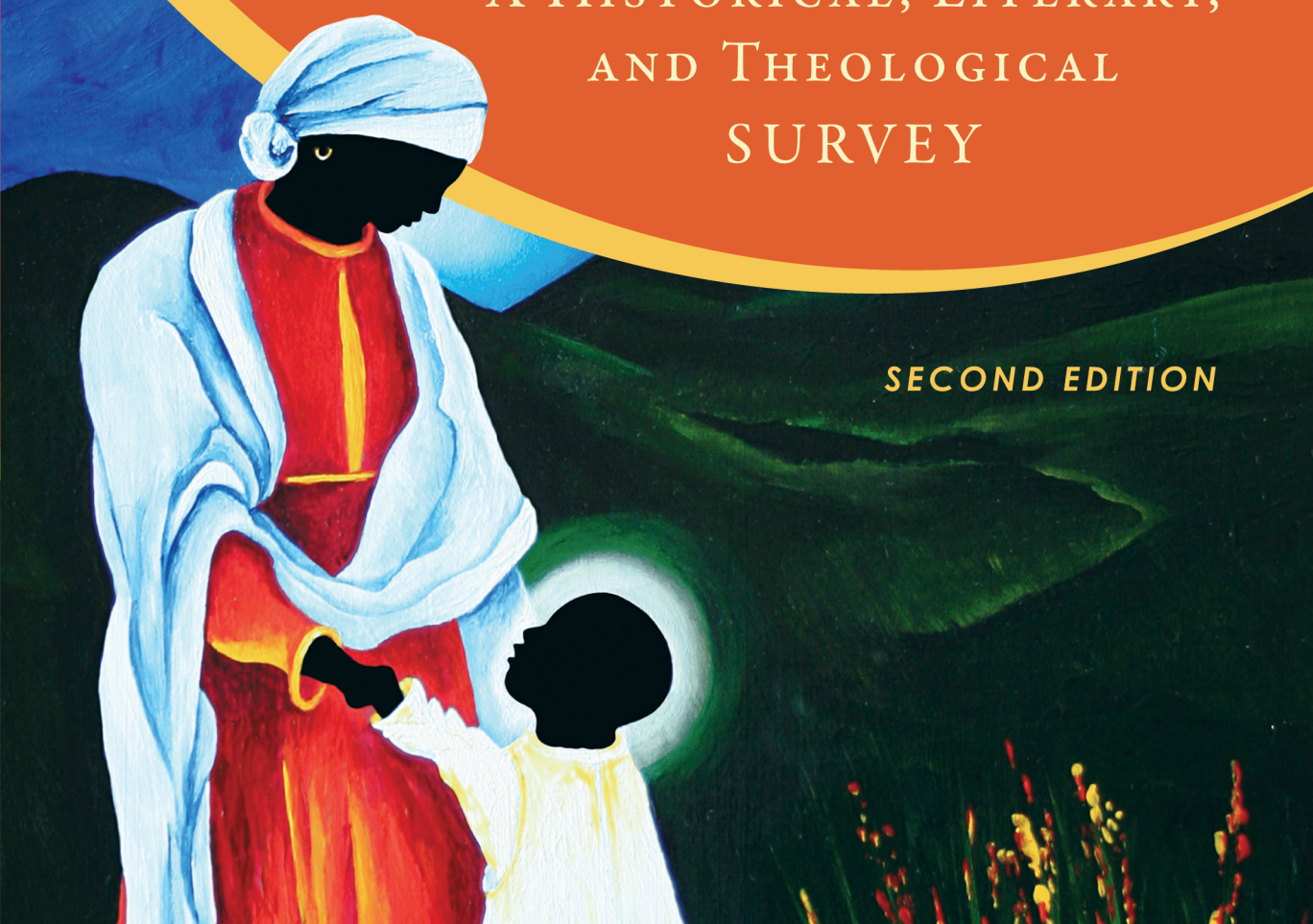
Mark Allan Powell

INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT

A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey

SECOND EDITION



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New Testament Background

The Roman World

The world of the New Testament can be a strange place for the uninitiated. People beat their breasts (Luke 18:13; 23:48), tear their clothing (Mark 14:63), speak in tongues (Acts 2:4–13; 1 Cor. 14), and wash one another's feet (John 13:3–15). Some people wear phylacteries, which Jesus thinks should be narrow, not broad (Matt. 23:5). When people eat, they don't sit at a table; they lie on the floor (John 13:23, 25). When they want to elect an important leader, they don't take a vote; they cast lots (Acts 1:26).

phylactery: a small case containing texts of Scripture worn on the forehead or left arm by pious Jews in obedience to Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18.

casting lots: a practice akin to "drawing straws," used to select a person for a given task; "lots" were marked stones similar to dice (see Acts 1:26).

This world is often a harsh one by our standards. When a woman wants to make a request of a man, she kneels in the dirt and waits for him to call on her (Matt. 20:20); when a man defaults on a debt, his wife and children are sold into slavery (Matt. 18:25). It is a brutal world, one in which thieves can be nailed naked to wooden poles and hung up in public where people can watch them slowly die (Mark 15:27). It is a world in which some people think that a woman who commits adultery should be hauled out into the street and pelted with rocks until she is dead (John 8:2–5).

It is also a world filled with surprising tenderness and dignity. People speak freely and affectionately of how deeply they love one another (Phil. 1:3–8; 4:1). Families are valued, friendships are treasured, and hospitality to strangers can almost be taken for granted. It is a world where faith, hope, and love are primary values (1 Cor. 13:13) and where the retention or attainment of honor trumps all other goals in life. This is also a world with a finely tuned moral compass, with some widely accepted notions of what constitutes virtue and what constitutes vice (see, e.g., Rom. 1:29–31; 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:10–11; 6:9–10; 2 Cor. 6:6–7; Gal. 5:19–23).

All the books of the New Testament were written by people whom we would call Christians, so in order to understand them, we have to know a few things about what these Christians believed: what they valued, what they feared, how they lived. But, to be a bit more specific, all the books of the New Testament were written by Roman Christians—that is, Christians who lived in the Roman Empire. Furthermore, even though all these books were written *by* Christians, not all were written *about* Christians. Jesus, John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, and many other celebrated New Testament personalities were not Christians, but Jews. To be more specific, they were Roman Jews—that is, Jews who lived in the Roman Empire.

To understand the New Testament, then, we must know about three different worlds: the Christian world, the Jewish world, and the Roman world. In all of the New Testament writings, these three worlds overlap.

Map 1.1. The Roman Empire.

Roman Rule during the Christian Era

BCE: an abbreviation meaning "before the common era"; in academic studies BCE is typically used for dates in place of BC ("before Christ").

CE: an abbreviation meaning "common era"; in academic studies CE is typically used for dates in place of AD (*anno Domini*, "in the year of our Lord").

Jesus was born during the reign of the first great Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE), and he conducted his ministry during the reign of the next emperor, Tiberius (14–37 CE). Rome is a long way from Jerusalem, but the emperor's presence was always felt. Later, as Christianity moved out into the world around the Mediterranean Sea, the new faith came to the attention of the emperors in ways that invited direct engagement. For example, the Roman historian Suetonius reports that the emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome around 49 CE due to a disturbance over someone known as "Chrestus" (probably a mangled reference to Christ). Claudius's successor, Nero, violently persecuted Christians, murdering them in sadistic ways that generally repulsed the Roman public.

For Jesus and his followers in Palestine, however, the local Roman rulers had more immediate relevance than the emperors in faraway Rome. When the Romans conquered a country, they typically set up a king, governor, or some other ruler in the land, but they also tried to preserve some institutions of native rule. Thus, according to the New Testament, a council of Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin, had authority in Jerusalem in some matters (Mark 14:55–64; Acts 5:21–40), but the Roman authorities always had the final say (cf. John 18:31). Some knowledge of these Roman authorities is important for understanding the New Testament, so here we look briefly at some of these rulers.

Herod the Great

Herod the Great ruled all of Palestine from 37 to 4 BCE. He was first appointed king by Marc Antony but was later confirmed in that position by Antony's archrival, Caesar Augustus. The fact that he attained support from both of these rival leaders indicates that he was adept at political maneuvering (switching sides at exactly the right time). Herod would also become known as a master builder; his projects included a harbor at Caesarea and a number of fortresses (including Masada, Machaerus, and the Herodium). He rebuilt the ancient city of Samaria into the Greek metropolis Sebaste and, perhaps most important, was responsible for expanding and refurbishing the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. At the time of Jesus, this "Herodian temple" was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; its pinnacle was the highest architectural point in the world.

Box 1.1

Herod and the Temple

The Jewish Roman historian Josephus reports, "In the fifteenth year of his reign, (Herod) restored the temple and, by erecting new foundation-walls, enlarged the surrounding area to double its former extent. The expenditure devoted to this work was incalculable, its magnificence never surpassed" (*Jewish War* 1.401).

Josephus, *Jewish War: Books 1–2*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), §1.401.

Map 1.2. Palestine in the time of Jesus.

Fig. 1.1. Herod the baby-killer. Herod the Great will always be remembered for "the massacre of the innocents" described in Matthew 2:1–18 and portrayed in this fifth-century fresco from Verona (northern Italy). The story is not mentioned in any other ancient record, but historians agree that it seems in keeping with the sort of atrocities for which the otherwise capable ruler was renowned. (Bridgeman Images)

Ethnically an Idumean, Herod was considered to be "half-Jewish," but he was viewed by the Jewish people as a foreigner and a Roman collaborator. Though Herod the Great appears to have been a competent ruler in many respects, he was famously paranoid to the point that he actually inspired a Roman proverb attributed to Caesar Augustus: "Better to be a pig than a son in the house of Herod" (the Romans found it humorous that Herod did not eat pork but did kill three of his children when he suspected them of wanting to usurp his throne). Herod also murdered his Jewish wife, Mariamne, when he suspected her of plotting against him, and this incident inspired numerous legends (e.g., tales of how he remained hopelessly in love with her and/or was haunted by her ghost). Herod was ruler of Palestine at the time Jesus was born (Matt. 2:1), and he remains known to Christians for the biblical story in which he confronts the magi and orders a massacre of babies in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1–18).

magi: astrologers or sorcerers associated with Persian religion.

Herod Antipas

Herod Antipas ruled Perea and Galilee from 4 BCE to 39 CE. In Roman literature he is often referred to simply as "Antipas," but the New Testament Gospels consistently call him "Herod," and this can lead to some confusion, since Herod the Great is also called "Herod" in the New Testament. In any

EXPLORE 1.3
Roman Emperors of the New Testament Period

EXPLORE 1.4
Roman Rulers in Palestine: New Testament References

Fig. 1.2. Death of a prophet. Mark 6:14–29 tells the story of a gruesome banquet in which Herod Antipas provides his stepdaughter with "the head of John the Baptist on a platter" after her mother, Herodias, prompts her to request this as a reward for pleasing the drunken ruler with her dancing. (Bridgeman Images)

tetrarch: a ruler of a quarter of a province or region.

case, Herod Antipas ruled less territory than did Herod the Great (whose lands were divided when he died), and he was only a tetrarch, not a king. Still, his tenure was a long one, and it included the entire time of Jesus's life and ministry in Galilee.

About the time Jesus began his public ministry, John the Baptist criticized Antipas for marrying his niece Herodias, who was already married to a different uncle. Antipas had John arrested and, later, beheaded at Herodias's request (Mark 6:14–29). Luke's Gospel reports that Antipas also took an ominous interest in Jesus, who refers to the ruler as a "fox" (13:31–33)—probably a reference to his penchant for violence (the Jews considered foxes to be rapacious animals that would kill not only for food but also for sport). According to Luke, Antipas heard speculation that Jesus might be John the Baptist raised from the dead (9:7–9), and he examined Jesus briefly when he was arrested in Jerusalem, hoping to see Jesus perform a miracle (23:6–12).

Pontius Pilate

Pontius Pilate ruled Judea as a prefect or procurator from 26 to 36 CE. He was, in essence, a governor who served as the representative of Caesar. Pilate is portrayed in some literature (notably the writings of Philo of Alexandria) as a cruel ruler who hated the Jews and did not understand their religion. Some scholars think that this vilification is perhaps exaggerated, but many reports do indicate that Pilate's term in office was marred by episodes of conflict and violence. During his first week in power he sought to install imperial banners in Jerusalem, which precipitated a crisis among Jews, who saw the banners as idolatrous. Embarrassed, Pilate removed the banners in response to virulent protest and threats of riot. He later used temple funds to finance an aqueduct, and this precipitated more protests, but this time he did not back down; he sent soldiers (disguised as civilians) into the crowd of protesters and, at a prearranged signal, had them beat and kill people at random. The New Testament reports that Pilate was the governor who sentenced Jesus to be crucified while also declaring him to be innocent (Matt. 27:1–26; Mark 15:1–15; Luke 23; John 18:28–19:26). Some years later, Pilate was recalled after using extreme force to suppress a religious revival led by a Samaritan prophet. Two more procurators of Judea figure in later New Testament stories: Felix (53–60 CE) and Festus (60–62 CE), both of whom kept Paul imprisoned in Caesarea and presided over his hearings there (Acts 23–25).

prefect: in the Roman Empire, a magistrate or high official whose duties and level of authority varied in different contexts.

procurator: a governor appointed by the Roman emperor to administer a province for an indefinite period of time.

EXPLORE 1.12
Pontius Pilate in History and Ancient Literature

Fig. 1.3. *Christ before Pontius Pilate*. This painting by Hungarian artist Tamas Galambos tries to capture the contrast between the tranquil power of an ascetic Jesus (wasted away from a life of self-denial) and the pomposity of Roman rule, evident in Pontius Pilate. (Bridgeman Images)

Herod Agrippa I

Herod Agrippa I ruled Galilee (like Herod Antipas) from 37 to 41 CE and then became king over all of Palestine (like his grandfather Herod the Great) from 41 to 44 CE. He is also simply called "Herod" in the New Testament, which can be confusing for readers who do not realize there are three different people who bear that name; also, the person

Fig. 1.4. ***The Triumph of Truth.*** This work, by nineteenth-century Italian artist Luigi Mussini, celebrates the victory of philosophy and science over superstition and ignorance—a viewpoint that would sometimes be used to justify colonialism (anticipated here in the submission of the African). The empires of Greece and Rome justified their conquests in a similar manner, as they brought Hellenistic enlightenment to cultures regarded as primitive and undeveloped. (Mondadori Portfolio / Art Resource, NY)

called "Agrippa" in Acts 25:13–26:32 is not Herod Agrippa I but is a later ruler of Galilee whom historians call "Herod Agrippa II." Herod Agrippa I was a politically popular and successful ruler, but he persecuted the fledgling Christian movement in Jerusalem, putting Jesus's disciple James to death and imprisoning Peter (Acts 12:1–3). He ultimately met with a somewhat gruesome death, which the New Testament attributes to divine wrath (Acts 12:20–23).

Philosophy and Religion in the Roman World

Everyone who lived in the world that produced the New Testament was influenced directly or indirectly by different patterns of thought that the Greeks and Romans brought to the lands that they subdued and occupied. The people of this era were heirs to the three greatest Greek philosophers—Socrates (ca. 470–ca. 399 BCE), Plato (ca. 428–ca. 348 BCE), and Aristotle (384–322 BCE)—and to some extent the thinking of most people was shaped by what these masters had

EXPLORE 1.7
Major Philosophical Schools

taught. Indeed, the case could be made that the thinking of most people today is still shaped by the ideas expounded and explored by these influential thinkers.

New Testament scholars focus more attention, however, on certain philosophical movements that were popular during the period in which the New Testament documents were written. These include the following:

- Cynicism—a philosophical orientation that emphasized radical authenticity, repudiation of shame, simplicity of lifestyle, and a desire to possess only what is obtained naturally and freely
- Epicureanism—a philosophical orientation that emphasized free will, questioned fate, and encouraged the attainment of true pleasure through avoidance of anxiety, concentration on the present, and enjoyment of all things in moderation
- Platonism—a philosophical orientation that emphasized the reality of a transcendent world of "ideals" standing behind everything physical or earthly
- Pythagoreanism—a philosophical orientation that emphasized the value of intelligent reasoning, memory, and radical honesty, all in service of a quest to attain harmony of ideas and of body and soul
- Stoicism—a philosophical orientation that emphasized the attainment of virtue through acceptance of fate, based on the notion that all things are predetermined and that there is logic to all that transpires

New Testament scholars detect the influence of these philosophical schools in various ways. Paul is depicted as interacting with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Acts 17:16–34, but the impact of Greek and Roman philosophy can be detected even when there is no reason to suspect direct contact. Josephus, a first-century Jewish Roman historian, thought that the Essenes (who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls) were analogous to Pythagoreans and that the Pharisees had much in common with Stoics. Likewise, many modern scholars have noted similarities between the first followers of Jesus and Cynic philosophers (e.g., in their renunciation of materialism and worldly status). Several letters in the New Testament (including 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and James) make use of the "diatribe" and other forms of rhetorical argument that were popular among Cynic and Stoic philosophers. The Letter to the Hebrews is often read as an engagement with Platonic philosophy, and the concept of the "Logos" in John 1:1–18 also owes much to that school of thought. The "banquet talks" that Jesus gives in Luke's Gospel (7:44–46; 14:7–14) and the lengthy discourses that he offers in the Gospel of John (5:19–47; 6:25–70; 7:14–52; 8:12–59; 10:1–18, 22–39; 12:23–36; 14:1–16:33) are similar in style and content to writings of various philosophical schools.

Essenes: ascetic, separatist Jews who lived in private communities.

Dead Sea Scrolls: a collection of Jewish documents copied and preserved between 250 BCE and 70 CE.

diatribe: a rhetorical device derived from Greek philosophy in which an author argues with an imaginary opponent by proposing objections and then responding to them.

Of course, not everyone in the Roman world would have identified as a follower of one of these particular schools. Jewish peasants in Palestine may not have known one system from another. Still, these philosophies represent the sort of thinking that was "in the air" at the time. They represent efforts to answer questions that virtually everyone wondered about: What is the purpose or goal or highest good in life? Is everything predetermined, or can people make choices that affect how their lives turn out? Is there life beyond death? What is the secret of happiness? Even uneducated people in far-flung corners of the empire (e.g., Galilean fishermen or shepherds or carpenters) tended to think about things like this and to orient themselves in a manner more compatible with one philosophical system than with others. Naturally, people then (as now) could also be eclectic and inconsistent, simultaneously holding to notions derived from schools that the philosophers themselves might not have considered compatible.

Roman Religion

In addition to the major philosophical systems, the Roman world offered a smorgasbord of religious options. There were, first of all, the numerous gods known to us from Greek and Roman mythology (Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, and others). Most of these had temples in their honor, and people were invited to engage in various festivities and practices to earn the gods' favor or celebrate their gifts. Some people in the empire appear to have taken this very seriously and literally. For others, the ostensibly religious observances were more social and symbolic experiences, something akin to modern people celebrating Christmas with rituals designed around the Santa Claus story. Thus when Roman

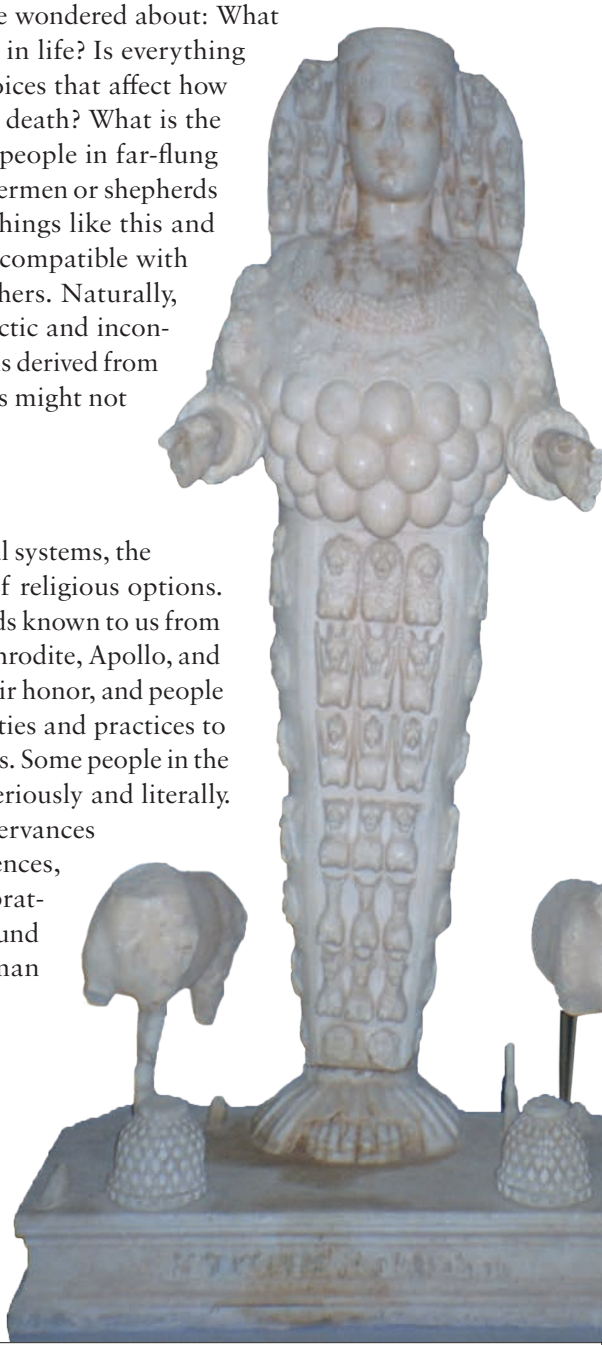

Fig. 1.5. Artemis. One of the more popular deities of the ancient world, the goddess Artemis was especially revered in Ephesus. A mother goddess, Artemis is easily recognizable by the numerous globes on her chest. These are usually thought to be breasts, although an alternative theory holds that they could be eggs. Either way, Artemis was regarded as a provider of fertility and as an overseer of children. See also fig. 17.2. (Craig Koester)

EXPLORE 1.8
Artemis of the Ephesians

pagans converted to Christianity, there was some question as to whether purely social observances connected with pagan mythology were incompatible with their new faith. Some Roman Christians saw nothing wrong with celebrating traditional festivals inspired by stories of mythical gods, whom they knew to be unreal. Other Christians (like most Jews) saw this as a dire compromise.

pagans: nonconverted gentiles, often associated by Jews and Christians with idolatry, polytheism, erratic religious beliefs, and an immoral lifestyle.

Something similar probably applied to emperor worship. The Roman emperors often were identified as divine figures to whom appropriate homage was due. In popular piety, various miracles and divine benefits were attributed to the emperors. Beyond this, however, no real "religion" developed around the emperors: what Jews and Christians regarded as "worship" of emperors, most Romans saw as simple acts of patriotism (analogous to pledging allegiance to a flag). The Romans rarely understood why Christians refused to pay such homage to Caesar.

The Roman world also featured a wide variety of cults that modern scholars identify as "mystery religions." The mystery religions were organized around gods and goddesses from various mythologies: Demeter, Dionysius, Orpheus, Cybele, Astarte (Ishtar), and Artemis (Diana) were particularly popular. They differed from one another but always involved participation in secret rites, such as ritual washings, common meals, and sometimes sexual rites related to concerns for fertility (of crops or of humans). The secret knowledge that was obtained allowed the devotees to bond with the god or goddess in this life and to establish an intimate connection that would continue in the world beyond death. We know that these religions were popular, but we know little about them because their practitioners deliberately kept their ideas and practices secret. What reports we do have might be hyperbolic accounts based on speculation and rumor. After all, Christianity was regarded as a mystery religion by some Romans when it first appeared, and early reports concerning Christian worship included allegations of orgies and cannibalism—probably because the Christians called their eucharistic meal a "love feast" and talked about "eating the body of Christ."

fertility: the ability to produce offspring; used of humans able to conceive children, or of fields able to produce crops.

eucharistic meal or Eucharist: from a Greek word meaning "thanksgiving"; the Christian rite or sacrament also known as the "Lord's Supper" or "Holy Communion."

Finally, it might be helpful to mention a few other areas of spiritual interest that were so widespread in the New Testament world that they need not be connected with any one particular religion.

Animism

There was widespread belief in the existence of spirits, good and bad, and in the possibility that these spirits could possess people and animals. They could also dwell in rocks, trees, streams, and other phenomena. The common perception was that such spirits interacted with the world of nature—for example, storms at sea were caused by water sprites; diseases were caused by demonic possession. As a result of these beliefs, protective amulets often were

Fig. 1.6. Animism. In the Roman world it was commonly believed that trees, rocks, rivers, and other natural phenomena were inhabited by spirits. (Bridgeman Images)

worn by people from all social classes, and magical potions and spells were used to influence or manipulate the spirits into doing one's bidding. The city of Ephesus appears to have been a center for these magical arts (see Acts 19:11–21). Along these same lines, we should note that virtually everyone in the New Testament world believed in ghosts (spirits of the departed); some tried to contact them.

Augury and Divination

There was great interest in knowing the future: dreams, visions, and other portents could reveal the future, but an interpreter might be needed to know their meaning. Priests known as augurs tried to determine the will of the gods by observing flight patterns or eating habits of birds (the "auspices"). Professional oracles, usually women, claimed to have the ability to predict the future for those who sought them out (and performed required services). The most famous of these was at Delphi in Greece. Astrology was also practiced, offering predictions of the future (and attendant advice for the present) based on the observation of stars, which were believed to be deities affecting earthly events.

Supernaturalism

There was common acknowledgment among most people in the Roman world that what we might regard as supernatural events could and did occur: what we deem impossible, they considered extraordinary. Miracles often were attributed to individuals who seemed to have an especially close link to the spiritual realm; a person believed to have such a link was called a *theios anēr* ("divine man"). Examples of such "divine men" include Honi the Circle Drawer (a Jewish teacher from the first century BCE) and Apollonius of Tyana (a Greek philosopher from the first century CE). Jesus, who lived in between the lifetimes of these two individuals, no doubt would have been regarded as a *theios anēr* by Romans who heard the miracle stories reported in the New Testament.

Interestingly, while women were more likely to be regarded as oracles who could predict the future, most miracle-workers were men.

On the Horizon: Gnosticism

One of the more significant developments for Christianity in the second century was the emergence of gnosticism, a religious movement or perspective that appealed to many Christians and became the bane of many prominent church leaders who sought to defend the orthodox faith from what they called the "gnostic heresy." Gnosticism is difficult to define because as a religious and ideological phenomenon it took many forms and had many different expressions (think, for instance, of how difficult it would be to define exactly what is meant by "new age" religion or thinking today). Gnosticism also demonstrated a remarkable capacity for integration with different religions and philosophies: there were gnostic Jews, gnostic Christians, and gnostic pagans. Ultimately, however, the marriage of gnosticism and Christianity proved especially effective, and throughout the second, third, and fourth centuries gnostic versions of Christianity constituted the primary alternatives to what we usually think of as "mainstream" Christianity. There were hundreds of gnostic Christian churches, complete with their own clergy, bishops, liturgies, and all the other accoutrements of any organized religious system. The gnostics also wrote their own gospels, telling stories about Jesus in ways that reflected their particular interests and then backdating the books by falsely attributing them to Jesus's disciples or close acquaintances. A library of gnostic writings was discovered in Egypt at Nag Hammadi in 1945, and the availability of that literature has greatly enhanced our understanding of Christian diversity.

heresy: false teaching, or teaching that does not conform to the official standards of a religious community.

All the various expressions of gnostic thought derive from a radically dualistic attitude that regards "spirit" as fundamentally good and "matter" as fundamentally evil. Thus the physical world in general and individual human bodies in particular are understood to be material prisons in which divine souls or spirits have been trapped. The most prevalent form of gnosticism known to us held that the world was created by an evil or at least inferior god known as the Demiurge. Human beings are basically eternal spirits that were captured by the Demiurge and are now being confined in bodies of flesh and in a world of matter. Gnostic Christians believed that Christ had come as a spiritual redeemer (disguised as a human being) to impart secret knowledge (Greek, *gnōsis*). This knowledge enables the enlightened to be liberated from their material existence and to realize their true identities as spiritual beings. The implications of such a belief system for life in this world varied dramatically. Many (probably most) gnostics held that liberation from the flesh involved renunciation of bodily pleasures and material concerns: they encouraged virginity, celibacy, fasting, strict

dualistic: exhibiting the tendency to separate phenomena into sharply opposed categories.

Fig. 1.7. Roman cities. These images portray reconstructions of Roman cities in New Testament times. *Above*, the city of Rome, capital of the empire; *below*, Caesarea, a coastal city in Judea. See also figs. 10.4; 13.1; 14.1; 17.2; 18.1. (Balage Balogh / www.archaeologyillustrated.com)

diets, and other aspects of an ascetic and austere lifestyle that would enable them to become more spiritual. But other gnostics drew the opposite conclusion: they engaged freely in all manner of wanton excesses on the grounds that since the spirit is all that matters, what one does with the flesh is completely irrelevant.

ascetic: religiously strict or severe, especially with regard to self-denial or renunciation of worldly pleasures.

We need to emphasize that gnosticism appears to be a development of the second, third, and fourth centuries; there is no evidence that the movement as such had any traction at the time when events reported in the New Testament were occurring or when the books of the New Testament were being written. Nevertheless, historical scholars do not think that a movement such as this one simply appeared fully formed in the middle of the second century; the assumption is that the ideas and tendencies that would later define gnosticism must have been present earlier. Thus it has become common for New Testament scholars to speak of an almost invisible and largely unidentified "proto-gnosticism" as part of the milieu that made up the New Testament world. The apostle Paul writes about the distinction between "what is of the flesh" and "what is of the spirit" (Rom. 8:4–13; Gal. 5:16–26; 6:8). The Gospel of John and the Johannine Letters emphasize that Jesus was not just a spiritual being but rather a man with a body of actual flesh (John 1:14; 1 John 4:2). Texts such as these (there are many more) seem to indicate that gnosticism was "on the horizon": people were already thinking about the kinds of things that gnosticism would seek to address, sometimes in ways that were compatible with the New Testament documents and sometimes in ways that were radically distinct from those writings.

Social Systems and Cultural Values

Understanding the New Testament world also involves getting to know the mind-set of the people for whom these documents were first written. In recent years New Testament scholarship has become more attentive to identifying the unwritten social codes for this world—matters that may have been so pervasive they could simply be taken for granted. Some of these topics will be discussed more thoroughly in the chapters that follow. A few deserve mention here.

Wealth and Poverty

The Roman Empire was characterized by grotesque economic inequality. There was nothing comparable to what we would call a "middle class"; for the most part, people were either extremely rich (about 3 percent of the population) or extremely poor (about 90 percent). Most of those who belonged to the latter group lived at or near a subsistence level, making just enough to survive, with little hope of saving anything that would allow them to improve

EXPLORE 2.8
Commerce in the New Testament Period

their position or provide them with a hedge against calamity. The more fortunate of these impoverished persons might at least learn a trade (as was apparently the case with Jesus, his disciples, and the apostle Paul), but for many people in rural areas "subsistence" meant living off the land, and so life was subject to the vicissitudes of agriculture. Thus for the least fortunate—beggars, widows, orphans, prisoners, unskilled day laborers—survival itself may frequently have been in question. Modern estimates suggest that about 28 percent of the population of the Roman Empire during New Testament times lived below subsistence level, meaning that such people did not know from day to day whether they would be able to obtain those things necessary to sustain life.

Given the extremes of such a situation, attitudes toward wealth and poverty were a significant part of the social world. Some religious people at the time of Jesus believed that wealth could be viewed as a sign of God's blessing and that poverty could be understood as a consequence of divine displeasure. It is difficult, however, to know how widespread this notion was. What seems more certain is that virtually everyone in this time period held to what is now called a theory of "limited good." People believed that money and the things that money can buy were in short (or at least finite) supply; the common perception—in stark contrast to modern capitalism—was that acquisition of wealth or resources by some necessitated depletion of wealth or resources for others. Simply put, virtually everyone in New Testament times believed that there was only so much "stuff" to go around and that some people had less than they needed because other people had more than they needed.

Patronage and Loyalty

patron-client relationship: a social system according to which people with power serve as benefactors to those lacking power.

Roman society (in Palestine and everywhere else) functioned in accord with strong expectations regarding benefaction and obligation. At the simplest level, the exchange of favors was virtually definitive of friendship. "Friends" were people who did things for one another, and even though no one was supposed to keep score, the assistance and support would have to be mutual over the long term or else the friendship would break down. At another level, however, almost all people were involved in patron-client relationships with people who were not their social equals. Very few people had money or power, but those who did were expected to serve as benefactors for those who did not. The wealthy might, for instance, allow peasants to live on their land or provide them with food or grain or employment. In sociological terms, such benefactors are called "patrons," and the recipients of the benefits are called "clients." In such a relationship the exchange of favors could not be mutual, but the clients were expected to offer their patron what they could: gratitude and, above all, loyalty.

They were expected to praise their patron, to speak well of their patron, and to enhance his or her social reputation. They were expected to trust their patron to continue providing for them. And, as necessary, they were expected to perform various services that the patron might request of them. Such relationships were not constituted legally, but at a basic level they represented how most people thought the world was supposed to work and, indeed, how it usually did work.

Patron-client relationships would form a significant backdrop for the development of Christian theology. The term most often used for the patron's bestowal of benefits is *charis* (typically translated as "grace" in the New Testament), and the term that is often used for the client's expected attitude of loyalty toward his or her patron is *pistis* (often translated as "faith" in the New Testament). Thus the phenomenon of patron-client relationships seems to have served as a rough analogy for divine-human encounters in which the constitutive elements are grace and faith: God gives to people freely and generously (grace), and this arouses within people an appropriate response of trust, devotion, and willingness to serve (faith).

Honor and Shame

The pivotal social value in the New Testament world (among Greeks, Romans, Jews, and everyone else) was honor—that is, the status that one has in the eyes of those whose opinions one considers to be significant. To some extent, honor was ascribed through factors beyond an individual's control: age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, height, physical health, economic class, and the like could set certain parameters that defined the limits of how much honor one could hope to attain. Given such limitations, however, many things might increase one's honor (religious piety, courage, virtuous behavior, a congenial or charitable disposition, etc.), and many things might precipitate a loss of honor or even bring its opposite, shame.

Such a value system may not seem strange to us because even in modern Western society everyone likes to receive honor and nobody wants to be put to shame. The difference, however, could be one of magnitude: the New Testament world was one in which honor was to be prized above all else and shame was to be avoided at all costs. For example, people wanted to be wealthy not primarily because wealth would enable them to live in luxury but because almost everyone believed that it was honorable to have money to spare. Likewise, it was shameful to be needy; Ben Sira, a prominent Jewish teacher of the Second Temple period taught that "it is better to die than to beg" (Sir. 40:28). He said this not because begging was immoral or sinful but because it was disgraceful, and life without honor is not worth living. Everyone in Jesus's day (including beggars) probably believed this.

Fig. 1.8. Shame. In the New Testament world shame was not just a temporary emotional response (like embarrassment) but rather an overriding psychological status according to which one lived in disgrace and was considered to be unworthy of divine or human attention (or even of life itself). Cowards, failures, and fools lived in shame, as did tax collectors, lepers, beggars, and prostitutes. Compare the use of nakedness to display shame here with the nineteenth-century depiction of Truth in fig. 1.4. (Bridgeman Images)

The language of honor and shame is found throughout the New Testament. Some voices in the New Testament seize on the language to present faithfulness as a path to achieving honor and avoiding shame (1 Pet. 1:7; 2:6). Other voices seek to overturn the conventional wisdom regarding how those values are applied, claiming, for instance, that it is more honorable to behave like a servant than to lord over others as a person of power and privilege (Mark 10:42–43; cf. Luke 14:7–11). And some New Testament documents repudiate the fixation with honor altogether, calling on readers to develop a new value system defined by Christ, who did not seek honor or fame or glory but instead bore the shame of the cross (Heb. 12:2).

Life under Roman Rule

What was life like under Roman rule? On the one hand, the Romans were very good at administration, and many things probably ran more smoothly under their control than they would have otherwise. They cleared the sea of pirates, built aqueducts and roads, kept crime to a minimum, and provided many opportunities for employment. The extent of the Roman Empire, and its basic stability, brought an unprecedented unity to the world, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the *Pax Romana*. Trade flowed more freely than ever before, and both travel and communication (e.g., the sending of letters) became relatively easy—a factor essential to the rapid spread of Christianity.

In Palestine, however, these benefits came at a very high price. First, the tax burden appears to have been incredibly oppressive, forcing most people into poverty and keeping them there. Indeed, it has been estimated that in the New Testament era between one-fourth and one-third of all people in the Roman Empire were slaves (see box 23.2). Some people actually became slaves voluntarily in hopes of improving their lot (at least then one would be

EXPLORE 1.16
Josephus on the Destruction of Jerusalem

fed). Second, the Jewish people (even those who were not literally slaves) knew that they were not free, and this knowledge was an affront to their national honor and religious sensibilities. There were soldiers everywhere, reminding them that they were a conquered people. The Jews were officially allowed to practice their religion, but Israel had a long-standing tradition of prophets who railed against injustice and exposed the shenanigans of the powerful, and the Romans did not go for that sort of thing (as John the Baptist discovered). What was allowed was an innocuous sort of religion that did not upset or challenge the powers that be.

Several ancient sources indicate that Palestine became increasingly unstable in the latter half of the first century (after the time of Herod Agrippa I). Passionate Jewish rebels known as Zealots eventually led an all-out war against Rome (66–73 CE) that had disastrous consequences for the Jewish people. The city of Jerusalem was conquered and the temple destroyed in 70 CE. About sixty years later, a second Jewish revolt, led by Simon ben Kosiba, popularly known as Bar Kokhba, was also ruthlessly repressed. After that, on pain of death, no Jew was permitted to enter what had once been Jerusalem.

We do not know for certain what happened to the Christian church in Palestine, but the focal point for the growing Christian movement shifted from Jerusalem to places like Ephesus, Antioch, and Rome. This was primarily due to the success of missionaries such as Paul in bringing the gospel to large numbers of gentiles. In those areas the Christians sometimes encountered hostility from Jewish neighbors who had come to see the new faith as an aberration or false religion (see 1 Thess. 2:14). The Romans were always the biggest threat, however, and their hostility came to a head under the emperor Nero, who initiated the first overt, government-sponsored persecution of Christians in Rome in the 60s, a horrifying purge in which Peter, Paul, and numerous others were martyred.

EXPLORE 1.17
Pliny the Younger on Persecution of Christians

EXPLORE 1.18, 1.19, and 1.20

By the start of the second century, almost all the books of the New Testament had been written, including the Gospels and all of Paul's letters. By this time the Romans had come to regard Christianity and Judaism as separate religions, and the former was now regarded as an unauthorized innovation and was officially outlawed. We get a good picture of what this meant in practice from a set of letters sent by the Roman governor Pliny to the emperor Trajan in about the year 112. The overall policy was something of a "Don't ask, don't tell" approach: Christians were not sought out, but when they came to a ruler's attention, they were to be tortured and killed unless they renounced their faith and made sacrifices to Roman gods (see box 26.6).

Box 1.2

Whose Pax?

The *Pax Romana* was established through conquest. Calgacus, a Caledonian leader of one of the nations defeated to this end, remarked bitterly, "They create desolation and call it peace" (Tacitus, *Agricola* 30).

Tacitus, *Agricola*, trans. Harold Mattingly (New York: Penguin, 2009).

Conclusion

The documents of the New Testament are value-laden writings that critique the cultural standards of the world in which they were produced. Both Roman and Jewish social systems are evaluated, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. For instance, as we make our way through these writings, we will find a fairly sustained critique of Roman imperialism. The perspective is not completely negative—there were benefits to the Roman system. Still, though it is not always stated outright, one does not have to look hard to see that most New Testament authors are at least suspicious of the *Pax Romana*: World peace is nice, but at what cost has it been attained, and at what cost is it maintained?

liberation theology: a movement in Christian theology, developed mainly by twentieth-century Latin American Roman Catholics, that emphasizes liberation from oppression.

It should come as no surprise to discover that modern theologians have sought to apply these critiques to the world in which we now live. Feminists challenge the status quo of male supremacy, and liberation theologians critique the process of "colonialism" through which European powers impose their political and religious systems on developing nations. In the twenty-first century some theologians would speak critically of the *Pax Americana* or even of the *Pax Christiana*, according to which relative peace may be preserved through the dominance of one political, cultural, and/or religious system—and, of course, the New Testament writings are referenced in such discussions. As we will see, however, those documents do not speak unilaterally, and people with different sociopolitical ideas often are able to find support for their preferred position in comments offered in one or another of the New Testament books. But even when there is lack of clarity regarding application of New Testament values to our modern world, the questions are invariably brought to the fore: At what cost have the benefits of modern society been attained? And at what cost are they maintained?

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