of Palestine before he went to learn under Gamaliel in Jerusalem and speaks to an influence from the conservative Shammai school as well.

That said, on a final note, Gamaliel also appears as a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish elder court/council, and is seen as supporting leniency in regards to the early preaching of the apostles (*Acts* 5:34-39).

As a man, from his writings and descriptions about him by others, Paul seems to be full of inconsistencies—arrogant but also humble, a fervent believer but a probing, critical thinker, inflexible yet accommodating, a mystic but also a missionary and builder/supporter of communities. It has been postulated from statements he makes about himself that Paul was an epileptic, something which would have influenced both himself and his Jewish and non-Jewish listeners (Jews saw it as ‘demonic’ while Romans would have seen it as ‘touched by the gods’).(c.f. *2 Cor*. 7:7; *Gal*. 4: 13) (comp. *2 Cor*. 5:13; 10:10; 11:1, 16; 7:6) This and other ‘unreliable’ behavior such as his reliance upon the Septuagint rather than ‘Hebrew’ scriptures, has led groups throughout time to discount him and his works.

Paul The Thinker

Along that line, some take the line that Paul ‘hijacked’ Christianity from Jesus and the Jewish converts, especially through his Hellenism which seems to triumph soon after his death and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. He certainly was actively hostile to ‘Judaizers’ working in ‘his’ missionary realm, and had several things to say about the ‘old’ Law. But there is no denying his charisma and brilliance, so before we tackle these things let us take a moment and summarize his thought as we can see it in his “own hand”.

It is Paul’s writings, some of the earliest in Christian hagiography (earlier even than the Gospels), which reveal the most about his theology. As a quick note, the order of Paul’s letters (or any of the epistles for that matter) in the Bible has nothing to do with history and more to do with length; they go from longest to shortest, hence *Romans* is first. While we will not get into this, fourteen of the twenty-one letters have been traditionally attributed to Paul, but as of now only about seven are undisputed (dates in bold below: *Romans*, *1 Corinthians*, *2 Corinthians*, *Galatians*, *Philippians*, *1 Thessalonians*, and *Philemon*) with the six others continuing to bear his name and certainly the marks of his influence.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Work** | **~Date** | **Themes** |
| **1 Thessalonians** | ***51*** | The second coming and those who have died. |
| **Galatians** | ***48-55*** | Harsh on backsliding, big on grace. |
| **2 Thessalonians** | *50-52* | Similar to the themes of the first letter. |
| **1 Corinthians** | ***56*** | Factions and in-fighting; behavior, especially at the Lord’s Supper and the nature of that sacrament. |
| **Romans** | ***56–58*** | Brilliant summation of all of Paul’s teaching; very influential in doctrine. |
| **2 Corinthians** | ***57*** | The nature of the Christian life and ministry, authority and apostleship. |
| **Philippians** | ***55-58*** | Unity and his joy in captivity/hardship. |
| **Colossians** | *55+?* | Heavy Christology. |
| **Philemon** | ***61-63*** | This shows Paul’s pastoral side balancing rules with love, using the situation (the returning slave: a broken law) to contrast Roman law with Christian law – the law of love. |
| **Ephesians** | *61-100* | Very similar to Colossians, may be a copy of it. |
| **1 Timothy** | *60-100+* | Ministry, authority and orthodoxy. |
| **Titus** | *61-67* | Same as 1 Timothy. |
| **2 Timothy** | *60-100+* | Possibly written before 1 Timothy; same themes. |

We can also get a feel for Paul the thinker from his arguments on the Areopagus in Athens, as related in Luke’s book of Acts (*Acts 17:16-34*). Spurred on by Epicureans and Stoic philosophers, Paul mounted the Areopagus (a large flat hill above the agora and just beneath the Acropolis: the soapbox of its day) and was challenged to a discussion of ideas. The outcome was mixed, and while some derided his thought (most probably the Epicureans because of his Hellenized discussion of the soul) some did follow his teaching which means he had some rhetorical ability and had to have some knowledge of their thought.

Hellenized Judaism

*Hellenistic Judaism* was a movement which developed in the post-Alexandrian Jews who through the diaspora were spread out across the Greek world and the Holy Land. It sought a kind of update of the Jewish religious tradition within the culture and language of the Greek world. Perhaps the longest lasting and most influential impact of this effort is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Septuagint* (begun in the 3rd century BC), known to Jesus and the Apostles.

As a Jew trained in this way of thinking by Gamaliel, Paul then would not be considered as being in the Jewish main stream – even at the time – and most likely despised by many of the early Jewish followers. For most, ‘Hellenized’ Jews were the cause of the earlier Maccabean revolt[[3]](#footnote-3) (167-164 BC, *think Hanukah*) as much as were the Greeks themselves. These Hellenized Jews went as far as to subject themselves to an ‘un-circumcision’ operation, the very physical sign of the covenant with God; we can only imagine the chaos that kind of thinking must have caused among traditional Jews. In fact, much of the Jewish apocalyptic literature conveys a picture in which the Jews were violently opposed the imposition of Hellenistic culture, especially from within (the apocalyptic book of Daniel dates from this time) yet the idea of Resurrection is mentioned for the first time in Jewish Scripture (c.f. *Daniel* 12:1-2). Even the Hasmoneans are influenced by this thinking (c.f. 2 Maccabees).

So it is perhaps ironic that Greek influence is seen in the deepening of Jewish religious beliefs. Prior to the Hellenistic period the Jewish concept of the afterlife had been drastically different, as we discussed earlier. We now see the development of the concepts like the immortality of the soul and life after death and/or some sort of resurrection and through that the idea of Jewish eschatological salvation (still, an idea which was not shared by everyone). Think about it this way: eternal salvation is impossible without an immortal soul, which is a Platonic concept, thus a Greek Platonic concept of an immortal soul is central to any belief in eternal salvation. And so, while not shared by everyone even hundreds of years later, the use of Greek concepts by the Jews (within a Jewish context) points to a development in the Jewish system. Additionally, in a testament to Jewish thought, at about the same time (the third century), Greek writers began to take notice of the Jews. Theophrastus (a student of Aristotle) characterized the Jews as "philosophers", probably in the same way that Justin Martyr classified Christianity as a ‘philosophy’. Judaism was becoming an ‘accepted system.’

This should not be surprising because the Jews, while very much genetically oriented, were never a completely closed religion and as they dispersed around the known world they spent great effort to invite in and train converts. Many of the documents they used for this purpose were so effective they were later adapted by the Christians for the same goal.

Philo Of Alexandria

As an example, a brief mention here of a Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria (~20-50 AD) and while that may seem odd, do not forget that everyone involved here is Jewish. Philo was not a Christian though, and for all intents and purposes seems to know nothing of Jesus, the Apostles or Paul. Instead we know of him mainly from a short trip he took to Rome to meet with Caligula in an effort to stop the persecution of Jews in Alexandria in about 38 AD.

So why bring him up? We do have a smattering of his writings, and as a Hellenized Jew he puts forth some ideas we will see in Christianity, especially in terms of the *Logos*. Philo saw this Greek concept present throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and argued that there was compatibility between Greek philosophy and the Scriptures. For him, God’s ‘son’, the Logos, is the means by which the world was created and as such is both transcendent *and* immanent. That is to say that Philo felt that the Logos was both in God’s presence and yet also in the world. We hear this echoed in the prologue of the Gospel of John. That said Philo saw the Logos as subordinate to the Father, not co-existent with Him as does John.

Paul’s Thinking

It is nothing new then that Hellenistic influences are far from alien to the message of Christianity. We can understand then that while he was so Jewish Paul was also so anti-‘Judaizers’, that is against those folks who were probably still anti-‘Hellenistic’. This position gets to the heart of some of the objections to Paul, both then and now. Many of the Jewish converts (in this case groups with names like Ebionites and the Nazarenes) followed the apostle James and were not Hellenists like Paul, consequentially they tended to think of Jesus the Jewish terms discussed in the previous chapter. Ultimately because of the fact that God was God alone, Jesus was not divine – how could he be if there were just one God? This idea does not work for Paul, especially since the death and resurrection of Jesus, that post-life Jesus who appeared to him and is so central to his theology.

Paul’s Hellenism and theology about the Christology of Jesus does not mean that Paul has stopped being a Jew. Certainly, there is only one God, and God is that God. But because of his lens, he begins to explore how that could be; how can God be one yet Jesus be divine? Mind you, these early explorations have caused centuries of conflict. That in mind, Paul quotes what appear to be existing hymns (already being sung within Christian liturgies), meaning that they were established understandings of Jesus’ nature, especially now that he has passed from death to life. If we examine these hymns in Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 it is clear that Paul agrees with them, why quote them otherwise; God the Father exists and Jesus is both human and pre-existent; Creation could not be without Jesus. At the same time there is a Spirit, the Spirit of God as Jesus is the Son of God. Creation is not sustained without the life-giving Spirit. So we also have a developing Trinitarian doctrine (c.f. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:13; Ephesians 4:4-6). God is still one, but He seems to manifest Himself in different ways.

This has ramifications for the early believers. The Cross, the Resurrection, and the Parousia (the ‘second’ coming of Christ), central ideas of Paul’s soteriology, are tied into his eschatology and his ecclesiology, because as we discussed earlier these are hard to separate. There are certain things he wants to emphasize, especially if Jesus is coming back soon, things like why follow a dead man? Essentially, Paul answers these questions with that practical theology. The logic is pretty straight forward:

The Lordship of Christ – he has power over life and death. This comes from the fact that:

He both suffered death and experienced the Resurrection – truly human, truly with God.; because of that power over life and death, and the nature of Jesus’ new life as granted by the Spirit:

We are that same mystical Body of Christ – the body, raised still operates – just somehow differently; our baptism is the participation in that body; the Eucharist plays into this mystery; which means we are “holy as God is holy” because we share Christ’s holiness; ergo:

Through that death and resurrection we have Justification – that which we need for salvation, i.e. eternal life; everything comes from God:

It comes in the form of undeserved Grace – grace offered but not always taken; grace with known, ‘pre-destined’ benefits but also known consequences for its refusal. Ergo:

Christ, fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, is the center of the Faith, we need believe in nothing else because he contains it all – ergo the fullness of Revelation.

For Paul, Jesus is alive but Paul is not ‘Jesus oriented’, that is to say, he carries on the Jewish tradition of practical theology, focused more on the Christ and living Body, the present needs of the Church, as opposed to any long-term hair-splitting theology. Still, that does not mean that he is not providing apostolic teaching (kerygma) on Jesus and using Jesus’ words to do so. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, Paul alludes to the eschatological teachings of Jesus, as a basis for his teachings that Jesus will return soon; in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul quotes the commands of Jesus that married couples should not be divorced as the basis for his teachings on marriage and sexuality; in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, he describes the actions and quotes the words of Jesus over the bread and wine at the Last Supper, as the basis for his teachings on the correct understanding of the Eucharistic agape meal.

But for all of this, Paul is very adamant that what he teaches is not from him. He really wants (most of the time) that everyone understands that he is not the source or the summit of the message – only the Christ is. “I mean that each of you is saying, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I give thanks [to God] that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning.” (1 Corinthians 1:12-17; c.f. also 1 Corinthians 3:4-23)

*Apostolos*

Paul was an evangelical preacher, a preacher of the ‘Good News’, the gospel of Jesus Christ. He challenges even the Twelve with his teaching (c.f. *Galatians* 2, *Acts* 15) – but how? What weight and authority does he carry? When Paul declares himself an apostle what is he saying and why is it important that he does so? (c.f. *1 Corinthians* 15:9) The basic meaning of the word is “one who is sent” but it is applied to a very few of Jesus’ disciples. In addition, if we look at the Scripture references, theuse ofthe word *'apostle'* differs between the Gospel and Acts writers and Paul. The authors of the Gospels and of Acts use the term strictly to identify those disciples in the inner circle, the ‘Twelve’, who were specifically chosen by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. *Acts* 1:21-26 seems to further suggest that only those who were with Jesus from the time of John the Baptist at the beginning of his ministry could become Apostles. Paul, however, seems to use the term in its basic and far more broader sense, as that of ones sent to preach. By that thinking he is able to include himself and his helpers.

When we take it in its more restrictive and common use, the meaning of the term ‘Apostle’ we usually are thinking about denotes the Twelve. In that way the term ‘Twelve’ represents that specific understanding of ‘Apostle’, such that the two are interchangeable. By that, one could argue against Paul because he had never even ‘seen’ Jesus alive, much less been there during his ministry. He did not live with Jesus or directly hear his teachings and explanations. But in a sense we can see it as perhaps Paul does, as the “apostle to the Gentiles” (*Romans* 11:13). To Paul, Jesus *did* appear to him. The argument becomes that Paul sees himself as the apostle of the Christ whereas the Twelve are the apostles of Jesus. In that sense the Twelve have Authority directly from Jesus and the post-resurrection Christ (c.f. *Matthew* 16:17-19, 28:16-20) who received it from the Father, but Paul has it directly from the post-ascension, kingly Christ.

Peter

Speaking about that limited sense of ‘Apostle’, when we think about the Apostles, especially as presented in the Gospels, we are usually drawn to Peter by the authors. First, because in the role of spokesman (Greek chorus if you want) he is the one we probably know the most about.

Why Peter though? Where Paul seems to have a reckless disregard for traditional Judaism, Peter seems to have and appalling lack of knowledge of Judaism as a whole. In addition it really is James (possibly a very close relative of Jesus) who is the bulwark of Jewish Christianity but, in the end, it is Peter to whom all appeal or defer.

And if that is the case why is it that James is the head of the Church in Jerusalem? Why not Peter? He does not seem to found any churches though he is traditionally seen as the bishop in several. Why does Peter wander and not settle in one place? Could it be for the very reason that he is the spokesman, the head-honcho? If one looks at the Gospels and Acts then it certainly seems that way. Reading the Letters of Peter, even though they seem to be later in origin, one gets a sense of a universal (catholic) Church which seems to be his focus. Peter will define the doctrines of the Church by his very words, not of one community or another. Peter speaks the Truths upon which even Paul builds.

And so we argue about the broader understanding of Scripture and against those who would denigrate the Church but reducing it only to Paul. Paul and Peter are indispensable to the early Church, but Peter is the rock and foundation, expressing the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Even so, the Apostolic Age is larger than even them, as captured in the Gospels from memories and stories of other eye-witnesses as well. In the end, though, it is Peter’s proclamations which are the basic *kerygma* upon which the Church rests.

Death

But all good things must come to an end and when it comes time to begin to wind down the Apostolic Age, both Peter and Paul look to Rome. At this point we make assumptions about the nature of both Peter and Paul from the early writings but what do we really know about this time? Was Paul really a Roman citizen? Acts makes clear on several occasions that he was. Twice Paul uses this with regard to being flogged (*Acts* 16:37; 22:25), since it was illegal to flog a Roman citizen, and Paul on both occasions dramatically (and rather tiresomely) announces his citizenship chiefly to embarrass the Roman authorities. It is also the grounds for his being taken to Rome for trial (*Acts* 25:11). But why is there no sign of any appeal process during his time in Rome? On the other hand, Paul himself writes that he was three times beaten with rods (*2 Corinthians* 11:25), a known Roman penalty yet nowhere makes mention of his Roman citizenship though this may be because by this time it is more important to him that his “citizenship is in heaven” (*Philippians* 3:20). Was Peter really in Rome? Tradition and now archeological evidence at the site beneath the Vatican main altar seems to prove that he was. In the end, while Paul’s Roman citizenship may be a reference for the many citizens who were becoming Christian, it is like Peter’s specific request for crucifixion: not really worth worrying about.

What has to be worried about is whether their deaths and the deaths of the other Apostles created any sort of crisis of authority. The answer appears to be “no”. The line continues to be traced in all centers of Christianity. The basic design of the Church’s authority, as described in the letters of Paul and the Catholic Epistles, show that the transfer was fairly smooth and well understood. It is heavily based in both Jewish and Roman structures of power. The Synagogue system is well established and practiced by many of the Jews and their converts. The Roman system of dioceses and parishes is easily adopted to this urban religion.

We can see extra-scriptural examples of this in St. Ignatius of Antioch (?-107). He was the second bishop of Antioch after St Peter (who by tradition was not the first, that one being a man named Evodius). He was arrested, condemned to death, and transported to Rome to die in the arena. In the course of his journey there he wrote seven letters to various churches over which he had authority, where he highlights the organization of the Church, and makes binding moral pronouncements about the Christian life.

Probably the main thing to take away from this is the nature of authority. Remember this is not authority as we might think of it, rather it is one who speaks with the words of God. Jesus handed on authority to the Twelve. We see that in their ability to teach and heal among other things. The Twelve begin to disperse their authority to others, first recognizing in Paul that authority. Peter has the authority to proclaim the truth about Jesus; Jesus never says that he is the Messiah – it is Peter who does so. Peter stands and declares the special   
apostolic dogmas of the Church (*kerygma*), and from that come the doctrines or the teachings. The initial derived authority of bishops and the like is mainly a doctrinal or teaching authority. The Apostles supply the dogma and the bishops teach it. With the end of the Apostolic Age though, the necessity of declaring dogma is continued through that same authority, but is seen through the collegial council.

Authority then is couched within the transitions of this age. First we see the Apostles with their declarations of kerygma, what we would call oral Tradition, and the movement into Paul, who both proclaims dogma and doctrine with the first real theological steps into the Gospels, which are theological explorations of Jesus’ message as proclaimed by both Jesus and the Apostles.

Authorship

Authority and authorship have the same root, and our sense of authority which develops with the Apostles and is claimed by Paul depends upon these writings. But that was a long time ago. In some cases we have early fragments or quotations within other early fragments but in others we have later documents which purport to be based exactly on the originals. That aside, we have scholarship which doubts the authorship of many works, and if that is true calls into question the time-frame for the work and therefore its authority.

But that is a modern twist. When we talk about authorship in this time (and probably until ‘modern’ times), we have to be aware of the idea that one might write quotes from or ‘in the thought or vein of’ the character mentioned as the author. That is to say, *this is what so-and-so said or would have said had they said it*, so we can ‘attribute’ it to that person, ergo they are the ‘author’. This was a widely accepted practice.

After the seven accepted Pauline letter, most of the epistles then, were probably written by someone other than they are directly attributed to, either a scribe being dictated to or a later disciple from memory or even, as said in a manner quite common for the day, someone claiming the name because of similar messages or desire for ‘authority’. Because of style, content, or other reasons, several seemed to at least be written by close associates, like *Ephesians* or the three *Johns*, but some are placed too late in time for even that (especially if James is dead by ~62 and Peter and Paul are dead by ~64-67).

We see this also in many apocryphal (Greek “*of dubious origin*” different from *apocalyptic* meaning “uncovering”) works which cropped up in the first four centuries. What we must understand, and why the Church Fathers eventually settled on the Canon (Latin for *list*) we have, was that the early Church saw the purpose of the Christian Scriptures was to be the written repository of apostolic faith. The Canon would be the authoritative statements of the Church and so there is an intense desire; therefore, they wished to include only the testimony of apostles. Consequentially this was not easy process, and the New Testament Scriptures did not just fall out of the sky as we have them. There are many lists of possible books, used by early theologians to make arguments with the one of Irenaeus (~125-202) ending up being one of the most ‘authoritative’ and consequentially closest to what we have now. Still the finalization of the Canon came only after a great many discussions and disagreements about the validity of books which were selected. That said, it is only today we bother to distinguish between the historical authorship of a work and its canonicity. In their day the point was that even though written by other, later witnesses than the named author, they still testify to the apostolic faith to which they are attributed and are seen as inspired.

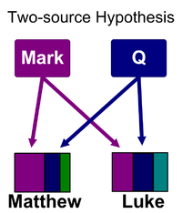
Early Documents

The oldest full text of the Christian Bible that we have dates from the 5th century, which makes sense if you realize that the canon was not really set before that time. Before that all we possess are fragments of the New Testaments books and letters.

**Paul’s Letters:**

We have already spent some time with these but it is always good to see where they fit into the overall mix. They are the earliest *known* writings, but probably stand ground with a rich Oral Tradition of the time as evidenced by his use of established hymns. The authorship of some of these letters is questioned, and some of the unquestioned ones are seen as perhaps conglomerations of other letter fragments. The availability of original papyrus is limited to copies of copies. Aside from early quotes in other works, about 800 early copies of letters exist and no two copies are completely identical.The oldest fragment found so far of Paul’s letters is from about 200 AD.

**The *Logia* or ‘*Q*’ Source:**

 Part of that rich tradition may be a large early collection of oral and written material, principally, what are recollections of the sayings of Jesus (with some stories) used by both Matthew and Luke but apparently not available to Mark. The first designation means “words” (think ‘*logos*’) and the second is from the first letter of the German word ‘*Quelle*’, meaning “source”. This view is disputed, and a more complex one has been put forth, one that relies less on a ‘source’ of sayings and more on actual eye-witness accounts and memories. The latter is advanced by those who place the date for the Gospels earlier. There are no extant fragments of any such document.

**The Gospels:**

The term ‘gospel’ means “good news” . The first three are known as ‘synoptic’ (Greek “one eye”) meaning that they are very similar and can be laid side-by-side and viewed with ‘one eye’. The dates listed are the generally accepted earliest possible dates, though there are some who argue five to ten years earlier for the synoptics. The following quick reference chart is by no means authoritative or exhaustive.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| “Author” | Date | Construction | Focus |
| Mark | ~60 AD | Probably written in Rome to a Roman Gentile audience unfamiliar with Jewish customs. Possibly written by someone or someone(s) acquainted with both Peter and Paul. | The kingdom of God now breaking into human life as good news and Jesus himself as the gospel of God. Jesus is the Son whom God has sent to rescue humanity by serving and by sacrificing his life. Help current followers to persevere on in the face of persecution as Jesus did. |
| Matthew | ~70 AD | Based on Mark and “Q”, probably written in Antioch, possibly originally in Aramaic or Hebrew to a mixed Greek speaking audience of Jewish Christians and Gentile, or a Jewish community which was becoming Gentile. Most frequently quoted in the non-canonical literature of earliest Christianity. Highlights the continuity of OT & NT but a definite turn into a new, final age. | Jesus as fulfillment: breaking-in of the new and final age through the ministry but particularly through the death and resurrection of Jesus; the demands of discipleship, the nature of the Church and how obedience will play out in the final age. |
| Luke/Acts | ~70 AD (post-destruction of Jerusalem) | Based on Mark and “Q”, possibly also written in Antioch or somewhere in the eastern part of the Roman Empire to mainly non-Palestinian Gentile Christians. Stated to be ‘historical’ in nature; the first part of a two-volume work that shows the continuity of Jesus and the Church with the biblical history of God’s dealings with humanity found in the OT. | The preaching and teaching of the representatives of the early church directly from the preaching and teaching of Jesus, who prepared his specially chosen followers and commissioned them to be witnesses to his deeds and resurrection. Also looks at the place of Gentile Christians in the Kingdom. |
| John | ~90 AD | Traditionally written in Ephesus or some such place in the east like Antioch. Not based in any other gospel. Organized completely differently than the synoptics; more of a theological rather than ‘historical’ work; highly literary and symbolic. | The divine nature of Jesus. Jesus is always in the know and always in charge of the situation. Anti-gnostic leanings, opposition to the synagogue, and to any group who would down-grade Jesus. |

Table 1: Gospel Synopsis

There are also other ‘gospels’ which were not considered canonical, many of which are the stuff of modern conjecture. Most are later creations (post-first century) and they have never been ‘lost’ but they have always been considered outside of the Canon. Many are referenced for their legend value but not used to create doctrine. Others are considered completely outside of orthodoxy and would never be used for doctrinal purposes. The oldest fragment found so far of the New Testament is a piece of the Gospel of John dated to the first half of the 2nd century, about 125 AD.

**Apostolic letters**:

These ‘catholic’ epistles (Eusebius, 260–340 AD, used the term to refer to these letters) differ from Paul’s and carry (for the most part) specific references to different authorship. [With the exception of 1 Peter and 1 John, the ancient church showed reluctance to include the catholic letters in the New Testament canon because of widespread doubt whether they had actually been written by the apostolic figures to whom they are attributed. By the late fourth or early fifth centuries, most objections had been overcome in both the Greek and Latin churches, and all seven of the catholic letters have since been acknowledged as canonical.]

* Hebrews – to Jewish Christians; the addressees are in danger of apostasy from their Christian faith not from any outside persecution but because of weariness and a growing indifference to the demands of Christian life.
* James – non-Palestinian Jews settled throughout the Greco-Roman world though some argue that it was initially a Jewish document; concerned almost exclusively with sound teaching ethical conduct especially good works. Authority of elders.
* 1 and 2 Peter – Christians there are encouraged to remain faithful to their standards of belief and conduct in spite of threats of persecution.
* 1, 2, and 3 John – Combats false ideas, especially about Jesus who is true man and true God; deepen spiritual and social awareness of the Christian community; knowledge of God and love for one another are inseparable, and error in one area inevitably affects the other.
* Jude – Warning of the dangers from false teachers worming their way into the community.

***Revelation***:

Christian apocalyptic work. Addressed to the churches of Asia Minor, it encourages them to hold fast in the face of horrific persecution. Great influence upon liturgical expression.

***Didache***:

~50-110 AD most likely an adaptation of an existing Jewish document used for converts to Judaism which could account for its earliest date. Contains early liturgical and creedal statements, as well as instructions for neophytes.

My Apologies

These sections are slim at best and I give my apologies for that but that is not what we are talking about in this chapter. Apologetics is not the art of debasement but of explanation. The transition of Christianity away from Judaism, out of the Apostolic Age and into an accepted religion thought which is really the hallmark of the faith. The ability of its disciples to convince others through word as well as deed depended upon their ability to couch the message within understood language – mainly, as stated, the language of Greek philosophy.

Since we have spoken of this in some brevity already we will not dwell for long on this subject. What is of note is the development of Scripture Tradition which starts in this period. From the end of the Apostolic Age in the beginning of the second century, the use of both the established Hebrew and the fragmented Christian letters and Gospels is a great aid in seeing both the maturing of theology and the that of the canon of the Bible.

Creeds

Okay, so I brought it up, so I have to deal with it. We can make these claims because of the power of Tradition, Tradition which was laid out in the Oral days of Christianity and in various ways made it into the Written Tradition of the Scriptures. We will talk more about creeds later but in terms of authority, establishing orthodoxy, and spreading the message, creeds are the main vehicle even before Scripture.

Putting It Together

When we consider the first century of Christianity, theology must be seen as a transition from the earlier Jewish practical theological thought to a new focus on more speculative thinking. In the first century, the point is Christology – who is Christ, not just for the Jews, but for Gentiles as well. The practical guide for living is not lost but added to it is a certain amount of less practical thinking: How does one introduce the native concepts to the wider world? Judaism had already made inroad there, albeit in a more Hellenized fashion, and that created fertile ground for the expansion of Christianity outside of the Palestine region from whence it arose.

While many would argue that the Church is essentially Pauline in nature, they would be incorrect. The problem comes in the over-emphasis of Paul’s theology over every other theology contained within not just Scripture but Tradition as well. It is through the even-handed examination of all of the sources of Revelation that we arrive at a truly balanced understanding. If the other were true, if Paul was the only thinker in Christianity, then the Gospels would never have been written; his writings would have been sufficient. But we see that that thinking is not enough – it was not even enough for the Gospels, which is why we have four.

This type of thinking reinforces the unquestioned fact that the early Christians appropriated/borrowed heavily from Judaism. Certainly one can find Jewish roots within the early Christian Church and the early Church documents. The question is whether one can consider them mainstream roots or actually branches from further up the tree. Paul is not the perfect Jew in some definitions, but in the larger world he may be considered so by some. Peter’s traditional Judaism is of perhaps a less sophisticated nature than that of Paul’s, and his knowledge of a wider set of Jewish literature may be lacking, but taken together, they form the head (Paul) and the heart (Peter) of Christianity.

Most of the conflict comes from the interpretation of Paul. *Antinomianism* (Greek ‘*against law*’), is the idea that moral law is *trumped* by grace. The Law is no longer a sufficient groundwork for salvation. Luther sees this one way, the Church another (loosely based in the idea of ritual law which Luther feels Paul is agin’, verses divine law, which he is fer). This argument ties to the idea of unearned grace versus good works (*orthodoxy* – right belief versus *orthopraxy* – right practice). The number of passages which support both views is part of the problem (c.f. *Colossians* 2:13-14 and *Acts* 26:19-20). It is the decision of one over the other which causes the problem. [Luther, believing that his doctrines were refuted by certain passages in James, suggested that the Epistle might be a forgery, and relegated it to an appendix in his Bible (although he later came to accept its canonicity).] It is only with the failure to take the whole of Tradition into account that these divisions develop – not just later in Luther, but throughout Church history.

It is ironic though that Paul, who so often called for unity, is the source of so much division in Christianity.

*“We reject God's love and then we wonder 'where will I find love?'; we reject God's forgiveness and then we spend years looking in all the wrong places for expiation for our sins; we reject God's salvation and put hope in things which will kill us; we reject eternal life and then try to find joy in nothingness.”*

**Anonymous**

1. In fact, by Jewish tradition, he is the grandson of Hillel. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. the process of critical examination of a text, using one or several methods like looking at it within its historical context or searching for the meaning of a word at the time of it use as opposed to later meanings in order to help in the interpretation of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Which resulted eventually in the occupation by the Romans [↑](#footnote-ref-3)