

## Threefold Historical Context of the New Testament

### **The context of Jesus and Early Christianity**

Jesus' historical context was the Jewish homeland in the first third of the first century. He was born around 4 BCE and crucified around the year 30.

Jesus' movement was within Judaism and not yet a new religion distinct from Judaism. That came later. Soon after Jesus' death, [Jesus' movement] expanded geographically beyond the Jewish homeland –into Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. Initially, it spread within the Jewish Diaspora (Jewish communities outside of the homeland). Within no more than twenty years, it had begun to include Gentiles, that is, non-Jews. These early Christian communities are the historical context for the oral traditions about Jesus and what it means to follow him. They are also the context of the whole of the New Testament: its twenty-seven documents are the product of early Christians in the first hundred years or so after the end of Jesus' historical life.<sup>1</sup>

### **The context of Judaism**

Early Christianity and the New Testament emerged within the larger context of Judaism. Jesus, Paul, and most or perhaps all of the writers of the New Testament were Jewish. The exception may be the author of Luke and Acts, who may have been Gentile –but if so, a Gentile who knew Judaism well. First-century Judaism was diverse. In the Jewish homeland, there were a number of groups with different ways of being Jewish within the context of Roman rule, which began in 63 BCE, about sixty years before Jesus was born.<sup>2</sup>

### **The context of the Roman Empire**

Jesus and his followers lived within it, and all of the documents in the New Testament were written within it. Rome was a particularly powerful form of an ancient domination system legitimated by an imperial theology.

Ancient domination system were:

Politically oppressive. Societies were ruled by a few –by monarchies and aristocracies, the powerful and wealthy elites. Ordinary people, the vast majority of the population, had no voice in how these societies were structured.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 7.

Economically exploitive. The ruling elites structured society in their own economic self-interest. About half to two-thirds of the annual production of wealth went to the top few percent of the population. The great gap between the wealthy and the rest (90 percent or more) had calamitous [disastrous] effects on the latter, including a life expectancy about half that of the elite class.

Chronically violent. Elites maintained power by the threat and use of violence against their own populations. In addition, wars were frequent, initiated by one group of elites against another for the sake of expanding their wealth and power by controlling more people and land.

Legitimated by religious claims. Elite religion proclaimed that kings ruled by divine right and the social order, the way the world was put together, reflected the will of God.

The world of the ancient domination system is the context not only of Jesus and early Christianity, but of the Bible as whole. It is the context for the story of the Exodus, which is about liberation from the domination system of ancient Egypt. It is the context for the prophetic protest against the re-creation of a domination system within Israel during the time of the monarchy. It is the context of Jewish voices, from the sixth century BCE on, crying out against oppression by a successful of foreign domination systems.<sup>3</sup>

Rome was an especially large domination system, controlling much of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. It was even more economically exploitative than its predecessors. Not only were the conquered provinces required to pay annual tribute to Rome (a form of taxation collected by local authorities), but Roman economic policy promoted the commercialization of agriculture. Small plots were combined into large estates owned by the wealthy to produce crops for sale and export. Having lost their land, many in the rural class became tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or day laborers. .. Outside the Jewish homeland, the commercialization of agriculture also resulted in large-scale migration to cities, where former agricultural laborers became part of the urban working poor –a

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 8.

situation that becomes important for understanding the urban context of Paul's activity.

Roman Imperial Theology. Rome legitimates its rule with religion. It was amplified during the reign of Caesar Augustus, emperor from 31 BCE to 14 CE.

His birth name was Octavian, who became "Augustus." The word means "he who is to be worshipped and revered." He was also "Son of God" and "Lord." He was called the "savior of the world" who had brought "peace on earth" by ending the civil war that was tearing the empire apart. His birth was the beginning of the "gospel," the good news." Stories were even told about his divine conception: he was the son of god Apollo. From Augustus on, imperial theology imparted the message that Roman domination was divinely ordained. The god had chosen Rome to rule the world. <sup>4</sup>

Roman imperial theology is the oppositional context for much of early Christian language about Jesus. The gospels, Paul's letters, and other New Testament writings use the language of imperial theology, but apply it to Jesus. Jesus is the "Son of God" –the emperor is not. Jesus is the "Lord" –the emperor is not. Jesus is the "Savior" who brings "peace on earth" –the emperor is not. The contrast is not just a matter of language. The contrast is also about two different visions of how the world should be. The world of the domination system is a world of political oppression, economic exploitation, and chronic violence. The alternative is a world in which everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid. The gospel phrase for this is the "kingdom of God," the heart, as the gospel proclaims, of Jesus' message.<sup>5</sup>

### **Paul's Life**

We do not know when Paul was born, but it was probably in the first decade of the first century. He was thus a near contemporary of Jesus, perhaps ten years or so younger. He lived vigorously into the 60s of that century, even though he was

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<sup>4</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 10.

plagued by a recurrent malady. He was executed in Rome in the early to mid 60s. He was born Jewish in the Diaspora, a term referring to Jews living outside of their ancestral homeland. Most did. Estimates of the number of Jews in the first century hover around six million, about one-tenth of the population of the Roman Empire. One to two million lived in the homeland. Two-thirds or more were in the Diaspora.

According to Acts, he was born in Tarsus, a cosmopolitan city in southern Asia Minor (Today's Turkey). Capital of the Roman province Cilicia and renowned for a university said to be as excellent as the one at Athens, Tarsus was, as Acts puts it, "an important city" (21:39).<sup>6</sup>

We do not know how Paul's parents came to live there. The reasons Jews lived in areas other than the Jewish homeland were diverse, ranging from capture and enslavement to voluntary emigration. According to Acts, Paul's father was a Roman citizen, and thus Paul was a Roman citizen by birth. "Citizen" did not mean simply somebody who lived within the Roman Empire; it was an elevated status that belonged to a very small percentage of the population. If Paul's father was a Roman citizen, the most likely reason is that he had been a slave of a Roman citizen, who then liberated him. But Paul in his letters never refers to himself as a Roman citizen, and so scholars are uncertain whether this detail from Acts is correct.

Paul obviously had an excellent education. His letters reflect an intimate knowledge of the Jewish Bible, and his use of the Greek language and its rhetorical style is remarkable. He knew both Judaism and the Gentile world firsthand and may even have had a Greek education as well as a Jewish one. In Tarsus, he grew up in both worlds, a superb context for one who was to become the "apostle to the Gentiles" (that is, non-Jews, whom Paul frequently calls "Greeks").<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 21.

He was a passionate Jew. He became a Pharisee, a member of a Jewish movement that sought through sharp social boundaries to preserve Jewish identity and community in a historical context in which accommodation to Hellenistic and Roman culture was a very real threat. Paul never met the historical Jesus. But almost immediately after Jesus' crucifixion, within at most a few years, he became a persecutor of Jesus followers. That he did so is an indicator not only of his religious passion, but also that he knew enough about Jesus at this point in his life to think his movement should be stopped. That is the purpose of persecution.<sup>8</sup>

### **Urban context of Paul's Apostleship and Letters**

Paul was a city person. Unlike Jesus, who grew up in a small village and whose activity was among the peasant class in small town and rural areas of the Jewish homeland, Paul was urban. He grew up in the city and carried out his vocation in major cities of Asia Minor and Greece, most of them capitals of Roman provinces. There is no report of his bringing his message to a small town or village. Thus, to understand the historical context of Paul and his letters we need to know something of the cities in the Roman Empire of his time. The largest was Rome itself, with perhaps a million people. A number of others had six-figure populations: Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch in Syria, Ephesus in Asia Minor, perhaps Corinth in Greece. Most were smaller. Estimates for Jerusalem are around forty thousand, and for Tarsus, Paul's city of birth, around fifty thousand.

Cities in the Roman Empire shared a number of features. They were very densely populated. Because most were walled cities, population expansion occurred within the walls. For example, the walls of Antioch enclosed two square miles, within which two hundred thousand people. Its population density exceeded that of the most densely populated cities today, and without high-rise

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<sup>8</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 21.

buildings.<sup>9</sup> Most of the urban working class lived in four-or-five-story tenements. Most families had only a room or two, used primarily for storage and sleeping. There was no sanitation. Today's visitors to the remains of ancient cities of the Roman Empire often marvel at their waste system, including even toilets, but these were luxuries for the wealthy. In the tenement areas, where most of the population lived, water had to be carried, most often up several flights of stairs. Human waste was dumped into gutters. These condition and crowding meant that contagious disease was rampant. Life expectancy was low, about thirty years for those who survived the high mortality rates of infancy and childhood.

The urban working population could be sustained only by continuing migration from rural areas. Roman agricultural policy virtually compelled migration to cities. Small peasant farms that had provided basic sustenance to the families that had lived on them for centuries were being combined into large estate that now produced grains and other agricultural products for export. Many of the rural class, now without their own land, moved to cities to find work. Most did so out of desperation, not because they desired city life. Migration to cities destroyed the extended family and village relationships that marked traditional rural communities. Newcomers to cities, even if they arrived with their family, were severed from the familiarity and common concern of village life. They were alone and on their own. Moreover, cities were populated by many ethnic and linguistic groups, in contrast to the homogeneity of village life. Ethnic estrangement and conflict were frequent. Thus life was difficult for most of those who lived in cities. Earning enough money to pay for food and shelter was always an issue. Disease and death were constant threats. Community was no longer something that one was born into, but was either absent or newly formed.

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### **Paul's Audience**

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 25.

Paul's purpose as apostle was to create and nurture urban communities of Christ-followers –from among Gentiles in particular. That was his commission; to go to Gentiles, not Jews. Preaching to the Jews was Peter's commission. And yet when Paul arrived in a new city, he consistently went to a synagogue to tell people about Jesus. Why? Was he trying to convert the Jews, in spite of his commission to go to the Gentiles, a vocation and restriction that he and other early Christian leaders had apparently agreed upon? Almost certainly, the explanation is that synagogues in major cities were likely to have a number of Gentiles who were strongly attracted to Judaism, but not willing or ready to fully convert.<sup>11</sup> ..... Known as "God-fearers," "God-worshippers," and "God-lovers," they were Gentiles involved in but still on the fringe of Judaism. They often attended synagogue service and thus knew quite a bit about Judaism, its scriptures, rituals, festivals, yearnings, and vision. Some became benefactors. No doubt they had Jewish friends. But the men did not get circumcised, and households may or may not have observed Jewish food and purity laws. That Gentile "God-lovers" were Paul's primary audience. Paul would find "God-lovers" in synagogues. So when Paul arrived in a new city, he went first to the synagogue –not because his mission was to convert Jews, but because Gentile "God-lovers" would be there. He sought to enlist them in communities of Christ-followers either by creating a new community in that city or by integrating them into an existing community. Christian groups existed in some cities before Paul got there, including Ephesus and Rome. In others, they were Paul's creation. Other than synagogues, the other context in which Paul encountered Gentiles was in his work. Paul supported himself by "tent-making," an umbrella term that included making awnings, in great demand in the Mediterranean world, and perhaps also making leather goods more generally. Paul's skill gave him great mobility and self-sufficiency. He could travel light

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<sup>11</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 25.

and find a job in any significant city. No doubt Paul met some of this Gentile converts while working next to them in a shop. <sup>12</sup>

### **Paul's Approach**

Paul would have talked about Jesus – who was the Lord and Messiah, the promised one of Israel – testified to his meaning and significance. And he would have emphasized that in Jesus a new form of Judaism had been created in which Gentiles could be full participants. “In Christ” as he wrote in Gal. 3:28, “there is no longer Jew or Greek [Gentile].” He would have invited her into a new community in which she could be both Gentile and Jew. Indeed, Paul’s purpose was to create communities of Christ-followers or to integrate converts into Christian communities that already existed. <sup>13</sup>

### **Paul's Communities**

The communities of Paul were not churches in the modern sense. The first church building dates from the mid-200s, and churches were not common until after Constantine legalized and became a patron of Christianity in the 300s. So also the communities of Paul were not primarily intended for the practice of “religion” as one dimension of life; rather, they were groups learning about and practicing a comprehensive way of seeing and living. The Greek word translated “church” is *ekklesia* (from which, for example, we get the word “ecclesiastical”). It means “assembly” and “those called out” –a community. Lacking the modern associations with “church,” the Greek word is a good term for Paul’s communities. <sup>14</sup>

Another reason “church” is misleading is that Paul’s communities were as small as fifteen or twenty people and perhaps as large as a hundred or two. The term “house church” is also misleading because a “house” –which usually has one or two rooms – would not have a space for a gathering of fifteen or twenty or more.

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<sup>12</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 26.

<sup>13</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 27.



But some of tenement buildings and some homes of the wealthy on main streets had “shops” on the ground floor. These spaces were not large but unlike residential space, there were unused some of the time. In them, small early Christian communities met. Thus some contemporary scholars speak of Paul’s communities of Christ-followers not as “house-churches,” but as “shop-churches.” “Shop-communities” would be even more accurate, given the modern meaning of “church.”

Paul’s communities were not only small, but deeply committed and intentional. To become part of one was a serious undertaking. Jesus had been condemned and executed by Rome. Joining this movement meant risk –to call Jesus “Lord” and “Son of God” meant the emperor was neither of these things. It meant becoming countercultural, rejecting the values of dominant culture and living in accord with another vision of how things should be. Paul referred to them as communities whose identity was “in Christ” and as “the body of Christ.” They were “a new creation” in the midst of “this world” that subverted “this world.” The small size of these communities meant they were intimate. Their members knew and were committed to taking care of each other. Paul’s frequent use of the language of “brothers and sisters” is not just affectionate; it is “new family” imagery. People who became part of one of his communities took on the same responsibilities for each other that blood brother and sisters had. In the first century urban context in which many had lost their blood families because of migration and high mortality rates, this was a powerful image of community. It also meant that these were “share” communities. <sup>15</sup>

### **Paul’s Letters in the Context of His Communities**

Paul’s relationship to urban Christian communities is the historical context of his letters. [Paul’s genuine] seven letters were written to communities Paul had founded thus knew firsthand. The exception is Romans. When he wrote to the Christian community in Rome, he had not yet been there. But he planned to be,

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<sup>15</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 28.

and Romans is to some extent an introduction to Paul's way of seeing things for Christians whom he planned to visit. His letters are correspondence in context. They presuppose a relationship, a connection. He wrote to Christian communities that already existed, whether he or somebody else had begun them. What we have is his very personal response to what he had learned was going on in these communities. <sup>16</sup>

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Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012),

### **I Thessalonians**

Is the first document in the chronological New Testament that Paul wrote to a Christ-community in Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia, a province in northern Greece. This was the earliest Christian document was written to a community in Europe, which was largely Gentile.

According to Acts, Paul's mission to Europe began with a vision of "a man of Macedonia" urging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:9). Paul's first stop was the city of Philippi and Thessalonica was the next. There, according to Acts, Paul went to the synagogue and converted some Jews and "a great many of the devout Greeks" (Gentile "God-lovers," 17:4). Then, presumably not immediately, but after some weeks or maybe a few months, riots broke out because of Paul. He left the city and went south to Athens and Corinth. While in Athens Paul sent his companion Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out how the community was doing (2:17-3:6). Timothy returned to Paul, who was possibly still in Athens but more likely in Corinth, with news of the community. First Thessalonians is Paul's response to what he hears from Timothy. <sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 35.

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Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012),

## **Galatians**

No other relatively short New Testament document has had as much influence on Christian theology as Galatians. Its language of “justification” and the contrasts between “grace” and “law” and “faith” and “works” were central to Martin Luther’s thought and have been for Protestants ever since. Though Paul also used this language in his letter to Christ-communities in Rome a half decades or so later, it first appears in Galatians. Borg put Galatians chronologically in the second place supposedly written around in late 50s.

### *Audience and Historical context:*

Galatians is the only one of Paul’s seven letters to be addressed to a group of communities rather than to a particular community or individual; it is sent to the “churches of Galatia.”<sup>18</sup> Galatia was a region in central Asia Minor that contained several cities. These communities had been deeply conflicted since Paul was there. Paul himself was under attack; some were accusing him of having falsified the gospel. He accuses the Galatian communities of “deserting” and “turning to a different gospel,” because of those who “pervert the gospel of Christ (1:6-7).”<sup>19</sup>

Those in the Christ-communities in Galatia were primarily Gentiles, most and perhaps nearly all of them “God-lovers” who had been attached to Judaism. This is the central issue addressed by the letter. Did Gentile converts to life in Christ need to be circumcised? And did they need to follow at least some other Jewish laws, including food laws? While with them, Paul had taught “no.” He had offered full participation in the Christ movement without circumcision and observance of Jewish laws. After Paul left Galatia, probably some years earlier, other teachers –Paul’s opponents in Galatia –had told them “yes.” Gentile males

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<sup>18</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 46.

had to be circumcised and follow Jewish food laws. For them, it seemed obvious that what Jesus began was a moment within Judaism, and that for Gentiles to become children of Abraham, they had to enter into God's covenant with Abraham, which include circumcision. These teachers were also followers of Jesus. They were Christians. Whether Gentile converts had to observe Jewish laws was a major issue in early Christianity. This was a conflict within early Christianity.<sup>20</sup>

The conflict and its resolution are a theme of Acts, which narrates the spread of the Jesus movement from Jerusalem and the Jewish homeland to the larger Gentile world, climaxing with Paul in Rome, the center of the world. In the middle of Acts is the story of a meeting of early Christian leaders ("apostles and elders") in Jerusalem to decide whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and follow other Jewish laws (Acts 15). Paul and Barnabas were there, representing the Gentile mission, as were James and Peter, representing the mission to Jews. They resolved that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised or follow all of Jewish law. Paul's mission to the Gentiles was blessed. Galatians refers to this meeting and the larger conflict. In 2:1-10, Paul reports that the leaders in Jerusalem had ratified his mission to Gentiles, including that males did not need to be circumcised.<sup>21</sup>

The issue of food was more complex because of the common meal eaten by members of the Christ-communities. When they gathered together, was the food to be kosher or not? Of the community was either all Jewish or all Gentiles, the issue would not arise. But when if it was a mixed community of Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles, was it to be kosher for all or kosher for none?

Conflict about the status of Gentiles within the community is the context for what Paul says in Galatians about justification, faith, law, works, and life in the Spirit. Paul says, "We ... Jews [referring to Christian Jews] .. "know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus

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<sup>20</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 46.

<sup>21</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 46.

Christ” (2:15-16); the last phrase is better translated “through the faith of Jesus Christ”—that is, through the faith we see in Jesus). He reminds his largely Gentile communities that they had received the Spirit of God not “by doing the works of the law,” but by faith (3:1-5). He argues that Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was justified by faith, not by works of the law [at that time Abraham didn’t have Moses’ laws]. Moreover, God promised Abraham that the Gentiles would be blessed through him, and this was now happening; “In Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham” had “come to the Gentiles... through faith” (3:6-18). Requiring circumcision and observance of Jewish law would perpetuate the division between Jew and Gentiles and thus destroy the unity of life “in Christ.” [besides, it will make nearly impossible for Gentiles to accept faith in Jesus Christ.] As perhaps the best-known text in Galatians puts it: *In Jesus Christ, you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek (Gentile), there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Gal. 3:26-28).<sup>22</sup>

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Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012),

#### **Commentary on 1 Corinthians**

In the chronological New Testament, this letter comes after 1 Thessalonians and Galatians. According to Acts, Paul created a Christ-community in Corinth in southern Greece around the year 50. Corinth was a major city, seaport and capital of the Roman province of Achaia, which include Athens. In Paul’s word, Corinth (not Athens) was the most important city in Greece. Though there was a Jewish synagogue there, the city was almost completely Gentile, cosmopolitan [multicultural], and multi-ethnic. According to Acts, Pau spent eighteen months in Corinth on his first visit, probably from about 50 through 51. When he wrote

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<sup>22</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 47.

this letter a few years later, he was in Ephesus in Asia Minor, just over two hundred miles across the Aegean from Corinth.<sup>23</sup>

### Historical Context

The historical context of the letter is Paul's relationship to the Christ-community he had founded in Corinth. Paul has been away from it for a few years –probably at least two. Now he has learned that divisions and conflicts have developed within the community. Much of the letter addresses these conflicts.<sup>24</sup>

The community was divided into factions: 1) Some say, "I belong to Paul," or "to Apolos" or "to Cephas (Peter)" or "to Christ." 2) the community was divided over spiritual gifts. 3) Division within the community between "the rich" and "the rest." The letter tells us that few were wealthy. The Christ community in Corinth was mostly made up of urban workers, many of them God-fearers from the merchant and artisan classes. Some were prosperous enough to have become Paul's patrons and benefactors. Although not from the super-wealthy class, they may have been what we call "well-to-do."<sup>25</sup>

This conflict surfaces in chapter 11 and is the context for what Paul writes about the meaning of the common meal that he calls the "Lord's supper." In the first century Christianity, the Lord's supper was a real meal – a full meal shared in the community by the community, during which bread and wine would be celebrated as the body and blood of Christ.<sup>26</sup> What we call the Eucharist was part of the common meal. They shared this meal probably at least weekly. In Corinth, the meal had ceased to be a common meal. According to chapter 11, the wealthy (who didn't have to work) would gather early for the meal. By the time people who worked (most of the community) go to the meal, the wealthy had already eaten. They may also have served the best wine and best food to themselves before the others arrived. Such was common among the wealthy in that world. For Paul, this violated the "one body" understanding of life "in

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<sup>23</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 57.

<sup>25</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 58.

<sup>26</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 58.

Christ.” It meant bringing the hierarchical distinctions of “this world” into the body of Christ. But these differences were not to be replicated in the community that Paul called “a new creation.” Paul describes the situation: <sup>21</sup>*For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.* <sup>22</sup>*What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!* (I Cor. 11: 21-22)<sup>27</sup> [Paul cares about and defend the poor members who have little]. Paul, in the context of the Lord’s Supper (11:23-26), concludes that “whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (11:27). In this context, eating and drinking the bread and wine “in an unworthy manner” refers to the behavior of the wealthy in perpetuating the divisions of “this world.” In Christian communities, those divisions were abolished.<sup>28</sup>

Resurrection (p. 60-61).

The conclusion

Chapter 16 begins with a reference to the “collection for the saints.” Paul is raising money from his largely Gentile Christian communities for Christian Jews in Jerusalem. This collection was a major reason for Paul’s final journey to Jerusalem in the late 50s, where he was arrested and then spent the rest of his life in confinement, initially in Jerusalem, then in Caesarea, and then in Rome.

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<sup>27</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 59.

<sup>28</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 59.

<sup>29</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 61.

Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012),

**Commentary on 2 Corinthians**

Second Corinthians is not a single letter, but a combination of at least three letters from Paul to the Christ-community in Corinth (chapters 1-7, 8-9, and 10-13). Second Corinthians adds to these correspondence.<sup>30</sup>

Chapters 8-9. Their subject matter is the “collection for the saints.” Paul was raising money from his largely Gentile communities for the impoverished Christian Jewish community in Jerusalem, both as a sign of solidarity and to meet their need for help. These chapters disclose how important the collection for the Jerusalem community was to Paul. They abound with appeals to generosity, grace, bounty, sharing, and fairness.<sup>31</sup>

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Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012),

**Romans**

Paul's letter to the Christ-communities in Rome is the only letter he wrote to people he didn't know; Paul had never been to Rome. Most [scholars] think Romans is the last of the universally agreed upon seven genuine letters of Paul. He wrote it from Corinth around the year 58, just before he began what became his final journey to Jerusalem, arrest, imprisonment, and eventual execution in Rome itself. So this letter is not about interacting with a community he had founded or with which he had a continuing relationship. Rather, its main purpose was to introduce himself to a group of Christ-followers whom he planned to visit and from whom he receive support for a mission to Spain. Romans is the most theological of Paul's letters, and the most important of his

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<sup>30</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 101.

<sup>31</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 103.



letters in the history of Christian theology.<sup>32</sup>

### Historical Context

The letter has another primary purpose, namely explicating [전개, 분석, 해명] its central theme of the relationship between Jew and Gentile in the context of God's covenant with Israel. The first verse of body of the letter announces it. The gospel is the power of God for salvation "to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (1:16; recall that "Greek" means "Gentile"). In chapter 9-11, the theme of God's covenant with Israel, including Jews who had not become followers of Jesus, is explicit. Some scholars think these chapters are the climax and heart of the letter.<sup>33</sup>

Why this emphasis is so strong in Romans is explained by the historical context of the Christ-communities in Rome. [Although we do not know when and who founded the Christ-communities in Rome] we do know that there were Christ-communities in Rome by mid-40s at the latest. Some in them would have been Christian Jews, and some would have been Christian Gentiles, most of them "God-lovers" In the year 49, the emperor Claudius ordered the expulsion of Jews from Rome. Christian Jews, of course, were also expelled. Thus, from roughly 49 or 50 on, the Christ-communities in Rome would have become primarily and perhaps completely Gentile. The Christian Jews were gone. Then, in 54, Claudius' edict [칙령] was rescinded [철회, 취소). How many Jews returned and how quickly they did so are unknown. But the process was under way in the years immediately before and as Paul wrote this letter.<sup>34</sup>

### Jews and Gentiles, and the mess the world is in

The section begins with Paul's indictment of the Gentile world (Rom.1:18-2:16). He recites standard Jewish stereotypes of what Gentiles are like; they are

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<sup>32</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 119.

<sup>33</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 120.

<sup>34</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 120.

idolaters who should know better, exchanging the truth for a lie and worshipping the creation rather than the creator. A long list of Gentile vices follows, beginning with unnatural sexual relationships and continuing with "wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice .... envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness." Gentiles are "gossips, slanderers, ruthless" (1:29-31). This is pretty harsh rhetoric. There can be good Gentiles. His indictment is of the Gentile "world" - "this world," as he commonly refers to it.<sup>35</sup>

In 2:17, he turns to the guilt and responsibility of Jews for the way the world is. His main claim is that having the "law" (the Torah, the Bible) does not exempt you from judgment unless you live it. So also circumcision is of no value unless it is internal, not merely external. Yet Jews have priority; to them were revealed the promises of God. But the section ends with a common indictment of Jews and Gentiles as responsible for the mess the world is in (3:9-20). They share a solidarity of failure.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Both Jews and Gentiles justified by grace through faith*

"Justification by faith" has commonly been understood, "to be saved" and "salvation" mean a blessed afterlife - going to heaven when we die. The means by which we are saved are not good works, even though they matter. What ultimately matters is faith, understood as believing in Jesus. From this good works will flow. But faith (as believing in Jesus) is primary. It is the gateway to heaven. The preceding interpretation is a serious misunderstanding of Paul's use of these words. The greatest distortion is caused by imagining that Paul was writing about "how to get to heaven," that is, that his concern was primarily the afterlife and how a concern for that life should affect how we lead this life. Within this framework, "if you want to go to heaven, believe in Jesus."<sup>37</sup>

But heaven, the afterlife, was not central to Paul and early Christianity. Did they believe in afterlife? Most, perhaps all, did. But was that the main focus for

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<sup>35</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 121.

<sup>36</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 121.

<sup>37</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 122.

how they saw Jesus? That he provides the way to get to heaven? No. For Paul, "salvation" was not primarily about an afterlife, but about transformation this side of death- the transformation of ourselves and of "this world." Justification by grace through faith is not about how we get to heaven, but how we are transformed here and now. So Paul was not addressing the question of eternal salvation in heaven and how to get there. Rather, as he wrote about justification and grace and faith, he was addressing the issue of Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles; both, he affirms, are justified by grace through faith in Jesus. They are equals in the solidarity of failure and in the solidarity of grace, and equally dependent on the same grace.<sup>38</sup>

We note also that "faith" and what it means to "believe in Jesus" have often been misunderstood. The misunderstanding is that "faith" means "believing" a set of teachings/doctrines/beliefs/statements about Jesus. This misunderstanding has grown in Western culture over the last three centuries or so. Beliefs about Jesus - that he was born of a virgin, that he walked on water and changed water into wine, that he died for our sins and rose again on the third day, that he is the Son of God and the only way, and so forth- have changed from what everybody took for granted to claims that are questionable in the minds of many. So "faith," "believing," has come to mean believing a particular set of claims about Jesus to be true in spite of perhaps somewhat persuasive reasons to question them.<sup>39</sup>

But this is not what Paul (and early Christians generally and their spiritual ancestors in the Jewish Bible) meant by "faith." The word has two primary meanings: loyalty and trust. Loyalty, was about commitment and allegiance - not to a set of statements, but to a person. Its opposite was not doubt, but betrayal. Trust was about who or what you trusted. Its opposite was not intellectual doubt, but anxiety. Faith for Paul was about loyalty to and trust in Christ, not about believing a set of statements to be true. Christian Jews and

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<sup>38</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 122.

<sup>39</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 123.

Christian Gentiles alike are justified together by God's grace and by faith - loyalty and trust - in what God has revealed in Jesus. <sup>40</sup>

**Romans 15-16**

What is most striking about these chapters is the list of people in Romans 16. It begins by commending to them a woman named Phoebe, named as a deacon or minister and benefactor. Presumably she carried the letter to Rome and read it to the Christ-communities there. Reading it would also have involved explaining it whenever there were questions. On the list, of those who are named, some are clearly Christian Jews and others Christian Gentiles. Even more striking is the number of women's names. Of the twenty-eight individuals mentioned, ten are women. Of the eleven singled out for special praise, five are women. Paul uses the Greek verb for dedicated apostolic activity to refer to four of these women. One, Junia, is spoken of as "prominent among the apostles." Leadership by women was a fact in early Christ-communities. Not only did Paul not challenge; he obviously approved of it. <sup>41</sup>

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Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012),

**James**

Who is James? The author identifies himself as "James" (1:1). For centuries, Christian tradition took it for granted that the author was James, the brother of Jesus. According to Acts and Paul, James was the "leader" or "head" of the Christian community in Jerusalem. He was executed in the early 60s. Majority of mainstream scholars do not think the author was the brother of Jesus. The author does not say so, but describes himself simply as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." Moreover, his use of Greek language and grammar is quite sophisticated –not impossible for a brother of Jesus from the peasant class whose native language was Aramaic, but at least somewhat

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<sup>40</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 123.

<sup>41</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 125.

unlikely. It is likely that the author knew the teachings of Jesus from the oral tradition or from Q and not from Matthew or Luke. The letter was not sent to a particular Christ-community as the letters of Paul were. Rather, it was written to the Jewish people in diaspora.<sup>42</sup>

Its focus is primarily practical, combining wisdom about how to live and prophetic indictment of how people commonly do live. Half of James' 108 verses are imperatives. The author emphasizes the importance of doing and acting. Two of the best-known passages are: "*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers ...doers who act*"(1:22-25) and "Faith without works is dead" (2:14-26). His examples of "works" are concretely compassionate: clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and supplying their bodily needs.<sup>43</sup>

James speaks of people who are double-minded (1:8; 4:8). People have a divided commitment and thus lack grounding and stability. James contrasts loyalty to God with "friendship with the world" (4:1-10), which is enmity with God. He indicts the humanity created world of covetousness and violence. James includes harsh indictments of "the rich" and their position in the world.<sup>44</sup>

The message of James has been called "scandalous." Most American Christians will never hear these passages read or preached in church. James echoes more sayings of Jesus than any document in the New Testament other than the gospels themselves. Its fiery passion reflects the passion of Jesus himself.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 193.

<sup>43</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 194.

<sup>44</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 194.

<sup>45</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 195.