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A HISTORICAL EVALUATION OF THE EVIDENCE FOR THE
DEATH OF THE APOSTLES AS MARTYRS
FOR THEIR FAITH

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APPROVAL SHEET

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To Stephanie

This was truly a team effort.

I could not ask for a more loving and supportive wife.

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PREFACE

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

How can one trust in the veracity of the resurrection of Jesus? A commonly used apologetic argument points to the apostles' willingness to become martyrs. Popular apologists frequently cite their deaths as good reason to trust the sincerity of their testimony, since it is difficult to believe they would go willingly to such gruesome deaths for a lie.¹

E. P. Sanders, for example, in his *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, argues that “many of the people in these lists [of eyewitnesses] were to spend the rest of their lives proclaiming that they had seen the risen Lord, and several of them would die for their cause.”² Michael R. Licona notes,

After Jesus' death, the disciples endured persecution, and a number of them experienced martyrdom. The strength of their conviction indicates that they were not just claiming Jesus had appeared to them after rising from the dead. They really believed it. They willingly endangered themselves by publicly proclaiming the risen Christ.³

In *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* Craig S. Keener argues,

The disciples' testimony was not fabricated. Ancients also recognized that the willingness of people to die for their convictions verified at least the sincerity of their motives, arguing against fabrication. People of course die regularly for values that are false; they do not, however, ordinarily die voluntarily for what they believe

¹For instance, Chuck Colson said, “Twelve powerless men, peasants really, were facing not just embarrassment or political disgrace, but beatings, stonings, execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they had physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don't you think that one of those apostles would have cracked before being beheaded or stoned? That one of them would have made a deal with the authorities? None did.” Chuck Colson, “An Unholy Hoax? The Authenticity of Christ,” *Breakpoint Commentary*, March 29, 2002, accessed October 8, 2013, <http://www.breakpoint.org/commentaries/4187-an-unholy-hoax>.

²E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 279-80.

³Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 366.

is false. Intentional deception by the disciples is thus implausible.⁴

Still, despite the popularity and importance of this argument to Christian scholarship and apologetics, there has been little scholarly apologetics work that focuses primarily on evaluating the evidence for their martyrdoms.⁵ Questions naturally remain, then, which strike to the heart of the apostolic message: Were the apostles hopelessly biased? Did they really believe Jesus had appeared to them after his death, or did they fabricate the entire story? How reliable are the resurrection accounts? Should Christian apologists appeal to the argument of the apostles' martyrdom as evidence for the resurrection? If so, how might apologists best formulate the argument? How persuasive is this argument? And perhaps most importantly, most fundamentally: How strong is the actual historical evidence that the apostles of Jesus died as martyrs? In writing this dissertation, I hope to answer these questions.

There is in fact reliable historical evidence to trust the ancient and uniform testimony that (1) all the apostles were willing to die for their faith, and (2) a number of them actually did experience martyrdom.

The argument itself is quite simple: The apostles spent between one and a half and three years with Jesus during his public ministry, expecting him to proclaim his kingdom on earth. Although disillusioned at his untimely death, they became the first

⁴Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 342.

⁵For various books that explore the lives of the apostles, see William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (London: SCM, 1960); Pope Benedict XVI, *The Apostles* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2007); Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974); John R. Claypool, *The First to Follow: The Apostles of Jesus* (Harrisburg, NY: Morehouse, 2008); E. Dale Click, *The Inner Circle* (Lima, OH: CSS, 2000); Edgar Goodspeed, *The Twelve: The Story of Christ's Apostles* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1957); J. G. Greenhough, *The Apostles of Our Lord* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1904); Morris Inch, *12 Who Changed the World: The Lives and Legends of the Disciples* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003); George F. Jowett, *The Drama of the Lost Disciples* (Bishop Auckland, England: Covenant 2004); Emil G. Kraeling, *The Disciples* (Skokie, IL: Rand McNally, 1966); Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); F. Townley Lord, *The Master And His Men: Studies in Christian Enterprise* (London: Carey, 1927); Marianna Mayer, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Phyllis Fogelman, 2000); William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1973); C. Bernard Ruffin, *The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997); Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013); Asbury Smith, *The Twelve Christ Chose* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958); H. S. Vigeveno, *Thirteen Men Who Changed the World* (Glendale, CA: G/L, 1967).

witnesses of the risen Jesus and they, many of whom experienced martyrdom, subsequently endured persecution, signing their testimony, so to speak, in their own blood. The strength of their conviction, marked by their willingness to die, indicates that they did not fabricate these claims; rather, without exception, they actually believed to have risen from the dead. While in and of themselves these facts prove neither the truth of the resurrection in particular nor Christianity as a whole, they do demonstrate the apostles' sincerity of belief, lending credibility to their claims about the veracity of resurrection, which is fundamental to the case for Christianity.

In other words, *their willingness to face persecution and martyrdom indicates more than any other conceivable course their sincere conviction that, after rising from the dead, Jesus indeed appeared to them.*

Of course, however, many often misstate or misunderstand the argument from the deaths of the apostles to the truth of Christianity.⁶ Candida Moss, for example, claims that Christians “like to think of their martyrs as unique. The fact that early Christians were willing to die for their beliefs has been seen as a sign of the inherent truth of the Christian message. . . . Christianity is true, it is said, because only Christians have martyrs.”⁷ Two points are important to make in response. First, as I demonstrate, there *are* many martyrs outside Christianity; my claim is not that only Christians have martyrs but that the apostles died uniquely for the belief that they had actually seen the risen Christ, which demonstrates the sincerity of their convictions. The deaths of others for their religious causes in no way undermines the apologetic significance of the fate of the

⁶The point is not to criticize Moss unfairly. She accurately depicts how Christians often make the argument. Many Christian apologists and pastors portray the apostles as the sole martyrs whose deaths show the inherent truth of Christianity, as Moss indicates. In this dissertation, I am careful to construct the argument as accurately and nuanced as possible. Moss is right—the death of the apostles does not prove Christianity. And there are martyrs outside Christianity. However, unlike other martyrs, the apostles died specifically because they believed they had seen the risen Jesus. If so, then their martyrdoms uniquely show the sincerity of their convictions and strengthen our level of confidence in their testimony.

⁷Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 17, 81.

apostles. Second, the apostles' willingness to die for their beliefs does not demonstrate "the inherent truth of the Christian message," but that the apostles *really believed* that Jesus had risen from the grave. The apostles could have been mistaken, but their willingness to die as martyrs establishes their unmistakable sincerity. The apostles were not liars; rather, they believed they had seen the risen Jesus, they were willing to die by this claim, and many actually *did* die for it.

Methodology

I am primarily concerned with the historical evidence for the martyrdom of the apostles, which involved studying the earliest available sources, including New Testament documents (with particular focus on the book of Acts), the writings of the early church fathers, pseudepigraphical writings such as the *Acts of the Apostles*, Gnostic sources, and other extra-biblical accounts.

While there are some valuable later sources for the fate of some of the apostles, this investigation focuses primarily on what Markus Bockmuehl has dubbed "living" memory. First and second century writers emphasized that they were passing on a shared "living" memory of the apostles, which is to make a stronger claim than saying they were simply passing on a shared tradition or cultural memory. Instead, they believed they were transmitting personal memory of events that trace back to the apostles themselves.⁸ This living memory extended until the end of the second century, after which it could no longer be accurately appealed to as a means of understanding the apostolic gospel.⁹ This

⁸Markus Bockmuehl, "Peter's Death in Rome? Back to Front and Upside Down," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 7-13. The belief in living memory can be seen in church fathers ranging from Ignatius, Papias, Polycarp, Justin, Irenaeus, and possibly even Tertullian.

⁹Bockmuehl provides an example from Irenaeus, who as a boy had personal contact with Polycarp, an eyewitness and companion of the apostles. Irenaeus insists that Polycarp would have soundly rejected Florinus's Valentinian understanding of Christian origins: "I can attest before God that if that blessed and apostolic presbyter had heard anything of this kind he would have cried out and covered his ears, and said according to his custom, 'O good God, for what a time have you preserved me that I must endure this?' He would have fled the very place where he was sitting or standing, when he heard such words (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20.7)." Irenaeus believed there was a short chain of personal contacts tracing back to the apostles that revealed a personal recollection in his own day. *Ibid.*, 9.

prevents neither the development of legendary material about the apostles nor theological disagreements. According to Bockmuehl, living memory simply means that “until the end of the second century there were living individuals who personally, and sometimes vividly, remembered the disciples of the apostles—and that such memory was still thought to carry weight in debates about how to interpret the bearers of apostolic faith.”¹⁰ According to Bockmuehl, living memory involves three generations: (1) Peter and his contemporary associates, assumedly dead by roughly AD 70, (2) the direct followers of the apostles, the last of which died by about AD 135, and (3) the second-generation followers of the apostles who would have died by about AD 200.¹¹ Of course, by focusing on living memory I do not mean to imply that later history necessarily becomes suspect and unreliable. On the contrary, one can know many things independently of living memory. Indeed, for some apostles no chain of living memory exists, and for these cases one will need to rely upon the merits of later tradition.

Historians have recognized a spectrum of epistemological confidence for the examination of historical events. For the purposes of this inquiry, I adopt the following scale for evaluating the historical evidence for the martyrdom of individual apostles: not possibly true (certainly not historical), very probably not true (doubtfully historical), improbable (unlikely), less possible than not (slightly unlikely) possible (indeterminate but not impossible), more possible than not (slightly more possible than not) more probable than not (likely), very probably true (somewhat certain), and the highest possible probability (nearly historically certain). The reliability of the historical evidence for each apostle will be analyzed individually and assessed based upon the quantity and quality of the available historical data.

In terms of a numeric scale, the probabilities look like this

1. Not possibly true (0-1)

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 12-13.

2. Very probably not true (2)
3. Improbable (3)
4. Less possible than not (4)
5. Possible (5)
6. More possible than not (6)
7. More probable than not (7)
8. Very probably true (8)
9. The highest possible probability (9-10)

To help determine where each apostle falls on the numeric scale, a few specific questions will be asked. First, how many sources are there? Multiple sources provide greater confidence the claim is true. Second, how early are the sources? Generally speaking, earlier sources are considered more reliable than later sources. Third, are there sources from varying perspectives? For instance, a martyrdom account has greater credibility if it is supported by Christian, Gnostic, and secular sources. And a written account may also find support from oral tradition. Fourth, is there a historical nucleus even if secondary details disagree? Various accounts often fail to match up on the particulars, yet historians confidently believe they can ascertain a historical core. This claim is true even if an account has legendary and miraculous details.¹²

Defining Martyrdom

What, precisely, is a martyr? In its original Greek setting “martyr” simply means one who testifies in a legal manner, a “witness.”¹³ Later, it came to refer to one

¹²A popular example is the crossing of the Rubicon by Julius Caesar, which led to his taking control of the Roman Empire. There is considerable debate about when and where he crossed the river. Some of the various accounts seem to contradict, and one even has a miraculous story. Yet classicists are confident the account is historical. See Craig Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 138.

¹³Mark Allan Powell, “Martyr,” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed., ed. Mark Allan Powell (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 608.

whose testimony for Jesus results in death, which is now the standard Christian understanding of “martyr.”¹⁴

But does martyrdom require death,¹⁵ or can one’s suffering qualify one as a martyr?¹⁶ Are martyrs only those who confess certain beliefs, or might they be persons singled out, say, for moral acts? While these are worthwhile questions, I limit this discussion to the traditional understanding of martyrdom, perhaps the strictest possible definition, *as involving death for confession of the Christian faith.*¹⁷

I should note that this understanding of martyrdom includes the idea that death is voluntary. Even though martyrdom can be avoided through one’s renunciation of belief, the martyr *chooses* death. This applies even if the confessor is not given an official opportunity to recant, for he or she continues in the faith with knowledge of the outcome

¹⁴David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), s.v. “Martyr,” by Edward P. Myers.

¹⁵While martyrdom initially meant someone who bears testimony for his or her faith, it later came to be understood as someone who dies for his or her faith. There is debate, however, whether Thecla (from the *Acts of Peter*) qualifies as a martyr. She was prepared to die for her faith, but she escaped while being killed and died peacefully in old age. Nevertheless, she is still remembered in some circles as a martyr. See Monika Pesthy, “Thecla Among the Fathers” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1996), 164-78.

¹⁶Michael Haykin has argued that the contemporary understanding of *martyr*, as involving bearing witness to Christ to the point of death, may have first emerged from Asia Minor in the late first century when there were violent encounters between the church and empire. Specifically, he argues that Antipas may have been killed as a Christian martyr for refusing to worship Caesar (Rev 2:12-13). Michael A. G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 34-35.

¹⁷Thomas Wespetal defends this traditional conception of martyrdom with a few clarifications. First, at times the church has recognized non-fatal martyrdoms, such as monasticism or beings sent to work at mines. However, the church continued to distinguish between those who died and those who did not. Fatal and non-fatal cases were not designated with a single term, which would have abolished the difference. There is substantial historical evidence for reserving “martyr” for those who have died (1 Clement 5:3-7, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.1, 2.1-2, 13.2, 14.2, 15.2, 17.3, 18.3, 19.1, 21.1, and Origen *Commentary on John* 2.28). Second, some have applied “martyr” to those who have died defending the poor and oppressed of the world. But as Wespetal observes, this runs contrary to what seems to be the majority Christian view since the early church through the time of the Reformation. Third, while one must die for the faith to be considered a martyr, this death need not occur immediately, but can occur soon afterward because of the harm caused by the persecution. Fourth, martyrdom must end in death. Daniel, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego demonstrated a willingness and readiness to face death for their convictions until God saved them. Nevertheless, they cannot technically be considered martyrs, as some have tried to do. Thomas J. Wespetal, “Martyrdom and the Furtherance of God’s Plan: The Value of Dying for the Christian Faith” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2005), 19-33.

that may result from such belief. Thomas Wespetal concludes, “Thus individuals like John the Baptist, Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20-22) and Uriah (Jer 26:20-23), although they were given no formal opportunity to recant, could have forestalled their deaths had they taken the initiative to retract their accusations against their king.”¹⁸

With the exception of Andrew in the *Acts of Andrew*, there are no individual historical accounts to indicate the apostles were given the opportunity of recanting their faith at the moment of their deaths. The earliest record of executions for merely bearing the name “Christian” comes from a letter the governor Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan (AD 112), long after the death of the last apostle:

I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image . . . and moreover cursed Christ...these I thought should be discharged.¹⁹

Although Pliny’s represents the first *explicit* reference to the mere bearing of the name “Christian” as being sufficient to warrant death, there is good reason to believe the practice existed much earlier, even into the mid-to-late first century when the apostles engaged in missionary activity.²⁰ Peter urges Christians to expect and accept persecution for the *name* of Christ: “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but

¹⁸Ibid., 34.

¹⁹Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96-97, as cited in *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed., ed. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 2:551-53.

²⁰Candida Moss disagrees: “The fact that Pliny has to make inquiries about this indicates that, before this point, there were no measures in place for the treatment of Christians” (*Myth of Persecution*, 140). As a result, she concludes that Christians were not the ancient Roman equivalent of “enemies of the state.” But the fact that Pliny makes inquiries of Trajan could be for a host of other equally compelling reasons than the lack of measures for the treatment of Christians. Her point is a *non sequitur*—meaning the conclusion does not necessarily or logically follow from the premise. Consider an alternative view: *maybe the laws exist but Pliny is unsure of how he is to apply them in his particular circumstances*. Even in contemporary America there are state and federal laws that are regularly ignored and not enforced for political reasons. Immigration is a case in point. There are fierce debates about whether federal border laws should be enforced. The problem is not a lack of laws, but the political climate that makes it difficult to enforce them. Thus, even though there are federal and state laws on immigration, it would be completely feasible for a modern-day-version of the Pliny-Trajan discussion to take place between a state governor and the president of the United States regarding how to treat illegal immigrants.

let him glorify God in that name” (1 Pet 4:16).²¹ In his classic study on persecution in the early church, Geoffrey de Ste. Croix argues that persecution “for the Name” likely began during the time of Emperor Nero (AD 54-68): “The onus is one those who deny the early importance of this long-lasting element to produce reasons why it should have arisen only after Pliny’s day, when all that we know of Roman religion would lead us to expect its appearance very soon after Christianity first attracted the attention of the government.”²² Lawrence Cunningham concurs, “From the time of Nero it was the mere *nomen* of being a Christian that seems to have been sufficient reason to bring down the iron arm of Roman justice.”²³ Oscar Cullman believes Christians came into conflict with the state before Nero: “The whole Neronian persecution would be incomprehensible, unless the Roman State had come to know the Christians earlier. It was on the basis of previous experiences of them that they were declared state enemies.”²⁴

Candida Moss, on the other hand, believes the lack of official records of the apostles being given the opportunity to recant and live undermines the validity of their testimony. This is the missing element, she claims, that is required to make the argument they died *for* Christ.²⁵ She is right that there is not a record of the apostles being offered the opportunity to recant, but they ministered in potentially caustic environments with full awareness of the possible consequences for their actions.²⁶ The fact that their

²¹Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

²²G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, ed. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 150.

²³Lawrence Cunningham, “Christian Martyrdom: A Theological Perspective,” in *Witness of the Body: The Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Karen Scott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 10.

²⁴Oscar Cullman, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, trans. J. K. S Reid (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 30. Cullman points to passages in 2 Cor and Acts 17:7, which indicate that those brought to the faith by Paul were accused by the Jews before civic authorities.

²⁵Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 137.

²⁶The authorities arrested Peter and John after healing a crippled man (Acts 4:3). They were warned not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus, but Peter and John boldly responded, “Whether it is

founding leader was a crucified criminal of the Roman Empire also certainly plays a part of their collective consciousness. Jesus even warned his disciples that the world would hate and even persecute them, as they did him (John 15:18-25).²⁷ Every time the apostles proclaimed the name of Christ, then, they knowingly risked suffering and death. Even so, they continued to teach and preach the risen Jesus. Given their active proclamation of Christ, and their full awareness of the cost of such proclamation, if some of the apostles died for their faith, they qualify under the traditional definition of martyr.²⁸

right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19b-20). They continued to proclaim the resurrection (Acts 4:33) as well as perform miracles and the church grew considerably (Acts 5:12-14). The apostles were arrested again and thrown in prison, but the very next day, at the prompting of an angel, they were back preaching in the public square (Acts 5:18-21). The apostles are brought before the authorities and the high priest commands them not to proclaim Jesus. Yet again Peter and the apostles respond, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). The religious authorities beat them and command them again not to proclaim the name of Jesus. Yet they continued to teach and preach in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:42). Shortly thereafter Stephen is seized and killed for proclaiming the faith and Saul begins to wreck havoc on the church (Acts 6:8-8:3). Herod the king violently attacked the church, killing James the son of Zebedee and arresting Peter (Acts 12:1-5). Although Herod shortly died, and the apostles spread beyond Judea, they operated with full knowledge that they could be persecuted and killed for their faith.

²⁷Jesus made it clear that the world’s hatred could lead to severe persecution. Jesus called his disciples to keep his commandments (15:14), which involved loving as he did. The ultimate act of love, according to Jesus, is dying for another (13:34). Jesus will die for his friends and he expects the same of his disciples. There is an even earlier tradition that the disciples must be prepared to suffer and die for the name of Christ (Matt 5:11; 10:22-23). See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1020.

²⁸There is considerable debate as to whether Christians were the first martyrs. G. W. Bowersock argues that martyrdom was entirely new to the second, third, and fourth centuries of the Christian faith. He says, “There is no reason to think that anyone displayed anything comparable to martyrdom before the Christians . . . martyrdom was alien to both the Greeks and the Jews” (G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 7-8). Candida Moss agrees with Bowersock that *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, traditionally dated AD 157, was the first time the term *martyrs* was indicative of the concept of martyrdom. The problem with this approach, says Moss, is that it makes the *idea* of martyrdom synonymous with the particular term. A group may value death for a specific reason without having a corresponding word for the person who dies. She says, “If terminology is divorced from theme, the search for the beginning of martyrdom takes us into the expanses of the Greco-Roman and ancient Jewish literature, to the tales of the Maccabees, the epic poems of Homer, and the paradigmatic death of Socrates” (Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012], 5). As Moss observes, early Christians did not necessarily see dying for their faith in Christ as new and unique (see Heb 11:32-38). The key issue for this dissertation is not whether the term *martyrs* were in use during the time of the deaths of the apostles. This dissertation will utilize a functional definition of martyr that incorporates examples of martyrdom even if the corresponding technical term was not yet in use.

Challenges for the Historical Investigation

Critics frequently challenge the claim that the death of the apostles provides significant evidence for the veracity of their testimony, usually occurring along two lines. First, the lack of early historical data undermines the trustworthiness of the accounts.²⁹ Second, the *Apocryphal Acts*, which records the lives and deaths of many of the apostles after the *Acts of the Apostles*, are filled with legendary accounts, and thus undermines the credibility of the tradition. Robert Price concludes, “Thus we have no real reason to believe that the earliest preachers, whoever they may have been, were martyred for their faith.”³⁰ After briefly considering the deaths of the apostles, Candida Moss claims, “The result is that the fact of the apostles’ deaths cannot be used as evidence for the truth of Christianity, the resurrection, or any other detail of Jesus’s ministry.”³¹

Lack of Information

These two challenges raise important issues. As for the first challenge, it is true that there is little information on the lives and deaths of *some* of the apostles shortly after the inception of the church. Many church historians recognize this.³² Still, the lack of

²⁹In a debate with William Lane Craig, Bart Ehrman questioned the quality of the historical evidence for the martyrdom of the apostles: “And an earlier point that Bill made was that the disciples were all willing to die for their faith. I didn’t hear one piece of evidence for that. I hear that claim a lot, but having read every Christian source from the first five hundred years of Christianity, I’d like him to tell us what the piece of evidence is that the disciples died for their belief in the resurrection” (William Lane Craig and Bart D. Ehrman, “Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus?” [debate at Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, March 28, 2006], accessed November 5, 2013, http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehрман#section_2).

³⁰Robert M. Price, “Would the Apostles Die for a Lie?” *Free Inquiry* 21 (Fall 2001): 20.

³¹Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 137.

³²Earle E. Cairns observes, “The silence of the New Testament and even tradition concerning these men is remarkable when compared with the later medieval tendency to glorify the death of the notable men and women of the church” (Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 82). Stephen Neill states, “It is greatly to be regretted that we know so little of the activity of the other apostles, and of the spread of the Church in other directions” (Stephen Neill, *Christian Missions* [Baltimore: Penguin, 1964], 30). Kenneth Latourette concludes, “Most of the eleven apostles seem to have remained obscure. At least we do not have authentic reports of most of them after Pentecost. Except as names cherished in the memory of the Church and for stories about them which cannot be verified, the majority of them disappear from history” (Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1, *To A.D. 1500* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975], 60). A significant amount of written material was surely lost in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. And more was likely destroyed during the persecution that preceded the Edict of Milan (AD 313).

information does not undermine the significance of what does exist.³³ While the scarcity of evidence does complicate the task of analyzing the fate of the apostles, certainly, such scarcity does not quash pursuits. As I will show, the evidence for individual apostles varies. For instance, there is substantial historical evidence for the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in Rome. On the other hand, the evidence for more obscure apostles, such as Simon the Zealot and Matthias is meager.

Two reasons may help explain why there is little detailed early explication of the lives and deaths of the apostles. First, during the inception of the church, Christians did not write primarily to chronicle their own history, but to address specific issues and problems in the church. This is true of the Pauline epistles. Paul does not aim to write a history of the church or develop a systematic theology. Rather, he addresses particular issues within individual churches. The same is true for a period of time in the post-apostolic age.³⁴ On his way to martyrdom, for instance, Ignatius wrote his letters to individual churches to address issues they were currently facing, such as unity, suffering, and the danger of false teachers. Clement of Rome wrote *The First Epistle of Clement* to the church at Corinth, focusing on many of the same issues Paul addressed in his two letters to the Corinthians. The *Didache*, also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, is a handbook with instructions for Christian behavior. And the *Shepherd of Hermas* deals with real issues people confronted, including the problem of sin after

³³It is certainly possible that future evidence will arise that sheds further light on the fate of the apostles. Clement of Alexandria was one of the first theologians to discuss martyrdom in significant length (*The Stromata*, or *Miscellanies*). There are many lost works of Clement, including a few he mentions of which there is no trace: *On First Principles*; *On Prophecy*; *On the Allegorical Interpretation of Members and Affections when ascribed to God*; *On Angels*; *On the Devil*; *On the Origin of the Universe*; *On the Unity and Excellence of the Church*; *On the Offices of Bishops, Presbyters, Deacons, and Widows*; *On the Soul*; *On the Resurrection*; *On Marriage*; *On Continence*; *Against Heresies*. It is certainly possible that Clement, or other writers of the early Christian era, discuss the fate of the apostles in undiscovered treatises. Yet, of course, historians must operate on the existing evidence. See *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 2:169.

³⁴Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, rev and updated ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 83.

baptism. There is no systematic history of the church until Eusebius in the fourth century. The one exception to this point is the book of Acts, which records important church history. But even the focus of Acts is more on chronicling the spread of the gospel (cf. Acts 1:8) than recording the history of the church for its own sake.

Second, it is important to remember the purpose for which Jesus called twelve apostles. James Dunn notes, “The only obvious way to interpret the significance of Jesus’ choice of twelve disciples was that he saw them as representing (the twelve tribes of) Israel, at least in God’s eschatological intent.”³⁵ This same reasoning lies behind the emphasis in early Christianity upon “the Twelve,” as seen in passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:5 and Revelation 21:14. The calling of the twelve disciples was a prophetic sign that God was sovereignly initiating a new era for Israel. Craig Keener writes,

Although these witnesses were foundational (cf. similarly Eph 2:20), from the standpoint of Luke’s theology, such choices did not exalt the individuals chosen *as* individuals (hence the emphasis on their backgrounds, e.g., Luke 5:8; 22:34; Acts 8:3); rather, these choices highlighted God’s sovereign plan to fulfill the mission effectively . . . apart from Jesus, all the protagonists would be like David, who passed from the scene after fulfilling God’s purpose in his generation (Acts 13:36).³⁶

This may help explain why the gospels pay such little attention to some of the apostles.³⁷

The importance of the Twelve is found less in the individuals who composed the group than in the theological transformation their existence signified. For these two reasons, one may expect little historical explication of their lives in the writings of the early church.

³⁵James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:206.

³⁶Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:662.

³⁷The New Testament contains four lists of the twelve apostles: Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13. Richard Bauckham observes, “If the lists were merely introducing the characters in the Gospel narratives, it is remarkable that no less than seven of these persons are never mentioned again or appear as individuals in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, while the same is true of six of them in Matthew. . . . However, it could well be that the Twelve are listed as the official body of eyewitnesses who formulated and authorized the core collection of traditions in all three Synoptic Gospels” (Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 96-97). The emphasis on the eyewitness testimony of the apostles, says Bauckham, is on the group, not the individuals. Yet it was still important enough for the Synoptic Gospel writers to preserve careful lists of their individual names.

Legendary vs. History

As for the second challenge, Candida Moss completely dismisses the evidence for the deaths of the apostles because “our sources for these events are the stuff of legend, not history.”³⁸ There are two problems with this sweeping dismissal. First, evidence for some of the apostles is not contained in legendary documents, such as Clement of Rome’s accounts of the deaths of Peter and Paul, and Josephus’s account of the death of James. Second, while many legendary accounts of the lives and deaths of various apostles occur in the early writings of the church, including some seemingly incredulous³⁹ legends contained in *Apocryphal Acts*,⁴⁰ the key question is not whether they contain some legends, but whether they contain a historical core.⁴¹ Hans-Josef Klauck observes, “From the fourth and fifth centuries onward, in the West and especially in the East, the relevant material becomes more and more copious and crosses the always fluid border into pure legend and hagiography.”⁴² Moss agrees, “It was . . . during the fourth century that Christians became more interested in telling romantic fictions than preserving historical facts.”⁴³ If Christians started telling romantic fictions around the fourth century, without any bind to historical truth, then it seems to imply that before that time they *were*

³⁸Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 136.

³⁹Even in court cases, jurors are instructed that they may not believe a particular portion of an eyewitness account, but can still accept some other isolate piece. The juror simply has to try to determine why the witness might speak truthfully in one area of testimony, while lying or being incorrect in another.

⁴⁰For example, in *The Acts of John* a group of bedbugs pester the apostle John. They annoy him so much that he commands them to stay far away from “the servants of God.” They wake in the morning and find the bugs patiently waiting at the door of the room. The bugs continue to obey the voice of John. In the *Acts of Philip* a huge leopard prostrates itself at the feet of three apostles and speaks to them with a human voice. And in *The Acts of Paul*, milk splashes on the tunics of the executioners at the beheading of Paul.

⁴¹The genre of the *Apocryphal Acts* is generally agreed to be the ancient novel. Many ancient novels employ historical personages to give the account the appearance of authenticity. But on the other hand, many ancient novels contain events and people that are firmly anchored in historical tradition. See Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 8-10.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 231.

⁴³Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 234.

concerned with preserving at least a remnant of historical truth. And sometimes it may be reasonable to conclude that a gem of historical truth has been preserved even *after* this time as well. Each account must be examined individually.

The *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, then, written before the fourth century, may contain some remnants of a reliable historical tradition. Most scholars seem to assume the *Apocryphal Acts* are entirely fictional and incapable of providing veridical historical data on the lives and martyrdoms of the apostles. However, two points raise questions about the dogmatism with which this position is often held. First, archaeological finds have provided support for at least one significant *Act*.⁴⁴ Second, there may be a living memory of an earlier reliable tradition that some of the *Acts* contain.⁴⁵ Of course, then, while they would not be treated with the same credulity as other ancient writings, such as those of Tacitus or Josephus; still these accounts should not be dismissed as entirely fictitious without careful analysis. Legendary accretion, then, does not warrant dismissing a particular source or an entire tradition. An example of this is the Gospel of Peter, an apocryphal gospel likely written in the second half of the second century, the same standard dating accepted for many apocryphal acts. While the Gospel

⁴⁴The *Acts of Thomas* was largely considered fictitious since history had no record of king Gondophares or of any other significant details in the story. In the late nineteenth century, however, coins were found bearing the name “Gondophares.” These coins also show he had a brother named “Gad” as the *Acts of Thomas* portrays. Couple this find with the evidence of considerable travel between the Near East and India during this time as well as the ancient tradition of Thomas founding the Indian church, and the basic ministry and martyrdom story in *The Acts of Thomas* may be considered more probable than often thought. See F. A. D’Cruz, *St. Thomas, The Apostle in India: An Investigation on the latest researches in connection with the Time-honored Tradition regarding the martyrdom of St. Thomas in Southern India* (Madras, India: Hoe and Company, 1922), 4-11.

⁴⁵Markus Bockmuehl focuses on the fate of Peter. He argues that many of the early sources, such as 1 Clement, Ignatius, Papias, Polycarp, Justin, Irenaeus, and others place a high premium on living *memory* (he defines this as the period of Peter and his immediate contemporaries, the immediate followers of the apostolic group, and then second-generation disciples, which would have died around the end of the second century, c. AD 200). He concludes that “until the end of the second century there were living individuals who personally, and sometimes vividly, remembered the disciples of the apostles—and that such memory was still thought to carry weight in debates about how to interpret the bearers of the apostolic faith” (Bockmuehl, “Peter’s Death in Rome?,” 1-23). This living memory did not halt the development of legend, but it may help explain why there is a historical core that was so strongly established it carried its way into some of the *Apocryphal Acts*.

of Peter clearly contains legendary accretion (such as a talking cross and three heads that reach to the sky), it does preserve minimal historical material related to the passion and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁶ Similarly, many apocryphal acts contain fanciful ideas and yet they also transmit actual fact. Instead of simply dismissing apocryphal accounts that contain legend, I intended to carefully and cautiously use them in historical analysis.

Additional Historical Challenges

Three final challenges hinder an ability to discern the lives and fates of individual apostles. First, some traditions for individual apostles became confused or blended with other biblical characters having the same (or similar) name. The tradition of the apostle Philip, for example, may have been blended with Philip the Evangelist (Acts 8:4-8). Traditions of Matthias and Matthew are also often confused. It also appears that at least two early significant Christians were called John, which complicates historical inquiry into the apostle John's martyrdom.

Second, beginning late in the second century, various major cities began claiming apostolic origins. Justo Gonzalez observes,

In its rivalry with Rome and Antioch, the church in Alexandria felt the need to have a founder with apostolic connections, and thus the tradition appeared that Saint Mark had founded the church there. Likewise, when Constantinople became a capital city in the empire, its church too needed apostolic roots, and thus it was claimed that Philip had preached in Byzantium, the ancient site on which Constantinople was later built.⁴⁷

There are multiple traditions surrounding the apostle Andrew. Eusebius reports that

⁴⁶There is little historical debate about the existence of Herod and Pilate, as recorded in both the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Luke (23:1-16). The Gospel of Peter also preserves some other historical material that was recorded at least a century earlier in the canonical Gospels. Yet it must be recognized that many scholars have questioned the historicity of these accounts. For example, the Gospel of Peter preserves the record of darkness over the land (Mark 15:33; Matt 27:45; Luke 23:44), the crown of thorns (Mark 15:16; Matt 27:29; John 19:2), gambling of Jesus' clothes as lots (Matt 27:35; Luke 23:34; John 19:24), words of Jesus (Mark 15:34), nails in his hands (John 20:25), burial by Joseph (Mark 15:42-46; Matt 27:57-61; Luke 23:50-54; John 19:38-42), guard at the tomb (27:62-68), the visit of the empty tomb by women (Mark 16:1-5; Matt 28:1; Luke 24:1-3; John 20:1), and more.

⁴⁷Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:37.

Andrew went to Scythia (southern Russia), and another tradition agrees.⁴⁸ According to *The Acts of Andrew*, he ministered to and was martyred in Greece. And yet a third tradition places him as visiting Ephesus and Asia Minor. These three traditions may appear contradictory and attempts have been made to reconcile them.⁴⁹ Perhaps an overly zealous church invented one or more of the traditions to give itself apostolic authority. It may be difficult to know for sure. The mere fact that multiple traditions exist does not, however, mean there is no knowable truth about Andrew's mission.⁵⁰ And it does not follow that a reasonable conclusion cannot be drawn by analyzing the quality and quantity of evidence. At worst, the various traditions simply raise the difficulty of investigation and the care with which the evidence must be handled.

The final challenge for the investigation into the deaths of the apostles relates to the fact that in the Greco-Roman world dying a courageous death was both a sign of virtue as well as a mark of manliness. A good death could transform one into a model of patriotism or heroism.⁵¹ This was doubly true for Christians. G. W. H. Lampe notes, "For Christians, however, the conviction that the martyr was the ideal disciple held an even more central place in belief and practice, for it was rooted in the event that stood at the heart of the Gospel, the death of Jesus."⁵² Clement of Alexandria said, "We call

⁴⁸Eusebius, *The Church History* 3.1. See *The Martyrdom of Saint Andrew in Scythia* in E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles: Being the Histories and the Lives and Martyrdoms and Deaths of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901).

⁴⁹McBirnle, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, 52.

⁵⁰A common argument for moral relativism stems from the apparent disagreement on moral values across cultures and throughout time. Since people disagree, the argument assumes, there can be no objective truth about morality. But this conclusion does not logically follow from the premises. In fact, logically speaking, *nothing* follows from disagreement. People disagree about scientific facts and yet it does not follow that there is no truth about the matter. The same is true with morality. And the same is true in regards to the various claims of apostolic origins for various cities. Yes, there is disagreement. But there still is a truth about the matter that can be examined through careful historical investigation.

⁵¹Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 28-29.

⁵²G. W. H. Lampe, "Martyrdom and Inspiration," in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 118.

martyrdom perfection, not because the man comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love.”⁵³ According to Tertullian, “The death of martyrs also is praised in song.”⁵⁴ Thus, martyrdom stories served both edifying and apologetic purposes in the early church, especially in the West.⁵⁵

Does this mean the martyrdom stories were fabricated? Some may have been. Multiple stories for certain apostles include them dying in different places, at different times, and in different ways. Clearly they cannot all be true. But it hardly follows that *all* stories were invented simply because they elevate the status of the martyr and served an apologetic function in the church. Just because a fact may have an apologetic function does not mean it was invented. The writer could be equally motivated by concern for truth. The onus, then, is on those who claim the stories were *all* invented for apologetic purposes; what evidence exists to warrant the claim? In fact, if the church felt free to invent martyrdom stories, then one wonders why more stories of the martyrdoms of the apostles were not invented in the first two centuries of the church. The silence of history is telling.

I uphold, then, that the disciples fully understood the cost of following Jesus. In his farewell address to his disciples, Jesus spoke both of the world’s hatred for them and of the witness that the Holy Spirit and the disciples will provide for him. The result of this witness, Jesus warned his disciples, would be their suffering and death (John 15:18-16:4). Thus, they expected and anticipated their own deaths for the sake of the

⁵³Clement of Alexandria *Stromata, Miscellanies* 4.4, as cited in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. and chronologically arranged by A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 2:412.

⁵⁴Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 7, as cited in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 3 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 639.

⁵⁵Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), liv.

gospel. In doing so, they were following the example of Jesus, and providing the greatest possible witness for their belief in the risen Jesus. William Weinrich concludes,

As in 1 John 3:13, Jesus' love, shown in his death, leads to the disciples' giving their life for the brethren. The suffering and death of the disciples, occasioned by the hate of the world, is "witness" to Jesus and therefore gives sustenance to the community of believers. This element was fundamental in the early Christian view of martyrdom and lies at the bottom of the Acts of the Martyrs whose principal function was to exhort and encourage those who read them.⁵⁶

Jesus was the great exemplar for his disciples. He called his disciples not merely to follow his doctrines or teachings, but to follow *him*.⁵⁷ He willingly laid down his life for those he loved (John 10:14-18). Christians are urged to follow his example (Mark 8:31-38; Heb 12:1-3; 1 Pet 2:18-25; 1 John 2:6). Paul called believers to him as he imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7). Paul suffered greatly for his faith (2 Cor 23-33). He saw this suffering as honoring Christ but also testifying to His name. Ignatius saw martyrdom as an imitation of the example of Jesus: "Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God."⁵⁸ While the ancient world revered as heroes those who died a good death, the church need not invent all the martyrdom stories, for the apostles willingly faced death as an act of imitating Christ, so their message would have the greatest impact.

⁵⁶William C. Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom: A Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Contexts of Persecution and Martyrdom in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 30-31.

⁵⁷Lawrence Cunningham states the extent to which the disciples are to imitate Jesus: "Furthermore—and this point is often overlooked—the essential core of the Christian faith is not the doctrines of Jesus or his teachings, but Jesus himself. Christianity is not a religion of the book, *pace* fundamentalists, but a faith directed to a person. Jesus does not say, 'Come, follow my teachings,' but 'Come, follow me.' Paul conceptualizes baptism not as washing in water but in a symbolic death and rising up in Christ. . . . If a follower of Jesus finds him-or herself in a hostile situation in which faith is set over against possible punishment or death, there is a certain logic that, from the believer's perspective, urges one to accept death precisely because there is a paradigm for such behavior, namely, that the fundamental object of faith himself accepted death at the hands of the hostile" (Cunningham, "Christian Martyrdom," 8).

⁵⁸Ignatius *Epistle to the Romans*, 6.13.

Research Outline

Even though there are undeniable impediments to the investigation, careful historical analysis revealed that the apostles were willing to die for their faith, and that in fact many did. The strength of their convictions demonstrates that they were not fabricating their claims about Jesus, but that they actually believed their claims that Jesus had risen from the grave.

Before examining the historical evidence for individual apostles, a few steps need to be established. Ensuing chapters address the following issues.

First, what was the apostolic kerygma? Chapter 2 makes the case that the Christian faith was a “resurrection movement” since its inception. People joined the church because they believed in the resurrection, and the apostles, as well as other early Christians, willingly suffered for their conviction that Jesus rose from the grave. There is no record of an early Christianity in which belief in the resurrection was missing.

Second, who were the Twelve? Were they really eyewitnesses to the resurrection? Chapter 3 explains what is known about the apostles and provides evidence they were genuinely eyewitnesses. Witnessing the risen Jesus qualified one as an apostle (Acts 1:21-22). Focus is placed on the original twelve disciples—with Matthias replacing Judas—as well as Paul and James, the brother of Jesus, since they were also witnesses of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:3-8). It is important to demonstrate that they were actually eyewitnesses because this separates them from others who suffered and died for their beliefs. The disciples died for their *firsthand* experience with risen Jesus, not second- or third-hand information delivered to them by others. While a contemporary act of martyrdom may be emotionally powerful, it is not *evidentially* powerful. The martyrdom of the first eyewitnesses, however, carries both emotional *and* evidential force.

Third, did Christians really suffer and die for their faith in the early decades of the church? How extensive was the persecution? In order to establish that the apostles died as martyrs it was demonstrated that Christians were in fact tortured and killed in significant numbers during the early church. Chapter 4 demonstrates the historical

evidence for the persecution of Christians in the first century. Among the sources for this evidence are the New Testament, early Christian writers, and Roman and Jewish historians.

Fourth, how should a historian approach the question of the martyrdom of the apostles? What is sound historical methodology? Difficulties in knowing and studying history are analyzed in chapter 5 with an aim towards establishing the possibility of historical knowledge. The historical grid from this chapter is subsequently applied to each apostle. While the goal is to make an apologetic argument for the reliability of the resurrection appearances to the apostles, this investigation must be guided by sound historical methodology.

Fifth, is there evidence the apostles died as martyrs for their faith? Chapters 6 through 19 are the core of the dissertation and the linchpin of the argument. The chapters begin with the most attested apostles, such as Peter and Paul, move to the moderately attested apostles, such as Andrew and Thomas, and conclude with the least attested apostles such as Simon the Zealot and Matthias. After the historical evidence is presented, each apostle is analyzed with a historical ranging from *not possibly true* (certainly not historical) to *the highest possible probability* (nearly historically certain).

Sixth, what objections can be raised against the arguments entertained here? Chapter 7 includes responses to common objections against the veracity or significance of the apostles' deaths. Perhaps the leading objection is the claim that others have died for their religious beliefs—such as Joseph Smith, Jr., and Muslim terrorists—and so the value of the evidence for the apostles is minimized. What this objection overlooks is that the apostles died as eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus. If Jesus were not resurrected they would have died for a *known* lie. Other philosophical and epistemological objections are considered as well.

Seventh, a final concluding chapter summarizes the evidence from the investigation and draws broad conclusions concerning the fate of the apostles regarding

the evidence it provides for the resurrection. Once all the evidence is considered, it is clear the apostles were willing to die for reporting what they believed to be true and that many in fact did.

CHAPTER 2

THE CENTRALITY OF THE RESURRECTION

For the deaths of the apostles to count as evidence for the sincerity of their convictions about the risen Jesus, it is necessary to show that the apostles had a *resurrection* faith. In other words, it must be shown that the resurrection lies at the heart of the earliest Christian *kerygma* and that the faith of the disciples was based upon their belief that Jesus truly rose from the grave.

While some critics doubt the centrality of the resurrection,¹ the majority of scholars accept that Christianity was a resurrection faith since its inception. In *The Resurrection of The Messiah*, New Testament scholar Christopher Bryan begins his inquiry with the assumption that there are three established facts that can be considered “historical certainties,” one of which is the centrality of the resurrection in the earliest Christian self-definition.² Bryan is not alone in his estimation. Ancient historian Paul Barnett says there are two historical facts of the first century not easy to deny—that Jesus was proclaimed the Messiah shortly after his lifespan, and the centrality of the resurrection to the early *kerygma*: “It was this twin conviction, that Jesus was the Christ and that God had raised him alive from the dead, that drove and energized the first disciples and that alone accounts for the rise of Christianity as we encounter it in the historical records.”³

¹Robert M. Price, “Would the Apostles Die for a Lie?” *Free Inquiry* 21 (Fall 2001): 20

²Christopher Bryan, *The Resurrection of the Messiah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-4. According to Bryan, the other two “historical certainties” are the existence of the Christian church in the years following the crucifixion and the belief, among both Jews and Gentiles, that dead people stayed dead.

³Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 186.

What gives these scholars such confidence? To see the centrality of the resurrection in the first Christian *kerygma*, the evidence is considered from early Christian creeds, preaching in Acts, Paul's letters, and the Apostolic Fathers.

Early Christian Creeds

Christological creeds are often considered the most promising glimpse into the earliest Christian beliefs before the composition of the New Testament writings (beginning c. AD 50).⁴ Creeds were verbal proclamations of the faith that circulated *before* their inclusion in various New Testament books. Thus, creeds provide a window into the earliest known Christian beliefs that motivated the proclamation of their faith. The death and resurrection of Jesus, which demonstrates the present Lordship of Christ, are the most common elements within these creeds.⁵

An example many scholars consider a Christological creed is Romans 1:3-4: "Concerning his Son, who was descended from David, according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness and by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord."⁶ Rudolph Bultmann says this passage relies upon a pre-Pauline traditional formula from the early church, which dated the Messiahship of Jesus from the resurrection.⁷ Paul is proclaiming that the man Christ

⁴Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1997), 143-70. I credit Gary Habermas for many of the insights that guide the formulation of this chapter.

⁵Oscar Cullman, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, trans. J. K. S Reid (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 58-64.

⁶Support for Paul's use of a Christian creed is found in the structure of the section (parallelism), the reference to David, some words that are not Pauline, and some theological implications that many believe vary from Paul. Not everyone agrees on the credal status of this passage. For instance, Leon Morris says it is "quite possible" Paul is citing a traditional summary of the faith, but we cannot be sure of this. Where did Paul get it, asks Morris? Why do some of the creeds vary in the New Testament? He concludes that it is possible Paul is making free use of traditional expressions rather than citing a fixed creed. See Leon Morris, *Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 42-43.

⁷Rudolf K. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 1:27, 50, 82.

Jesus, who was born of human descent through the lineage of David, was declared the Son of God because of his resurrection.

Romans 4:24b-25 contains another possible early creed: “It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” Bultmann considers this “a statement that had evidently existed before Paul and had been handed down to him.”⁸ According to this creed, justification for sins is provided to those who have faith in the one who raised Jesus from the dead. Again, one finds the resurrection at the heart of earliest Christian belief. The important point about these creeds is that there is testimony to the centrality of the resurrection that likely predates the writing of Romans (typically dated between AD 55 and 58).

A strong candidate for an early creed can be found in 1 Thessalonians 4:14: “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again.” This is the basic Christian confession of the early church. Paul taught this same creed when the Thessalonian church was founded (Acts 17:3). The introductory statement “we believe,” the atypical reference to “Jesus” without a title, and the rare translation “rose again” (*anestē*) in the writings of Paul indicate this is a pre-Pauline creed.⁹ Gene Green writes, “These characteristics suggest that the apostle appeals to a pre-Pauline creed that had been handed over to the church and that both the apostolic company and the Thessalonians confessed. The centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the cornerstone of the apostolic proclamation can hardly be disputed.”¹⁰

By the time this letter to the Thessalonians was written (c. AD 49/50), the resurrection was at the heart of the creedal proclamation in fixed form. Paul is not

⁸Ibid., 82.

⁹D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 33 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 145.

¹⁰Gene Green, *The Letter to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 219-20.

arguing for the truth of the resurrection to the church at Thessalonica. Rather, he mentions the resurrection in passing, which indicates there was already agreement upon its centrality and importance.¹¹

Early creeds can also be found outside the letters of Paul. Oscar Cullman considers 1 Peter 3:18 such an example: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.” In light 1 Peter 3:18, and other such creeds, Cullman concludes, “It is, then, the *present* Lordship of Christ, inaugurated by His resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God, that is the centre [sic] of the faith of primitive Christianity.”¹²

First Corinthians 15:3-7

Perhaps the most crucial creedal text for understanding early Christian *kerygma* is found in 1 Corinthians 15:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (15:3-5)

Paul goes on to describe an appearance of Jesus to the 500, to James, to all the apostles, and then to himself. The core of this tradition is the death, burial,¹³ resurrection, and appearances of Jesus.¹⁴

¹¹Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 181.

¹²Cullman, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, 58. See pp. 41, 45, 53, and 57-62 for the creedal nature of this passage.

¹³The creed does not specifically mention the empty tomb. Critics like to raise this objection to discount the early tradition of the empty tomb, even though an indirect reference to the empty tomb is made in Acts 2:29-36. While the empty tomb is not specifically mentioned, it is strongly *implied*. N. T. Wright concludes, “The fact that the empty tomb itself, so prominent in the gospel accounts, does not appear to be specifically mentioned in this passage, is not significant; the mention here of ‘buried then raised’ no more needs to be amplified in that way that one would need to amplify the statement ‘I walked down the street’ with the qualification of ‘on my feet’” (N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], 319).

¹⁴There is debate about where the creed originally ended. It is possible that the traditional

The chief value of this creed is its early dating. First Corinthians is typically dated AD 54 to 55, roughly twenty-five years after the death of Jesus (c. AD 30). Thus, this formulation reveals a pre-Pauline tradition even closer to the time of Jesus than the writing of 1 Corinthians. In the preceding verses, Paul says, “Now I would remind you, brothers” (1 Cor 15:1). Paul intends to *remind* them of the core gospel facts they already knew.¹⁵ Thus, Paul did not invent this creedal formula but faithfully passes on the tradition he had previously received.¹⁶

Gary Habermas offers five reasons for why the creedal nature of this passage is accepted by the vast majority of critical scholars across a diverse theological spectrum.¹⁷ First, Paul uses the words “delivered” (*paradidōmi*) and “received” (*paralambanō*), which are technical terms for the transmission of tradition.¹⁸ Second, many of the words in the creed are non-Pauline, indicating a distinct origin. Third, the creed is likely organized in a stylized, oral form. Fourth, there are internal indications of a Semitic source, such as the reference to Peter with the Aramaic “Cephas.” Finally, the triple usage of “and that” as well as the reference to the fulfillment of Scripture indicate ancient Hebraic narration.

There is good reason to believe the origin of this tradition is Jerusalem.¹⁹ In the list of appearances, Paul specifically mentions Cephas and James (1 Cor 15:5, 7). It

formula ended at v. 5 and Paul added vv. 6-8. It also may have ended at v. 7 and Paul simply added v. 8. Settling this issue is not necessary for the present investigation, for the core of the tradition is about the resurrection and Paul assumes Corinthian believers are already familiar with it.

¹⁵R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 625-26.

¹⁶Bob Utley, *Paul's Letters to a Troubled Church: I and II Corinthians* (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2002), 173.

¹⁷Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 153-54.

¹⁸It is clear Paul valued tradition, even before becoming a Christian. In Gal 1:4 he says, “And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the tradition of my fathers.” Other passages emphasize the importance Paul placed on tradition, including the following: 1 Cor 11:2; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 3:6.

¹⁹Paul says the Jerusalem church was the source of spiritual teachings (Rom 15:25-27). In the

cannot be mere coincidence that these are the only two apostles Paul mentions visiting in person on his first trip to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the key question is *when* Paul received the tradition. Two main possibilities present themselves. First, Paul received the tradition during his stay with Ananias and other disciples in Damascus after his conversion (Acts 9:19). Paul immediately began proclaiming Christ and gained in his ability to confound the opposition with evidence that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:20-22). Second, he received the tradition during his first visit to Jerusalem three years later (Acts 9:26-28; Gal 1:18). Paul stayed with the apostles fifteen days, which is plenty of time to learn about the life, death, resurrection, and appearances of Jesus. Paul uses the term “visit” (ἱστορησαί) to describe his stay in Jerusalem, which implies he went to interview Peter. It is the same root word for the modern term “history.” It was important for Paul to get to know the apostles, specifically Peter. According to F. F. Bruce, it should go without saying that Paul sought first-hand accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from the apostles. One piece of information Bruce says Paul “most probably” received is the appearance of Jesus to Peter (Luke 24:34).²⁰

Paul Barnett believes the first option, that Paul received the tradition during his stay in Damascus, is preferable. After all, what else was Paul preaching in Damascus besides the death and resurrection of Jesus?²¹ Nevertheless, there are other possibilities as to when Paul received the tradition.²² There may not be certainty when Paul received the

previous chapter (1 Cor 14:36), the Corinthian church was forming its own policies for church gatherings. Paul asks, “Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?” These arguments assume the rabbinic understanding that there is one common law that proceeds from Jerusalem. Also, the apostles were originally in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8), and they remained there at least fourteen years after his conversion (Gal 1:17-18; 2:1-10). Decisions made by the Jerusalem church held equally for the universal church (Acts 15:1-29). See Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 227-28.

²⁰F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 98.

²¹Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity*, 182. He notes that the phrase “I delivered to you as of *first importance*” can equally be rendered as “I delivered to you what I also received *at first*,” which would have been at Damascus.

²²Paul visits Jerusalem on at least two more occasions before writing his first letter (Acts

tradition, but he had ample opportunities with leading Jerusalem figures long before the writing of 1 Corinthians. Michael R. Licona writes,

Moreover, even if Paul received the tradition embedded in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 from someone outside of the Jerusalem leadership, his constant interaction with these leaders in and outside of Jerusalem coupled with his high regard for tradition virtually guarantees that the details of the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 are precisely in line with what the Jerusalem leadership was preaching (1 Cor 15:11). We have what amounts to a certifiably official teaching of the disciples on the resurrection of Jesus.²³

There is thus firm and unambiguous evidence that the resurrection was at the heart of the earliest Christian *kerygma*. The fact that Paul mentions the apostles in the 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 creed (“the Twelve,” “all the apostles”) indicates that belief in the resurrection of Jesus was not simply a Pauline idea, but belonged to the entire circle of first believers.

The Resurrection in Acts and the Letters of Paul

Evidence for the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus can also be found in the apostolic preaching in Acts.²⁴ Speeches in Acts make up approximately one-third of the entire material of the book. The reason so much space is given to the speeches in Acts, in comparison to other contemporary writers such as Tacitus, Herodotus, and Josephus, is because Luke chronicles events propelled largely by the spoken word. Luke wants his

11:27; 15:2; Gal 2:1-10). Paul also could have received the tradition from Barnabas, James, Silas, or another apostle on a separate occasion.

²³Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 232.

²⁴There is some disagreement over the exact details of the apostolic *kerygma*. Commentators provide different lists of crucial points. Nevertheless, there is a consensus that the resurrection was central to the earliest proclamation of the apostles and is an indispensable element. C. H. Dodd observes, “The Pauline *kerygma*, therefore, is a proclamation of the facts of the death and resurrection of Christ in an eschatological setting which gives significance to the facts.” According to Dodd, this is the same *kerygma* as the apostolic preaching for two reasons. First, Paul states that he submitted his teachings to Peter, James, and John at Jerusalem (Gal 1:11-18) and states he “received” the gospel (1 Cor 15:3). Second, Paul speaks to believers in Rome who looked to other founders as authoritative. Thus, when Paul refers to data of the Christian faith, he refers to that which was common to the preachers that the church in Rome already considered authoritative. He preached what was already considered the common gospel. See C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 13-14.

audience to know that the Spirit-filled preaching of Jesus, as opposed to other macrohistorical events such as wars, was the reason for the church's explosive growth.²⁵

In his Pentecost speech, Peter describes how Jesus was appointed by God to do wonders but was killed by lawless men and yet "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it" (Acts 2:24).²⁶ The resurrection is mentioned in most evangelistic speeches, to both Jews and Gentiles,²⁷ as well as in other passages throughout Acts.²⁸ James Dunn concludes,

The claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead is the central and principal message of the preaching in Acts. . . . We can be quite confident, then, that Jesus' resurrection was from the first a prominent and distinctive feature of earliest Christian belief and functioned as a defining identity marker of the new sect which gathered round his name.²⁹

Paul's letters, especially the book of Romans, are filled with belief in the resurrection as well. N. T. Wright observes, "Squeeze this letter [Romans] at any point, and resurrection spills out; hold it up to the light, and you can see Easter sparkling all the way through. If Romans had not been hailed as the great epistle of justification by faith, it might easily have come to be known as the chief letter of resurrection."³⁰

²⁵Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 116-18.

²⁶C. K. Barrett makes the observation that this speech, which is characteristic of Acts as a whole (except at 20:28), shows no developed theology, especially in comparison with the letters of Paul. There is no suggestion that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and no positive effect is ascribed to his death. Thus, Barrett concludes, "There is no question that this speech and those that resemble it present an elementary, undeveloped, theology and Christology." He concludes that the speeches must be early. See C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: T&T Clark, 1994), 1:131-32.

²⁷Luke uses the verbal form *euāngelizeto* in the imperfect tense in Acts 17:18, which indicates the durative aspect of his missionary preaching in Athens. He was teaching on the resurrection of Jesus over an extended period of time in public to the philosophers. See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 2:1392.

²⁸Acts 1:21; 2:24, 31-32; 3:15; 4:2, 10-11, 33; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 33-34; 17:3, 18, 31; 23:6; 24:15, 21; 25:19; 26:8, 23.

²⁹James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:212-13.

³⁰Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 241.

Paul's letters confirm the central place the resurrection held in the early preaching of Peter in the book of Acts. Yet the theme of resurrection is not limited to Acts and the letters of Paul. With the exception of Hebrews, all the major books of the New Testament make resurrection a central focus.³¹

Resurrection in the Apostolic Fathers

The resurrection is at the heart of the biblical and pre-biblical proclamation of the earliest Christians. Yet it is also central to many of the generation of believers after the apostles, known as the Apostolic Fathers.³² For instance, *1 Clement* is likely the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers (c. AD 95-96). In regards to the centrality of the resurrection, *1 Clement* 42:3 says, "When, therefore, the apostles received his commands and were fully convinced through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and persuaded by the word of God, they went forth proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God was about to come."³³

In his *Letter to the Magnesians* 11, Ignatius wrote, "You should be fully convinced of the birth and suffering and resurrection that occurred in the time of the governor Pontius Pilate."³⁴ Resurrection permeates many of the rest of his letters.³⁵ In the *Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*, Polycarp says, "He [Jesus] persevered to the point

³¹Ibid., 476.

³²Scholars debate about which writings to include among the Apostolic Fathers. Yet most agree that the collection should include at least eleven authors: *1* and *2 Clement*, Ignatius (seven authentic letters), Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Didache*, the *Letter of Barnabas*, the *Epistle to Diognetus*, the *Shepherd* of Hermas, and the fragments of Papias and Quadratus (preserved through Eusebius). Most were written from the end of the first century to the middle of the second century. See Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1:10-13.

³³Another example is *1 Clement* 24:1: "We should consider loved ones, how the Master continuously shows us the future resurrection that is about to occur, of which he made the Lord Jesus Christ the first fruit by raising him from the dead." Ibid., 81.

³⁴Ibid., 253.

³⁵See *To The Ephesians* 20; *To The Trallians* intro., 9; *To The Philadelphians* intro., 9; *To The Smyrneans* 1, 12.

of death on behalf of our sins; and God raised him up after loosing the labor pains of Hades.”³⁶ His belief in the resurrection helped Polycarp face martyrdom boldly.

The *Letter of Barnabas* offers a critique of Jewish practices (such as circumcision, fasting, kosher food laws, Sabbath, etc.) in contrast to the new life in Christ. The whole point of the book is that Jewish practices are no longer necessary for salvation because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, *The Letter of Barnabas* 5:6 says, “He [Jesus] allowed himself to suffer in order to destroy death and to show that there is a resurrection of the dead.”³⁷ In regard to the resurrection in the Apostolic Fathers, N. T. Wright concludes, “The resurrection of Jesus continued, unsurprisingly, to be central in the church’s proclamation, with its meaning being explored from various angles.”³⁸

Conclusion

The resurrection is the heart of the earliest Christian *kerygma* from the pre-biblical creeds to the Apostolic Fathers. The resurrection was central to Christian proclamation from the inception of the church to (at least) the generation after the death of the apostles. Craig Keener writes,

Paul and his predecessors were united on the basic gospel message (1 Cor 15:1-12); we lack any evidence, except for secondary scholarship reflecting speculation, for “Jesus communities” that did not affirm Jesus as Messiah (and hence King and Lord) or that denied his resurrection.³⁹

For all the first-century disagreements within the church,⁴⁰ the lack of any evidence for disputation on the resurrection speaks loudly as to its centrality and universality among the first believers. James Dunn observes,

³⁶*Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 1.2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1:333-34.

³⁷Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2:27. Other passages in the *Letter* highlight the importance of the resurrection including 1:6-7; 15:9; 16:2-3.

³⁸Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 480.

³⁹Keener, *Acts*, 1:565.

⁴⁰An example is the debate between Jews and Gentiles regarding the importance of

It is an undoubted fact that the conviction that God had raised Jesus from the dead and had exalted Jesus to his right hand transformed Jesus' first disciples and their beliefs about Jesus. It is also natural that they should have focused their earliest preaching and teaching on filling out the consequences of that basic belief.⁴¹

It is important to grasp the significance of the earliest Christian *kerygma* for the lives of the disciples. Although they were Galileans and their lives were in danger since the arrest and death of Jesus, they stayed in Jerusalem to proclaim the resurrection. This shows their understanding and acceptance of the basic meaning of the crucified and risen savior. Otherwise, they hardly would have engaged in missionary work. If they wanted to persuade Jews in Jerusalem to believe in Jesus, it would be counterproductive to invent fictitious stories whose falsehood could easily be discovered. Thus, their preaching only makes sense if they truly believed Jesus had risen from the dead, and if the historical evidence was there to confirm it.

Paul Barnett sums up why the proclamation of Jesus was meaningless without the resurrection:

Indeed, it must be noted that the disciples' assertion of Jesus' messiahship . . . would have been meaningless had he ended his days as an indicted and crucified criminal, buried somewhere near Jerusalem. If he had, it is safe to say that he would have more or less disappeared from history. The dramatic actions of fellow martyrs like Judas the Galilean and Simon bar Gioras left greater imprints in Josephus's annals than Jesus did. But no ongoing movements succeeded either Judas or Simon, despite large followings during their lifetimes. The assertion of resurrection gave credence to Jesus' messianic claims and must be regarded as basic to the early witness of the disciples.⁴²

circumcision and the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1-21; Gal 2:4-10).

⁴¹Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 2:1169.

⁴²Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity*, 185.

CHAPTER 3

THE TWELVE APOSTLES

One of the first things Jesus did in his public ministry was to reach out to twelve individuals and invite them to be his personal disciples. Mark gives two reasons for the selection of the Twelve. First, they were to “be with him” (Mark 3:14a). They ate with him, travelled with him, ministered with him, watched him do miracles, listened to his teachings, and some even observed his arrest, trial, and execution.¹ They experienced a rather rigorous apprenticeship during their time with Jesus.² Second, Jesus selected the Twelve that he “might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14b-15).³ Jesus was multiplying his effectiveness through them. But even more importantly, he was preparing them to carry on his work when he was gone.

¹Peter, James, and John were with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane at his arrest (Mark 14:32-50; Matt 26:36-56; Luke 22:39-53; John 18:1-11). Peter followed Jesus into the courtyard (Mark 14:54). John was present at the cross (John 19:26-27). This, of course, assumes the apostle John is “the beloved disciple.”

²The teaching model of Jesus was clearly patterned after the approach Judaism took towards the Old Testament. It was the vocation of a rabbi to pass on how to preserve and interpret the Old Testament to his disciples. Students would live in close community with their selected rabbi, having his domestic needs cared for, but also learning how to keep the law and become a rabbi in the future. Jesus was called “rabbi” forty-one times in the Gospels and the twelve are referred to as disciples more than one hundred and eighty times. Although Jesus’ teaching had some differences to traditional rabbinical methods (such as preaching in open air by a lake), he had many rabbinical characteristics as well (teaching in Synagogues, using parables, etc.). See Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 33-34.

³The term “apostle” had wide range of meaning that extended beyond the Twelve. When Jesus selected the Twelve, he seems to be using “apostle” in the sense of messengers sent on a temporary mission. Mark and Matthew use “apostle” for the Twelve only when they are out on mission. Luke is probably responsible for the close connection, if not identification, in the later church between the Twelve and the apostles. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 3:126.

Who Were the Twelve?

The term “the Twelve” appears in all four Gospels.⁴ The Synoptic Gospels and Acts provide the names for the Twelve.⁵

Table 1. Apostolic lists

Matt 10:2-4	Mark 3:16-19	Luke 6:13-16	Acts 1:13
Simon (Peter)	Simon (Peter)	Simon (Peter)	Peter
Andrew	James b. Zebedee	Andrew	John
James b. Zebedee	John	James	James
John	Andrew	John	Andrew
Philip	Philip	Philip	Philip
Bartholomew	Bartholomew	Bartholomew	Thomas
Thomas	Matthew	Matthew	Bartholomew
Matthew	Thomas	Thomas	Matthew
James b. Alphaeus	James b. Alphaeus	James b. Alphaeus	James b. Alphaeus
Thaddaeus	Thaddeus	Simon the Zealot	Simon the Zealot
Simon the Zealot	Simon the Zealot	Judas b. James	Judas b. James
Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot	[vacancy]

There is no list of the twelve apostles in the Gospel of John, but Jesus does refer to some of them, including Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael, Thomas, Judas (not Iscariot), Judas Iscariot, the “son of Zebedee,” who are not mentioned by name, and the disciple “whom Jesus loved.”⁶

The key question becomes how to reconcile the different names mentioned as members of the Twelve. Some scholars have suggested that differences among the lists

⁴Matt 10:1-25; 11:1; 20:17, 47; Mark 3:14, 16; 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; 10:32; 11:11; 14:10, 17, 20, 43; Luke 6:13; 8:1; 9:1, 12; 18:31; 22:3, 47; John 6:67, 70-71; 20:24.

⁵Since the time of Homer’s catalogue of ships, it was very common in ancient Greek culture to make catalogues. Lists with the names of heroes were quite common. Other ancient documents included standardized lists as well. See Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:741.

⁶The call of Andrew, Peter (Cephas), Philip, and Nathanael is recorded in John 1:35-51. Thomas is called “one of the twelve” (20:24). Judas (not Iscariot) asks Jesus a question in 14:22. The disciple whom Jesus loved appears in 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20. The sons of Zebedee are mentioned only in 21:1. Judas Iscariot is mentioned in 18:1-3.

are an indication that the original names were forgotten when the Gospels were written down, and thus the tradition is unreliable.⁷ However, differences in the lists are not that significant. In all four lists the names occur in three groups of four names (except Acts omits Judas Iscariot), and the first name in each group is the same: Peter always tops the first group, Philip the second, and James son of Alphaeus the third, and the order of the subsequent names varies. Richard Bauckham provides a plausible explanation: “It is quite intelligible that a list of this kind should be remembered as consisting of three groups, with the first name in each group a fixed point in the memory, but with the order of other three names in each group variable.”⁸ Additionally, the slight variation in the lists may also suggest that the Twelve was more widely known than a standardized list of names.⁹

One difference that requires explanation is the variation between Thaddaeus and Judas son of James. There are two possible explanations. One is that Thaddaeus was an original member of the Twelve who dropped out for an unknown reason, but was replaced by Judas son of James sometime later. Some have suggested that the exact composition of the Twelve may have varied from time to time.¹⁰ It seems unlikely, however, that Matthew and Mark would include the list of a dropout instead of his replacement. This is different than in the case of Judas, since Judas was essential to the furtherance of the story and his betrayal is indicated in the list. The second possibility is that Judas son of James and Thaddaeus¹¹ were the same person. It was not uncommon for

⁷For instance, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 620.

⁸Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 98.

⁹Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 246.

¹⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 243-44.

¹¹There is early textual evidence that “Lebbaeus” should replace the name Thaddaeus. Some Greek manuscripts even combine the two forms of the text: “Thaddaeus who was called Lebbaeus” or “Lebbaeus who was called “Thaddaeus” (Barclay M. Newman and Philip Stine, *Matthew: A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1988], 284-85).

Palestinian Jews to have both Semitic and Greek names.¹² Furthermore, Judas son of James needed to be distinguished in some way from Judas Iscariot. He is referred somewhat awkwardly as “Judas, not Iscariot” in John 14:22, yet it seems unlikely this was his usual designation. Bauckham concludes,

To distinguish him from Judas Iscariot, this Judas could have been identified by his patronymic, Judas son of James (*Yehudah bar Ya'aqov*), or, alternatively, he could have been known by his Greek name (*Taddai*). Both alternatives could have been used, and the two versions of the list of the Twelve . . . have adopted different alternatives.¹³

There is also the difference in the names between Bartholomew, as mentioned in the four lists, and Nathanael, mentioned in John 1:45-52. Bartholomew has traditionally been identified as Nathanael.¹⁴ Three reasons have been offered to justify this conclusion. First, Bartholomew is a family name, not a proper name. Bartholomew comes from the Hebrew for *son of Talmai*. Second, Bartholomew immediately follows Philip in the three Gospel lists, and Philip is the one in the Gospel of John who brought Nathanael to Jesus (John 1:45).¹⁵ Third, Nathanael never appears by name in the Synoptic Gospels, and equally Bartholomew never appears by name in the Gospel of John.¹⁶ It seems reasonable to conclude that Bartholomew and Nathanael are the same person.

Finally, there is the question over the identification of Matthew and Levi. Although Matthew occurs in all four lists, there is the distinct call of Levi (Mark 2:13; Luke 5:27), which parallels Matthew's call (Matt 9:9). The similarity in wording between the three accounts as well as the chronology of preceding event (healing the paralytic), and subsequent event (a shared meal with “sinners”), indicates these refer to the same

¹²Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 100.

¹³*Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁴Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 169.

¹⁵Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Critical Commentary and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1871), 2:35.

¹⁶William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (London: SCM, 1960), 12.

occasion.¹⁷ Thus, the traditional view is that Matthew and Levi are the same person. Robert Stein finds this view reasonable since first-century Jews often had two or more names. He concludes the tax collector could have been called “Levi Matthew.”¹⁸ Others suggest that Levi was Matthew’s name prior to conversion.¹⁹

The identification of Matthew with Levi is not without its detractors. For instance, when considering onomastic grounds, Bauckham finds the traditional view implausible. If Levi and Matthew were the same person, this would be a “virtually unparalleled phenomenon of a Palestinian Jew bearing two common Semitic personal names.”²⁰ He notes that Mark does not seem to consider these persons the same. Considering other details Mark provides in his list of the Twelve, it seems likely he would have indicated the similarity had he known it. Various explanations have been offered to account for this puzzle.²¹ Bauckham even offers his own solution.²² However,

¹⁷Morna Hooker has suggested that the call to Levi was distinct from the call to Matthew. Thus, they are different persons. She observes Jesus’ call to follow him was not limited to the twelve (Mark 8:34; 10:21, 52). However, this does not seem to account for the near verbatim rendition of the call in Matthew, Mark and Luke, which includes the exact preceding and subsequent events. See Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black, 1981; repr., New York: Continuum, 1991), 95.

¹⁸Robert Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 182. R. T. France agrees that Levi is to be identified with Matthew and that it is not uncommon for someone to have two names, whether both Semitic or one Semitic and one Greek. He rejects the idea that Levi was a tribal name for “the Levite,” since Levi was such a common name at the time. James Edwards agrees, noting that other disciples were known by more than one name (e.g., Cephas/Simon/Peter). David Smith also agrees, noting the unlikelihood that Matthew and Levi, if they were distinct persons, would both have a father of the same name, Alphaeus. More likely, says Smith, is that there were three sets of brothers: Peter-Andrew, James-John, and Matthew-James. See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 82; David Smith, *Mark: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing, 2007), 79; and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 132.

¹⁹John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 1408.

²⁰Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 108-09.

²¹Davies and Allison list the five main options. First, The author of Matthew knew by tradition that Levi was also called Matthew. Second, the author of Matthew was aware that Jesus’ calling meant Levi must be one of the twelve so he chose Levi (from Mark) to be named Matthew. Third, since both are called “tax collector,” the author of Matthew attained this from the Mark tradition and applied the reference of Levi to Matthew. Fourth, the name Matthew was chosen to stress the theme of discipleship. Fifth, Matthew is pseudepigraphical, and thus the name Matthew was inserted to inform the readers about a fictitious author. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Commentary on Matthew 8-18: A Critical and Exegetical*

this issues does not need to be resolved to proceed in the investigation, for the name Matthew appears in all four lists of the Twelve regardless of the identity of Levi.

The Historicity of the Twelve

An impressive case can be made for the historicity of the Twelve as a group Jesus personally formed. Three primary arguments have been offered for the existence of the Twelve during the ministry of Jesus. First, reference to the Twelve appears in various sources and forms.²³ The different lists of names for the Twelve indicate they may represent independent tradition. Second, by the criterion of embarrassment, it is highly unlikely the early church would have invented a story of Jesus personally choosing Judas to be a member of the Twelve.²⁴ E. P. Sanders writes, “Thus the simplest and most probable explanation of the traditions about the twelve and Judas is that the church was faced with two facts: the existence of the twelve as a group (1 Cor. 15:5; Matt. 19:28) and the betrayal by one of them.”²⁵ This is one reason Sanders considers the existence of the Twelve among the “(almost) indisputable facts about Jesus.”²⁶ Third, if the tradition of

Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew (London: T & T Clark, 2000), 2:98-99.

²²“The most plausible explanation of the occurrence of the name Matthew in 9:9 is that the author of this Gospel, knowing that Matthew was a tax collector and wishing to narrate the call of Matthew in the Gospel that was associated with him, but not knowing a story of Matthew’s call, transferred Mark’s story from Levi to Matthew. The story, after all, is so brief and general it might well be thought to appropriate to any tax collector called by Jesus to follow him as a disciple” (Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 111).

²³Mark mentions the Twelve at least ten times: 3:14; 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; 10:32; 11:11; 14:10, 17, 20, 43. John, who has no special interest in the Twelve, directly mentions the group in 6:67-71. John also refers to Thomas as “one of the Twelve” (20:24). Additionally, there may be an indirect reference to the Twelve in the Q tradition of Matt 19:28/Luke 22:30. Paul also has a brief mention of the Twelve in 1 Cor 15:5.

²⁴Most contemporary scholars accept the historicity of Judas. Arie Zwiep observes, “It is difficult to see why the early Christians would *invent* a Judas figure, as has sometimes been suggested, for his steady position as one of the Twelve and his infamous role in the arrest of Jesus create more problems, both historical and theological, than they solve. See Arie W. Zwiep, *Judas and the Choice of Matthias* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 7.

²⁵E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), 100.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 101.

the Twelve were invented, one would expect early church records to be filled with examples of the Twelve's powerful influence and leadership in the church. Yet the opposite is the case. Neither Luke nor Paul has much to say of the Twelve. While the lack of early information on the Twelve makes it difficult to determine the historicity of their martyrdom accounts, this same absence is an indication that the group was not a mere invention of the early church.

Richard Bauckham recently completed an onomastic study of Jewish names of this time that lends additional support to the authenticity of the Twelve.²⁷ Among Jews in first century Palestine there were a small number of very popular names and a large number of rare ones.²⁸ As would be expected, if the tradition of the Twelve were reliable, a combination of common and rare names are on the lists.²⁹ Bauckham concludes, "The mixture of very common, relatively common, rare, and almost unique names is not at all surprising in view of what we have learned about the Palestinian Jewish onomasticon."³⁰ Taken together, these facts make it highly likely the Twelve existed as a special group of disciples who formed an inner circle around Jesus.

²⁷Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 701-71.

²⁸The following figures indicate the relative popularity of Jewish names during this period: 15.6 percent of men either Simon or Joseph, the two most popular names; 41.5 percent of males had one of the nine most popular names; and 7.9 percent of men had a name attested in only one source. Bauckham observes that the percentage of male names of Palestinian Jews in the Gospels and Acts corresponds remarkably close with those for the population as a whole. But this is not true for the names of those in the Diaspora, which is what would be expected if the tradition is reliable. *Ibid.*, 71-74.

²⁹Simon is the most common Jewish male name with 243 occurrences, Judas is fourth most common with 164 occurrences, John is fifth with most common with 122 occurrences, Matthew is ninth most common with 62 occurrences, and James is eleventh most common with 40 occurrences. On the other hand, Thaddaeus is thirty-ninth in order of popularity with 8 occurrences, Philip is sixty-first with 7 occurrences, Bartholomew (*Talmai*) also has 7 occurrences, Andrew has 3 occurrences, and Thomas has merely 2. *Ibid.*, 67-88.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 102.

The Apostolic Witness

The basic sense of “apostle” (*apostolos*) is one who was “sent out” as an authorized emissary on behalf of a superior. In Luke and Acts the term *apostle* predominantly designates the Twelve.³¹ Luke says, “And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles” (6:13). The ministry of these apostles principally involved proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39-41; 13:31), teaching (Acts 2:42), and prayer (Acts 6:2-4). Many signs and wonders were done through the apostles as testimony to the truth of their proclamation (Acts 2:43; 3:1-10; 5:12-16). Given that they were commissioned directly by Jesus, the earliest Christian writings portray the apostles as having the very authority of Christ himself.³²

There were specific criteria for inclusion in the Twelve. Peter makes it clear that it must be “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection” (Acts 1:22). Thus, according to Peter, a member of the Twelve must have been with Jesus from the time of his baptism until his ascension, and he would become a witness (*martyrs*) of his life and specifically to his resurrection. The book of Acts is filled with claims that the mission and authority of the apostles come from their personal appearances of the risen Jesus.³³ This value for eyewitness testimony is consistent with

³¹Luke 6:13; 9:1, 10; 22:14, 30; 24:9-10; Acts 1:26; 2:37, 42-43; 4:33-37; 5:2, 12, 18, 29, 40; 6:6; 8:1, 14-18; 9:27; 11:1.

³²Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 67-69. Passages that indicate the apostles had the very authority of Christ himself include the earliest biblical texts (Mark 3:14-15; Matt 10:14, 20; John 14:26; 17:8, 18; Acts 10:41-42; 2 Pet 3:2) and the apostolic fathers (*I Clement* 42:1-2; 47:1-3; Ignatius *Letter to the Magnesians* 7:1; *Letter to the Romans* 4:4; Justin Martyr *I Apology* 39; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1).

³³Acts 1:22; 2:32; 4:20; 5:32; 10:39; 13:31; 22:15.

ancient Greco-Roman culture. The best evidence was believed to come from eyewitnesses, and reports further removed from the events were considered weaker.³⁴

The Lukan idea of an apostle gaining authority to proclaim the risen Jesus because they themselves had been with Jesus from beginning to end finds additional support in the Gospel of John. In his final speech to his disciples after the last supper, Jesus said, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning” (15:26-27). Luke and John are both in agreement that qualification for being a witness to Jesus is having “been with [Jesus] from the beginning.” Richard Bauckham believes this idea was widespread in the early church beyond these two authors: “Evidently in the early Christian movement a special importance attached to the testimony of disciples who had been eyewitnesses of the whole ministry of Jesus, from its beginning when John was baptizing to Jesus’ resurrection appearances.”³⁵ Support for Bauckham’s thesis can be found in the Apostolic Fathers.³⁶ The apostles’ confidence to suffer in their proclamation of the gospel came from the belief that they had personally seen the risen Jesus.

The Twelve provide an important link between the time of Jesus and the early church. They provided the initial witness to the risen Jesus (Acts 2:14; 4:33; 5:29-32) and authenticated the mission work to the Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 8:14; 11:1-18). After

³⁴Keener, *Acts*, 1:768.

³⁵Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 116.

³⁶First Clement 42:1-3: “The apostles were given the gospel for us by the Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. Thus, Christ came from God and the apostles from Christ. Both things happened, then, in an orderly way according to the will of God. When, therefore, the apostles received his commands and were fully convinced through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and persuaded by the word of God, they went forth proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God was about to come.” Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 3: “For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection. And when he came to those who were with Peter, he said to them, ‘Reach out, touch me and see that I am not a bodiless demon.’ And immediately they touched him and believed, having been intermixed with his flesh and spirit. For this reason they also despised death, for they were found to be beyond death.”

accomplishing these tasks, the Twelve disappear from Acts.³⁷ Although Matthias is chosen to replace Judas early in Acts, there is no attempt to fill the vacancy created by the death of James about a decade later (Acts 12:1-2). After the Twelve accomplish their task Acts shifts to focus on Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and Paul.

All of the Apostles

There is a broader sense in which the New Testament refers to “all the apostles” beyond the Twelve (1 Cor 15:7, 9). This group of apostles had its basis in appearances of the risen Jesus, and thus they are considered “witnesses.” Candidates for this group include Barnabas (Acts 14:14; 1 Cor 9:5-6), Stephen (Acts 22),³⁸ Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7), Timothy and Silas (1 Thess 1:1; Col 1:1), Apollos (1 Cor 4:6, 9) and last of all Paul (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8). Authority of this group of apostles came not simply from Christ, but from *the risen Christ*.³⁹ Luke makes it clear that this group of apostles,

³⁷Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), s.v. “Apostle, Apostleship,” by C. G. Kruse.

³⁸Paul calls Stephen a “witness” in Acts 22:20 in the same sense in which he refers to the twelve apostles as witnesses. Thus, Stephen’s martyrdom could be additional evidence that the first eyewitnesses were willing to suffer and die for their faith. Dunn says, “The martyrdom of Stephen is unlikely to have been a figment of Luke’s imagination; Martyrdom is too poignant and sensitive a subject to be treated so lightly; the early martyrdoms are seen through a haze of hagiography, but it would be a hard-hearted critic who denied that such martyrdoms took place” (James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 2:264). Interestingly, after appearing in Acts 6-8, Stephen completely disappears from the rest of the New Testament. François Bovon has written an extensive analysis of the first martyr, Stephen. He notes that the apocryphal literature rarely mentions Stephen. Bovon mentions the lack of reference to Stephen in the Apostolic Fathers, early apologists, early Christian Apocrypha, and the Nag Hammadi documents. He is aware of only three mentions of Stephen in the second century. For instance, Eusebius mentions that the martyrs of Lyons and Vienna found their strength, like Stephen, to pray for their executioners (*Church History* 5.2). Irenaeus mentions that Stephen was chosen by the apostles, became the first deacon, preached about the law, saw the divine glory, and reached perfection through his martyrdom (*Against Heresies* 3.12.10, 13; 4.15.1). In a later article, Bovon examines traditions of Stephen outside the New Testament. See François Bovon, “The Dossier on Stephen, the First Martyr,” *Harvard Theological Review* 96 (2003): 288; idem, “Beyond the Book of Acts: Stephen, the First Christian Martyr, in Traditions Outside the New Testament Canon of Scripture,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32 (2005): 93-107.

³⁹Paul makes this claim twice: 1 Cor 9:1: “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” And in 15:8 Paul says, “Last of all, as one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

which includes the Twelve, was to publicly proclaim the risen Jesus, and was expected to suffer in the course of being witnesses.⁴⁰

Paul and James were not members of the Twelve, but they did have apostolic authority from seeing the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:7-8).⁴¹ Neither believed in Jesus during his lifetime. Paul was a persecutor of the church (Acts 8:3; Gal 1:13), and the brothers of Jesus—which included James—rejected him (John 7:5). While James and Paul were not part of Jesus’ inner circle during his public ministry, they were eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus, and so their martyrdoms would be equally significant in terms of providing support for their testimony as that of the Twelve. This is why they are considered *apostles* along with the Twelve for the sake of this investigation.⁴²

Did the Apostles Engage in Missionary Work?

The apostles undoubtedly engaged in their first missionary work to the people of Israel. The question is whether they engaged in missionary work to various nations of the world *after* ministering to the Jews. Mark’s Gospel, which was likely the first to be written and circulated, contains little reference to a universal commission,⁴³ even though it records the reminiscences of the apostle Peter. The writings of Matthew and Luke,

⁴⁰Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, *Paul the Accused: His Portrait in the Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), 1, 94-97.

⁴¹Rosenblatt argues that the details of Saul as a young man witnessing the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58) were not meant to indict Paul as an accessory to murder, but to make the theological point regarding the integrity of Paul’s identity as a witness to Jesus. *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴²While the burgeoning church selected Matthias as the twelfth apostle to fill the void of Judas (Acts 1:12-26), it was James the brother of Jesus who functionally filled the spot. James became the leader of the Jerusalem church, and as far as one can tell, functioned as an apostle. Paul called him an “apostle” and a “pillar” of the church (Gal 1:19; 2:9).

⁴³There is a reference to a universal commission in Mark 16:15: “And he said to them, ‘God into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.’ The final twelve verses in Mark, 16:9-20, do not appear in the earliest manuscripts and so are rejected by most scholars. If these verses should be included, as a minority of scholars suggest, it would only strengthen the case for a universal commission. See Bart D. Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace, *The Textual Reliability of the New Testament: A Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 29.

however, which were likely written post-70, emphasize that the apostles are to “make disciples of all nations” and to be witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8). There is a clear shift in emphasis from Israel to the nations of the world.

There is little doubt the apostles first witnessed their faith to Israel. But what is the evidence they engaged in missionary work beyond Israel? Stuart McBirnie writes,

One great truth about the apostles is unassailable. It has been strengthened by every bit of tradition and history we have studied. That is, most of the apostles took seriously the great commission of Jesus (as recorded in Matthew 28) and went forth . . . to evangelize the nations with the Christian gospel.⁴⁴

There is both internal and external evidence the apostles engaged in missionary work after their departure from Jerusalem.

Internal Evidence for a Universal Commission

Jesus called the Twelve with the specific purpose that they would be missionaries (Mark 3:14). After a period of preparation Jesus sent the Twelve to minister in pairs, which involved healing the sick, casting out demons, and proclaiming the kingdom of God (Mark 6:7-13; Matt 10:5-16; Luke 9:1-6). This commission has the ring of historicity.⁴⁵ This mission was limited in duration and focused specifically on the house of Israel. Yet, in the subsequent verses Jesus says, “Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles” (Matt 10:17-18; Mark 13:9; Luke 21:12-13). Jesus warns his followers that their

⁴⁴William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1973), xxi-xxii.

⁴⁵John Meier provides two reasons for why the mission activity of the Twelve is “more likely than not.” First, it has multiple attestation of sources including Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12; Matt 10:1-42. The missionary discourses in Mark and Q have different forms. Second, by the criterion of discontinuity, Jesus promised to make others “fishers of men” (Mark 1:17; Matt 4:19; The phrase “fishers of men” does not exist in the Old Testament, and later rabbinical literature views it negatively. It does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament or in Christian literature until the end of the second century AD. See Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 3:157-63.

preaching will be deeply opposed and they will be brought before the highest authorities in the land. The emphasis on “governors and kings” indicates that Jesus is no longer speaking of their present mission, but the future mission to the Gentiles outside Palestine. This short-term trip is preparation for future missionary activity to all the nations.⁴⁶ It is worth noting that Jesus views persecution positively as an opportunity for the apostles to “witness” to the truth of the gospel. They expected to suffer for proclaiming the kingdom of God to all the nations.

If the mission is to be universal, why begin just with Israel? Eckhard Schnabel explains, “The real limitation for the restriction of the mission to Galilee was not pragmatic, however, but rather theological and salvation-historical: salvation is offered first to Israel, then to the Gentiles.”⁴⁷ Jesus always intended the kingdom of God to be universal, but he did begin with the Jews.

The book of Acts shows the beginnings of the Christian mission. One of Luke’s primary purposes is to show the development of Christian evangelism from a religious sphere to a larger secular sphere that includes governors and kings.⁴⁸ Acts 1:8 functions as a summary statement for the entire book: the mission begins in Jerusalem (1-7), but then spreads to Judea and Samaria (8-12), and finally to the ends of the earth, which in the story is Rome (13-28). The phrase, “ends of the earth,” however, is not limited to Rome as the prophets often use the same phrase to indicate distant lands (e.g. Isa 49:6). Some specific events in Acts indicate the universal focus and expansion of the gospel.

First, Philip the Evangelist proclaimed Christ in Samaria (Acts 8:4-8) and shares with an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40).

⁴⁶Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 254.

⁴⁷Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 2:295.

⁴⁸Rosenblatt, *Paul the Accused*, 58.

Second, Peter and John were sent by the apostles in Jerusalem to visit Samaria in reaction to the news that some Samaritans had come to faith (Acts 8:14). There is no indication that the news surprised the apostles. Peter and John proclaim the gospel before returning back to Jerusalem, preaching along the way (Acts 8:25).

Third, Paul was specifically chosen by Jesus to be his emissary to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), even though he continued to preach to the house of Israel. Paul is also aware of other Christians who are involved in missionary work such as the apostles (1 Cor 9:5; 12:28-29) and other “brothers” who are proclaiming the gospel (Phil 1:12-18).

Fourth, after his vision at Joppa, Peter concluded, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34b-35). Peter then shares how he and the other apostles were witnesses to the risen Jesus and commanded to proclaim that message so that *everyone* who believes will be saved (Acts 10:43). Peter also preached the gospel and saw people “turn to the Lord” as he travelled through Judea, Galilee, Samaria, and Lydda (Acts 9:32-35).

Fifth, the church of Antioch also sent out missionaries to both Jews and Gentiles who had not been reached with the gospel (Acts 11:19-22; 13:1-2).

Sixth, Acts concludes with Paul preaching “with all boldness and without hindrance” in his final speech in Rome. This suggests the story continues and the witnessing is not complete.⁴⁹ Acts 28 is an intentionally open-ended conclusion to indicate that the worldwide witnessing of the gospel must continue.⁵⁰

The biblical precedent for the great commission is clear: Jesus trained his apostles to someday reach the nations and he gave them the command to do so. And in the book of Acts this very teaching is being put into effect. The apostles not only

⁴⁹John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman Holman, 1992), 86.

⁵⁰Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 111.

proclaimed the risen Jesus, but as their response to the missionary report from Samaria indicates, they personally directed the missionary efforts from Jerusalem.

External Evidence for a Universal Commission

The New Testament records the commission to reach the ends of the earth. But was such a task even possible in the first century AD? Could the apostles have made it to faraway places like Spain, Ethiopia, and India? Eckhard Schnabel provides nine reasons why such a task was entirely possible.⁵¹ (1) The first missionaries were all Jews. Thus, they would likely be accommodated and supported by synagogues in the Diaspora. (2) The apostles would have no problem procuring information about distant lands, even outside the borders of the Roman Empire, from merchants in the markets of large cities and towns. (3) The apostles who were fishermen could easily obtain needed information from sailors in harbor cities. (4) They did not need highly specialized or detailed information. Rather, they simply needed information about roads and population centers, which could easily be garnered by other travelers they meet along the way. (5) Some cities had public buildings that displayed such information. (6) Some of the apostles familiar with Greek education (e.g., Matthew and Paul) could obtain needed information from public libraries and archives. (7) Greek education trained people to make independent observations and analyses of other people and places. (8) Followers of Jesus with influential positions may have had important information and resources for planning missionary endeavors.⁵² (9) It seems early Christians were generally more prepared than their pagan counterparts to acquire information about other nations from merchants and sailors. Additionally, the Roman Empire was fairly stable during the time of Claudius

⁵¹Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1:470-99.

⁵²For instance, Luke refers to Chuzas, an administrator of Herod Antipas (Luke 8:3); the Roman procurator Sergius Paulus was converted during the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:7-12); Paul knew some Asiarchs in Ephesus (Acts 19:13); and John mentions the royal official in Capernaum (4:46).

(AD 41-54), which is the initial period the apostles would have engaged in missionary activity.⁵³ These facts do not *prove* the apostles engaged in missionary activity to distant lands. But they do rebut objections meant to undermine the plausibility of such an endeavor. These points indicate that the apostolic missions were entirely possible. There is also positive external evidence for their missionary endeavors.

The Twelve were the leaders of the Jerusalem church until Herod Agrippa (AD 41-44) initiated a persecution that resulted in the death of James, the son of Zebedee, and the arrest of Peter (Acts 12:1-4). It seems the Twelve left Jerusalem at this point and leadership was transferred to a group of elders led by James, the brother of Jesus (Acts 11:30; 12:17; 15:12-21; 21:15-19; Gal 2:9). Acts 12 marks a significant turning point in the ministry of the Twelve and the Jerusalem church. After sharing about his escape from prison, Peter “departed and went to another place” (Acts 12:17). It seems the other apostles likely left at this point as well (if not earlier). It is noteworthy that “the brothers,” as well as James, are to be informed about Peter’s departure. The other apostles are not mentioned. It seems likely they had already left Jerusalem. Given their awareness of the death of James and subsequent arrest of Peter, it seems abundantly probable the apostles would have fled Jerusalem to avoid the wrath of Herod Agrippa.⁵⁴

The consistent testimony of the early church is that the apostles left Jerusalem to engage in missionary work. As demonstrated below, both orthodox and Gnostic sources see missions as the prime task of an apostle. It is impossible to say whether the persecution was the initial motivation for their mission work, or if the persecution simply put existing plans into motion. Regardless, there is considerable external support for the departure of the Twelve to engage in mission work.

⁵³The stability during the reign of Claudius is in contrast to the preceding reign of Caligula (AD 37-41), who was insane during part of his time in power, and the subsequent reign of Nero (AD 54-68), who launched the first official state persecution of Christians. See Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 66.

⁵⁴Polhill, *Acts*, 283.

Clement of Rome 42:3-4b:

Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. And thus preaching through countries and cities.⁵⁵

The Preaching of Peter (c. AD 100-120):

Jesus says to the disciples after the resurrection, “I have chosen you twelve disciples, judging you worthy of me,’ whom the Lord wished to be apostles, having judged them faithful, sending them into the world to the men on the earth, that they may know that there is one God.”⁵⁶

Ascension of Isaiah 3.17-18 (c. AD 112-138):

And the Beloved sitting on their shoulders will come forth and send out His twelve disciples; And they will teach all the nations and every tongue of the resurrection of the Beloved, and those who believe in His cross will be saved, and in His ascension into the seventh heaven whence He came.

The Gospel of Thomas 12 (c. AD 140):

The disciples said to Jesus, “We know that you will depart from us. Who is it who will be great over us?” Jesus said to them, “Wherever you have come, you will go to James the Righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.”⁵⁷

I Apology 39.2-3, Justin Martyr (c. AD 155-157):

For from Jerusalem there went out into the world, men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking: but by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach all the word of God.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Clement of Rome, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, as cited in *The Apostolic Fathers—Justin Martyr—Irenaeus, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev and chronologically arranged by A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 16.

⁵⁶Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.6, as cited in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 491.

⁵⁷Regarding this passage, Richard Bauckham concludes, “It is clearly a saying which presupposes the mission of the apostles (and probably therefore presupposes the sending out of the by the risen Christ)” (Richard Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Church,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 451).

⁵⁸Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin*, as cited in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 175-76.

The Epistle of the Apostles (c. AD 150-175):

He answered and said to us, “Go and preach to the twelve tribes of Israel and to the gentiles and Israel and to the land of Israel towards East and West, North and South.”⁵⁹

The Acts of Peter 5 (c. AD 180-190):

While they were grieving and fasting God was already preparing Peter at Jerusalem for the future. After the twelve years had passed, according to the direction of the Lord to Peter, Christ showed to him the following vision, saying, ‘Peter, Simon, whom you expelled from Judea after having exposed him as a magician, has forestalled you at Rome. . . . But do not delay. Go tomorrow to Caesarea, and there you will find a ship read to sail to Italy. . . . Instructed by this vision, Peter did not delay to mention it to the brethren and said, “I must go to Rome to subdue the enemy and opponent of the Lord and brethren.”’⁶⁰

(Pseudo) *Hippolytus on the Twelve Apostles* (c. AD early third century):

Peter preached the Gospel in Pontus, and Galatia, and Cappadocia, and Betania, and Italy, and Asia . . . Andrew preached to the Scythians and Thracians . . . John, again, in Asia . . . James, his brother, when preaching in Judea . . . Philip preached in Phrygia . . . Bartholomew, again, preached to the Indians . . . And Thomas preached to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Hyrcanians, Bactrians, and Margians . . . And James the son of Alphaeus, when preaching in Jerusalem. . . . Jude, who is also called Lebaeus, preached to the people of Edessa . . . Simon the Zealot, the son of Clopas, who is also called Jude, became bishop of Jerusalem . . . And Matthias . . . preached in Jerusalem.⁶¹

Apollonius (c. AD 200):

Moreover, he says, on the basis of tradition, that the Savior ordered his apostles not to leave Jerusalem for twelve years.⁶²

Origen (AD 185-254):

Such was the condition of things among the Jews, but the holy Apostles and disciples of our Savior were scattered throughout the whole world. Thomas, as tradition relates, obtained by lot Parthia, Andrew Scythia, John Asia (and he stayed there and died in Ephesus), but Peter seems to have preached to the Jews of the Dispersion in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia, and at the end

⁵⁹*The Epistle of the Apostles* 30, as cited in J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; repr., 2009), 575.

⁶⁰*The Acts of Peter 5*, as cited in Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 401-2.

⁶¹Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Hippolytus on the Twelve*, as cited in *Fathers of the Third Century, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 5 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 255.

⁶²Eusebius, *History of the Church* 5.18.

came to Rome... This is stated exactly by Origen in the third volume of his commentary on Genesis.⁶³

The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles (AD second and third centuries):

And from now on we were of one mind and agree to fulfill the ministry to which the Lord had appointed us. We made an agreement with one another, and went down to the sea—at an opportune moment, which came about for us through (the counsel of) the Lord. We found a ship at anchor by the shore, ready to put to sea. And we spoke with the sailors of the ship, that we should embark with them. . . . For we are strangers and servants of God. We must spread the word of God obediently, (and that) in every city.⁶⁴

Fragments of Polycarp (third century AD):

After the apostles . . . Lord gathered . . . they travelled from Jerusalem . . . and they went . . .⁶⁵

Epistle of Peter to Philip (c. AD late second and early third centuries):

Then the apostles separated to “the four winds” that they might preach. And they went in the power of Jesus in peace (140.23-27).

The Acts of Thomas 1 (c. AD 200-220):

At that time we apostles were all in Jerusalem, Simon called Peter and Andrew his brother, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew the publican, James (the son) of Alphaeus and Simon the Cananean, and Judas (the brother) of James; and we divided the regions of the world, that each one of us might go to the region which fell to his lot, and to the nation to which the Lord sent him.⁶⁶

Didascalia Apostolorum 24 (c. AD third century):

But when we had divided the whole world into twelve parts, and were gone forth among the Gentiles into all the world to preach the word, then Satan set about and stirred up the People to send after us false apostles of the undoing of the word.⁶⁷

⁶³Origen *Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 3, as cited in Eusebius, *Church History* 3.1.

⁶⁴*The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 420-21.

⁶⁵The text of the *Fragments of Polycarp* contains physical damage as well as missing sections. The statement in the above text is a possible restoration based upon analysis and translation from the earliest known documents in the Sahidic dialect of the Coptic language. The concern Frederick Weidmann, the translator, was to produce a concise literal translation rather than a more fluid text. Frederick W. Weidmann, *Polycarp and John: The Harris Fragments and Their Challenge to the Literary Tradition* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 42.

⁶⁶*The Acts of Thomas* 1.1, as cited in *New Testament Apocrypha*, 339

⁶⁷R. Hugh Connolly, ed. and trans., *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929), 200.

Letter of Peter to Philip (c. AD 170-220):

Then Peter gathered together the others also, saying, "O, Lord Jesus Christ, author of our rest, give us a spirit of understanding in order that we also may perform wonders." Then Peter and the other apostles saw him, and they were filled with a holy spirit, and each one performed healings. And they parted in order to preach the Lord Jesus. And they came together and greeted each other saying, "Amen." Then Jesus appeared saying to them, "Peace to you all and everyone who believes in my name. And when you depart, joy be to you and grace and power. And be not afraid; behold, I am with you forever." Then the apostles parted from each other into four words in order to preach. And they went by a power of Jesus, in peace.

Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.1b-2a (AD 260-339):

Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were dispersed throughout the world. Parthia, according to tradition, was allotted to Thomas as his field of labor, Scythia to Andrew, and Asia to John, who, after he had lived some time there, died at Ephesus. Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion.⁶⁸

The historical value of these individual sources is undoubtedly variable, and they disagree over the particulars of some of the apostles. Yet they generally agree the apostles stayed in Jerusalem for a period of time before embarking out for world missions. The apostolic commission to world missions thus meets the criterion of multiple attestation.⁶⁹ Why do these sources not tell a more consistent and coherent tradition of exactly where each apostle went? Eckhard Schnabel offers important insight:

If the sources from the second and third centuries presented a coherent and consistent tradition, then this would be used as an argument against the authenticity of such a conference in Jerusalem twelve years after Easter. It is a fact that no early Christian text that reports or claims to report historical events attempts to provide a comprehensive historical account. It is precisely the missing 'coherence' that may indicate that Christian authors of the second and third centuries had information about the ministry of the apostles. Since they did not write a comprehensive history of the early church, they passed on information that they had in a selective and uncoordinated manner.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Eusebius of Caesaria, *Ecclesiastical History* (1890). In *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, trans. A. C. McGiffert (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890): 1:132.

⁶⁹According to John Meier, the criterion of multiple attestation focuses on sayings (of Jesus) that are in more than one independent literary source and/or in more than one literary form or genre. Support for the apostolic commission comes from a variety of genres including letters (*I Clement*), church order teachings (*Didascalia Apostolorum*), historical accounts (Eusebius, *Church History*), and novels (*Acts of Thomas, Acts of Peter*). See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:174-75.

⁷⁰Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:531.

Two additional reasons support the historicity of the mission of the Twelve as recorded in the apocryphal Acts. First, the early church fathers, such as Tertullian and Hippolytus, treated the Apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* favorably.⁷¹ Second, traditions in these works have additional historical support, such as the existence of Gondophares in *The Acts of Thomas* or the visit of Peter to Rome in *The Acts of Peter*. But even if the apocryphal Acts are completely rejected as fiction, there still remains the other extra-biblical support for the apostolic commission. In sum, there is firm historical support for the missionary endeavors of the Twelve after Jerusalem.

The Testimony of the Twelve

The Twelve were the first witnesses to Jesus and they spearheaded the initial missionary movement from Jerusalem. Assuming Acts preserves a historical core, the apostles boldly proclaimed their faith after Pentecost, willingly suffering and facing possible death. After Pentecost, they boldly proclaimed their faith even in the face of suffering and possible death, if Acts preserves historical kernels in this regard.

The boldness of the apostles is in stark contrast to their character before Pentecost. Herbert Lockyer lists five significant defects in the pre-Pentecost apostles.⁷² First, the apostles lacked spiritual understanding and regularly misunderstood the message of Jesus.⁷³ Second, they were mutually jealous. Even as Jesus neared death, they fought over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God (Mark 10:35-45). Third, they lacked faith. Jesus regularly castigated them for not demonstrating faith (Mark 4:40; Matt 14:31; Mark 9:18; Mark 9:19). Fourth, they deserted Jesus in the hour of need. At

⁷¹Schneemelcher notes that the extent of historicity in the Acts of the Apostles is difficult to say. However, assessment of these apocryphal Acts went from benevolent treatment in Tertullian and Hippolytus, to concern in Eusebius, to rejection after the close of the canon. See Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 20.

⁷²Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 34-36.

⁷³For instance, Jesus calls Peter “Satan” for not understanding he must suffer and die (Matt 16:23). The disciples also do not understand the teachings of Jesus (e.g., Matt 13:1-23).

the beginning of their call they “left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:11). Yet at his arrest “they all left him and fled” (Mark 14:50). Fifth, they were helpless in the face of a challenge, even though Jesus strived to prepare them for the difficulty of his arrest and crucifixion. The criterion of embarrassment as well as multiple attestation make this depiction of the apostles reliable.

What accounts for the radical change in the apostles? How could they go from an ordinary band of men with little courage to a bold group willing to suffer and die for their faith? How did they come to fear God more than men? Luke provides insight:

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at the right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (Acts 5:29-32)

CHAPTER 4

PERSECUTION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Christians faced persecution and difficulty from the beginning of the church.¹ The forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, was imprisoned and beheaded.² Jesus of Nazareth was crucified.³ Stephen was stoned to death after his witness before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6-8). Herod Agrippa killed James the brother of John (Acts 12:12), which led to the departure of the rest of the Twelve from Jerusalem. This persecution was not simply brought on by the missionary work of Paul, but the preaching of the first apostles regarding the Messiahship and Lordship of the risen Jesus.

¹The persecution Christians faced was not a continuous, ongoing, daily battle of persecution against relentless waves of attack by the Roman government for its first three centuries of existence. Rather, persecution was typically local rather than statewide. Most persecution in the first couple centuries was from mobs pressing authorities to action rather than state-incited persecutions. Persecuting Christians was simply not an imperial authority until the time of Decius in AD 250. Still, Christians knew they could face the ultimate price at any moment for their faith in Jesus Christ. See Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 50-51.

²Few contemporary scholars question the historicity of John the Baptist. Josephus confirms the existence of John in *Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.2. According to Meier, the vocabulary and style is that of Josephus. The passage is also unrelated to Jesus and is twice as long as the *Testimonium Flavianum*. Meier observes, “Hence it is hard to imagine a Christian scribe inserting into Book 18 of the *Antiquities* two passages about Jesus and the Baptist in which the Baptist appears on the scene after Jesus dies, has no connection with Jesus, receives more extensive treatment than Jesus, and is praised more highly than Jesus” (John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994], 2:20). Meier also notes that existence of John the Baptist gains credibility from the criterion of multiple attestation (Mark, Q, possibly M, and John) as well as the criterion of embarrassment. Craig Keener concludes, “From a purely historical standpoint, we can be fairly certain that Antipas had John executed for preaching what he took as undermining his honor” (Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 174).

³To my knowledge, Gary Habermas has engaged in the most in-depth analysis of the evidence for the resurrection, studying over 3,400 academic sources in English, German, and French between 1975 and the present. According to Habermas, the vast majority of scholars accept the death of Jesus as historical fact for four primary reasons: (1) a surprising number of ancient historical texts record the death of Jesus including early primal creeds such as 1 Cor 15:3, the Gospels, non-Christian sources, and several early noncanonical early Christian sources; (2) medical studies agree on the cause of death in crucifixion; and (3) a survival of Jesus on the cross cannot account for the disciples’ belief that he had been raised. This is why Habermas says the death of Jesus is “a heavily evidenced belief that is acknowledged by virtually all scholars” (Gary Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope* [New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003], 16).

This persecution should have come as no surprise to the disciples of Jesus since he had instructed them to expect discrimination, betrayal, imprisonment, torture, and even death. The Twelve were well aware of the potential cost when they accepted the invitation to follow Jesus and he reminded them of this cost throughout his ministry.⁴

The Cost of Discipleship

Jesus told his disciples to expect persecution (Matt 10:16-23; Mark 13:9; John 15:18-27, 16:2-3, 33).⁵ In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned his followers to expect to suffer for the sake of righteousness (Matt 5:10-11, 43-44; Luke 6:22-23). Jesus warned his disciples that they would suffer and be killed just as Israel had done to the prophets (Matt 21:33-40, 22:6, 23:30-31, 34, 37; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 6:22-23, 11:47-50, 13:34, 20:9-18). And they were to expect persecution in the same manner as Jesus experienced it himself (John 15:18-27). In fact, they would be persecuted specifically because of their proclamation of the *name of Jesus* before men (Matt 24:9; Luke 21:12-13, 17). In turn, their deaths would testify to the truth of their proclamation, as the death of Jesus proclaimed the truth of his.⁶ Many Romans did in fact abandon their view of reality and choose to follow Jesus when they saw Christians martyred for their faith.⁷ For instance,

⁴They probably did not fully understand the scope of this teaching until *after* the death and resurrection of Jesus. The request by the sons of Zebedee to reign on the right and left of Jesus indicate their initial confusion (Mark 10:35-45). Jesus answers their request to reign with Jesus with the qualification that such a position requires being willing to drink the cup he must drink, that is, be willing to face martyrdom. There were many things Jesus clearly taught that only made sense to the disciples after the resurrection (e.g., John 12:16).

⁵Most scholars agree that this teaching goes back to the historical Jesus. See Barnabas Lindars, "The Persecution of Christians in John 15:18-16:4a," in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 53.

⁶Weinrich concludes, "As in 1 John 3:13, Jesus' love, shown in his death, leads to the disciples' giving their life for the brethren. The suffering and death of the disciples, occasioned by the hate of the world, is 'witness' to Jesus and therefore gives sustenance to the community of believers" (William C. Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom: A Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Contexts of Persecution and Martyrdom in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* [Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981], 30).

⁷When formal martyrdoms began, Christians were often dragged against their will into the public arena to be tortured and humiliated. The games were meant to show the power of Rome against criminals who were supposed to die in fear, misery, and pain. Yet the Christian martyrdom undermined this

Justin Martyr considered the martyrdom of Christians a significant part of his journey to the Christian faith: “For I myself, too, when I was delighting in the doctrines of Plato, and heard the Christians slandered, and saw them fearless of death, and of all other things which are counted fearful, perceived that it was impossible that they could be living in wickedness and pleasure.”⁸

This relationship between martyrdom and mission is implied in John 12:24, when Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Jesus combines death with bearing “much fruit.” The disciples were expected to lose their lives for the sake of the advancement of the gospel. Jesus made this specifically clear to Peter, James, and John (John 21:18-19; Mark 10:38-39). W. H. C. Frend concludes, “Persecution was no longer something to be regretted or avoided, but to be expected as part of the age in which the Christian was living, and to be accepted with rejoicing.”⁹

Mark cryptically clarifies the cost of discipleship by placing the martyrdom of John the Baptist (6:14-29) right between the commission of the Twelve (6:7-13) and their return (6:30). Mark’s reader is forced to consider that those who follow Jesus may face the same fate as John.¹⁰ Although the persecution of the disciples is not referred to during the ministry of Jesus, there is a hint of this persecution in John 9 where the blind man

worldview. Tripp York observes, “So much so that some Romans abandoned their reality altogether and converted to the path of Christianity. Indeed, the purpose of Christian confession, of baptism, of showing how both live and die, is so that the world may know that there is an alternative to it. Martyrdom, like all other forms of Christian witness, is not merely an end in itself, since it has a particular reason for being: the conversion of all this is not Christian” (Tripp York, “Early Church Martyrdom: Witnessing For or Against the Empire?” in *Witness of the Body*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Karen Scott [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 34).

⁸Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 12, as cited in *The Apostolic Fathers with Just Martyr and Irenaeus, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 1193.

⁹W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965; corrected ed., Cambridge: James Clark & Co. Ltd, 2008), 84.

¹⁰James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 177.

whom Jesus healed is cross-examined by the religious authorities and ejected from the synagogue for *confessing* Christ (9:22, 34).¹¹ After Pentecost, however, when they were truly witnesses to the risen Christ (Acts 4:20), the apostles experience a wave of persecution from the religious authorities for confessing the name of Christ, which culminates in the arrest of Peter and the death of James (Acts 12:1-5).

Can these teachings of Jesus about suffering and persecution be trusted? There is sufficient historical evidence to believe so. John Meier observes, “Abundant multiple attestation of sources argues that Jesus did in fact warn his disciples of the fierce and possibly fatal cost of following him.”¹² Meier provides three types of teachings that reliably trace back to the historical Jesus.

First, Jesus taught that losing one’s life for the sake of the gospel is necessary to save it. Jesus was not referring merely to the salvation of the soul, but of saving the entire person. Those who choose a self-centered life in this world and refuse the call of Jesus to discipleship will ultimately lose their lives to eternal destruction. But on the other hand, the one who “loses” his life by accepting the requirements of Jesus will gain eternal life.¹³ There may be debate about the precise words Jesus used (*ipsissima verba*), but there is no doubt Jesus taught this very concept (*ipsissima vox*). If parallel passages are considered, this teaching occurs six times in the four Gospels (Mark 8:35; Matt 10:39, 16:25; Luke 17:33, 9:24; John 12:25). Meier concludes, “Such a pithy, paradoxical proverb that is attested in variant forms in Mark, Q, and John has a very good chance of

¹¹Of course, the primary reason the Gospels do not record the persecution of the disciples is because they were not yet witnesses and could not testify to the resurrection of Jesus. After Pentecost, however, the disciples experience a wave of persecution from the religious authorities, which culminated in the death of James (Acts 12:2), for confessing the name of Christ.

¹²John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 3:56-73

¹³John D. Grassmick, *Mark*, The Bible Knowledge Commentary, vol. 2 (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1983), 141.

going back to the historical Jesus.”¹⁴ Clearly, Jesus taught his disciples to sacrifice their own self-interest, to the point of giving their own lives, as a part of following him.

Second, Jesus taught that his followers must deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow him. Meier observes, “Both the shocking imagery and multiple attestation of sources argue for Jesus as the source of the saying.”¹⁵ In the first century a cross was an instrument of humiliation, degradation, punishment, cruelty, and shame. It was the ultimate symbol of Roman oppression. To pick up one’s cross was to sacrifice one’s entire life and allegiance to the cause of Christ.¹⁶ This saying has clear martyrological connotations.¹⁷ To emphasize to his disciples the seriousness of following him, Jesus used the ultimate symbol of death and torture—the cross. Following Jesus meant willingness to face scorn and death, all the way to the cross.¹⁸

¹⁴Ibid., 63.

¹⁵Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 3:65. Multiple attestation for this teaching occurs in Mark 8:34; Matt 16:24; Luke 9:23, and also Q (Matt 10:38 and Luke 14:27). A similar saying also occurs in *The Gospel of Thomas* 55.

¹⁶Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 257.

¹⁷Thomas J. Wespetal, “Martyrdom and the Furtherance of God’s Plan: The Value of Dying for the Christian Faith” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2005), 83.

¹⁸J. C. O’Neill has suggested that the “cross” sayings were only meant for Jesus and his immediate followers, not for all believers. This becomes clear, says O’Neill, when the background is properly considered, which is the intended sacrifice of Isaac, who carried his own “cross” (Gen 22:6), and seven brothers and their mother who were martyred in 4 Maccabees. He concludes, “The original idea of the Cross sayings was intended by Jesus to apply to his immediate disciples who were to pledge themselves to the possibility of martyrdom as a condition of following him” (J. C. O’Neill, “Did Jesus Teach that His Death Would Be Vicarious as well as Typical?” in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, 17). If true, this would provide even greater precedent for the expectation that all the apostles would die as martyrs for their faith. However, the problem is that Mark, who is considered by most scholars to be the first Gospel writer, says Jesus called his disciples and the crowd to hear this particular teaching (8:34). Thus, the deliverance of the teaching was to the crowd *and* his closest disciples. O’Neill could attempt to avoid this conclusion by pointing to other teachings given by Jesus in public that were only intended for his closest disciples (e.g., Matt 13:11). However, the context never indicates this is the case for his “cross” sayings. This interpretation does raise some additional questions: Why did Mark make this redaction? And what source did he redact it from? Why do the other Gospel writers not include it? Did Mark not understand that the teaching was meant only for the closest disciples? Until these questions are answered, O’Neill’s position may remain only a *possible* interpretation rather than the likely one.

Third, Jesus warned his disciples to expect persecution from within their own families.¹⁹ On behalf of the disciples, Peter said to Jesus, “See, we have left everything and followed you” (Mark 10:29). In his instruction to the Twelve before they are sent out, Jesus said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:37). And more starkly, Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). In essence, Jesus was simply calling his disciples to experience the same type of persecution he faced, for even his own family rejected him (Mark 3:20-35; John 7:5). While Jesus is speaking with hyperbole in regards to family relationships, his point is clear: *the disciples must be willing to face rejection from their own family members if they are to be true followers of him.*

Jesus was very straightforward about his radical expectations for his disciples: they must be willing to face persecution from the government and religious authorities as well as rejection from their own families, just as Jesus had. They are to give everything over to following Jesus, including their own lives. Craig Keener writes, “The Gospel tradition emphasizes that once one becomes a follower of Jesus one’s own life is forfeited; one chooses a path that could lead any day to one’s execution for Christ’s name . . . if one wants to follow Jesus, one must be ready to *die*.”²⁰

How should the disciples respond to the possibility of suffering and death? Rather than cower in fear, they are to preach boldly, acknowledging God before men (10:32), knowing that God will reveal everything in the end (Matt 10:26). They are to proclaim the gospel loudly and publicly from the rooftops (10:27), trusting that God is

¹⁹Three criteria give substantial reason to believe these statements trace back to the historical Jesus: multiple attestation, coherence, and embarrassment. See Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 3:67-72.

²⁰Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 331.

more powerful than the persecutors (10:28). After the death and resurrection of Jesus, this is exactly what they did.

Persecution in the Writings of Paul

At his conversion, Paul was told he would suffer explicitly before Jews and Gentiles as part of his mission (Acts 9:15-16), and he suffered indeed. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians lays out most explicitly the suffering he endured, which included being whipped, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, near starvation, and danger from various people and places (2 Cor 6:4-9).

Suffering is a central theme of the letters of Paul.²¹ He not only suffered deeply for proclaiming the name of Jesus, but he expected other believers to suffer as well (Rom 8:35-36; 1 Thess 3:3-4; Phil 1:29; cf. 2 Tim 4:5). Paul and Barnabas encouraged their newly won converts in Asia Minor to continue in the faith because "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Paul and Barnabas experienced persecution, and they warned their followers to expect the same. It was through the suffering of disciples, not just the display of power, that Jesus would be manifest to the world (2 Cor 4:7; cf. John 17:1-5).

Paul faced the genuine possibility of death while ministering in Asia. He writes, "For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:8b-9). At first, it appears this is another passage where Paul emphasizes God's strength in human weakness (2 Cor 12:10), but closer analysis reveals that Paul seems to be anticipating his pending death. Paul says they were "burdened beyond our strength, that we despaired of life itself," and "had received the sentence of death," which indicate Paul and his companions truly

²¹Paul discusses suffering and persecution in six of his seven undisputed letters: Rom 5:3-4, 8:18, 35, 12:12, 14, 14:8, 15:31; 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 1:3-10, 4:8, 6:4-9, 7:5, 11:24-27, 12:10; Gal 4:29, 5:11; Phil 1:29; 1 Thess 2:1-2, 2:14-15, 3:3-4. Suffering is also a central idea of some of the disputed letters: Eph 3:1; Col 1:24; 2 Thess 1:4-9; 2 Tim 1:8, 12, 2:3, 8, 10-12, 3:12.

believed death was imminent and, humanly speaking, there was no possibility of escape.²² What gave Paul hope amidst his despair and pending death? Thomas Wespetal concludes, “Thus, the hope of the resurrection was a sustaining force for Paul in this ‘non-fatal’ trial of faith, which was a precursor to and foreshadowing of his ultimate test before Nero in Rome.”²³

Paul experienced persecution not only at the hands of the religious authorities, but also at the hands of Gentiles. He reports that the governor under King Aretas²⁴ in Nabataea wanted to arrest him (2 Cor 11:32-33; Acts 9:23-25). This demonstrates two key points. First, even in this early stage, Paul did not limit his preaching to the Jews but reached out to pagans as well. Second, non-Jewish governments were provoked by the public proclamation of Jesus in the earliest stages of the development of the church. The fact that the governor of King Aretas aimed to arrest Paul makes sense only if government officials considered Paul and his message provocative and threatening to public safety.²⁵ This is an important precedent. While persecution of Christians primarily

²²David Garland helpfully summarizes the possibilities of what kind of suffering Paul faced in Asia, all of which involve a degree of speculation. First, Paul refers to the riots in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-20:1). This is the most obvious view, but the problem is Paul was not under any death sentence and quickly departed the city. Second, it was a flare-up of Paul’s illness. The problem with this view is that the word “affliction” is typically used for persecution, not illness (Gal 6:17; Col 1:24). Furthermore, Paul uses “we,” which makes an illness unlikely. Third, Paul may refer to a time in prison when he faces death that is not recorded elsewhere. One problem is that the term “death sentence” is not a judicial metaphor. Fourth, Paul refers to intense opposition from Jews, which he had clearly faced elsewhere (Acts 20:3; 21:11, 27). This is certainly possible, but not explicitly stated. Fifth, Paul refers to a mental anguish rather than genuine suffering. But it is difficult to see why Paul would use such vivid imagery, as well as list specific examples of suffering he endured later on (2 Cor 6:4-9), if this was merely mental. One may not know the specific suffering Paul faced, but one does learn this about his character—*he was willing to suffer deeply for his faith, and when he faced the possibility of death in proclamation of his faith, he relied upon the strength of the God who could raise him from the dead.* See David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 74-78.

²³Wespetal, “Martyrdom and the Furtherance of God’s Plan,” 87.

²⁴King Aretas controlled Nabataea, the region surrounding Damascus from around AD 34-39. He wielded considerable political influence beyond his legal jurisdiction and ruled one of the wealthiest and strongest of the minor kingdoms of the Near East. See Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 513.

²⁵Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2 of *Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1036.

began at the hands of the Jewish authorities, this incident indicates that non-Jewish governments could also be threatened by the public proclamation of the Christian faith.

Another incident shows how the actions of Christians could provoke governmental backlash. In Philippi, a slave girl with a spirit of divination followed Paul and Silas around for many days, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17). After becoming annoyed, Paul cast the spirit out of her in the name of Jesus (v. 18). But when the slave owners saw she lost her powers, they dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice” (v. 20b-21). The crowd joined in attacking them and so they were beaten and thrown in prison. While Paul and Silas were persecuted for economic reasons, rather than for preaching the name of Jesus, this incident provides early evidence of the conflict between Christian practices and those of the Roman Empire. Local magistrates were not afraid to severely persecute those who disrupted the common good. Most persecutions before the time of Decius were the result of popular clamor, such as this, rather than planned governmental campaigns.²⁶ While persecution was largely sporadic in the first three centuries, every Christian knew he might be called to testify to his faith at the cost of his life.²⁷

Persecution in the Rest of the New Testament

The expectation of suffering and persecution is not unique to the Gospel narratives or the letters of Paul. In fact, the expectation and importance of suffering is a central theme throughout the New Testament.

²⁶The principal legal basis behind the persecution of Christians in the first few decades of its existence appears to have been the procedure of *coercitio*, which gave local authorities flexibility and discretion to enforce policies intended to maintain public order. Local magistrates were not forced to follow imperial judicial norms in breaches of civil peace. Provincial magistrates were given considerable latitude in judicial action. See Paul Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 34.

²⁷Stephen Neill, *Christian Missions* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), 43.

Hebrews

The epistle to the Hebrews was written to help Christians undergoing trials. The pressure amongst the believers was so great that many were threatening to apostatize (3:12-13; 6:4-6; 10:26-29). Hebrews emphasizes the supremacy of Jesus, including his successful trials against temptation (2:9-10, 18), as well as the lives of those in the hall of faith (11:4-38), as examples believers should imitate. What happened to many of those in the hall of faith? The author of Hebrews clarifies that the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (Heb 11:33-38)

How should Christians respond to the reality of suffering? According to the author of Hebrews, they should follow the example of Jesus, who suffered profoundly for his faith, including such hostility as the cross, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2). Hebrews 13:12-13 says, “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.” Paul Middleton writes,

The command is to go out and suffer, following the example of Jesus and the heroes of faith, especially the martyrs, who come at the climax of the list of faithful heroes. Now is the time for Church members who have not yet endured to the point of spilling their blood to do so, and in this context, the triple warning against apostasy becomes explicable.²⁸

Christians should expect to suffer and possibly even die for their faith. But rather than

²⁸Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 158.

accept defeat, look to the example of Jesus and earlier generations of the faithful, who triumphed through suffering and death.

James

The book of James is often called “The Proverbs of the New Testament” because it provides practical wisdom for putting faith into action. And yet a background assumption of James is that the righteous will suffer for their faith (1:2, 12). James encourages his readers to be patient in suffering and to recall the example of the prophets who spoke *in the name of the Lord*:

As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (5:10-11)

Those who proclaim the name of the Lord should expect persecution just as the prophets did. God honored the prophets by making them his mouthpiece, but their lives were not always spared. Similarly, those who proclaim the name of the Lord should expect to suffer, but can find encouragement in the example of Job and other prophets.

First Peter

The book of 1 Peter is written as encouragement to Christians in the dispersion who were facing persecution (1:6; 2:19-23; 3:14, 17; 4:1, 12-16, 19; 5:1, 9-10). Peter assumes they will suffer for doing good, as Christ did (2:21; 4:1, 13). And this suffering is in accordance with the will of God (3:17; 4:19). Peter calls these believers to stand strong in their faith and to be holy as Jesus is holy (1:15-16). This suffering is not simply illness, but the same kind of “fiery trial” Jesus faced, which included being beaten, insulted, reviled, and even killed (1:19-23; 4:12-16). There was early persecution *for the name of Christ* outside Jerusalem.²⁹

²⁹These persecutions mentioned in 1 Pet were “at the initiation of the general populace as the result of a reaction against the lifestyle of the Christians than at the initiation of Roman officials because of some general policy of seeking out and punishing Christians. That does not rule out the possibility that persecutions occurred over large areas of the empire; they surely did, but they were spasmodic and broke out at different times in different places, the result of the flare-up of local hatreds rather than because

First John

The letter of 1 John is written to testify to the truth of the incarnation and to encourage Christians to turn from sin and love God and one another. In the same manner, John's Gospel acts as a witness for the truth about Jesus (John 5:31-46; 20:30-31; 21:24). The fourth Gospel is clear this will involve persecution and martyrdom (John 15:18-16:4a; 21:18-19). First John may in fact have been written in part to help the church address those who had failed the trial of martyrdom and succumbed to the world.³⁰

In 1 John 5:5, John describes true believers as those who believe Jesus is the Son of God. False confessors deny Jesus has come in the flesh from God (4:2-3). Genuine believers are to imitate the manner of Jesus (2:6) and the community of believers is to exhibit the same features that characterized the ministry of Jesus. First John 5:6 shows the features of Jesus' ministry that demonstrate he is the Son of God: "This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood." While there are various interpretations for the meaning of "water and blood," the predominant view holds that it refers specifically to the baptism of Jesus (water) and his crucifixion (blood).³¹ Early church fathers such as Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine considered martyrdom (blood) as a second baptism after the baptism of water.³² Thus, the genuine body of Christ is to exhibit the same three signs Christ did in the flesh: "The Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree" (5:8).

"Water" refers to the act of baptism when the person decides to follow Christ (cf. John 3:5). The "Spirit" testifies through the believer that Jesus is God (4:2; 5:6b). Interpretation of "blood," if taken literally, would require that it refer to the death and Roman officials were engaged in regular discharge of official policy" (Achte-meier, *1 Peter*, 36).

³⁰M. J. Edwards, "Martyrdom and the First Epistle of John," *Novum Testamentum* 31 (1989): 164-71.

³¹Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, The New American Commentary, vol. 38 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 196-97.

³²Cyprian, *The Treatises of Cyprian* 11:4; Tertullian, *On Baptism* 16; St. Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings* 11.

martyrdom of Christians as testimony of the true faith. While not required of the text, it must be conceded that this interpretation is indeed consistent with the teaching of 1 John 5:6-8.³³ If so, it would raise the expectation that the first witnesses—the Twelve—would in fact be martyred for their faith as testimony that they belonged to the truth faith.

If this interpretation cannot be maintained, 1 John 3:13 *still* testifies to the expectation that believers will be hated for their faith: “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.” Minimally, 1 John teaches that true disciples of Jesus should expect vitriol, scorn, and hatred from the world for their belief that Jesus is the Son of God.

Revelation

The book of Revelation is undoubtedly one of the most controversial and difficult books to interpret. What is generally agreed upon, however, is that Revelation has the following as a central theme: that Christians must be prepared to face death for Christ’s honor.³⁴ This theme is supported by the multiple references to the suffering and persecution of believers for their faith (1:9; 2:10, 13; 6:9; 11:7-8; 12:11, 17; 13:7, 10, 15; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4, 9). While Satan is the true enemy, Christians are called to “witness” to their faith, even if it means death: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10). Without exception, those considered “witnesses” (*martyrs*) face a violent death (2:13; 11:7; 17:6). At this stage “martyr” simply means “witness,” and did not yet signify one who dies in proclamation of the faith. Yet, those who are “witnesses” in Revelation are killed for their faith, and thus are technically martyrs. A key message of Revelation is to encourage readers to prepare themselves to stand strong

³³I owe full credit to William Weinrich for bringing my attention to this understanding of 1 John 5:6-8. See Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom*, 71-73.

³⁴Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 763.

when they face persecution and possibly even death for their faith in Christ. When they do stand firm in the faith, their lives testify against Satan and his followers (cf. 6:9-11; 12:11; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2).

The writings of the New Testament make something very clear—suffering and persecution are to be accepted as part and parcel of the Christian faith.³⁵ Jesus was the founder and exemplar of the faith and he was crucified as a criminal. Since Christians are called to imitate him, they ought to expect the same hatred by the world, which may include their own persecution and even death. While dying for the name of Jesus is unique to the New Testament era, dying for God has earlier roots in the Old Testament.

Martyrdom in the Old Testament

In the first century AD a popular tradition was that even God's own people might kill the prophets. Jesus referred to this tradition in Matthew 22:37/Luke 13:34: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"³⁶ This tradition is also implied in some of Jesus's parables, such as the Wicked Tenants of the Vineyard where multiple servants are mistreated and killed (Matt 21:33-40; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 20:9-18), and the Wedding Feast where servants are treated shamefully and killed (Matt 22:6). Paul, Luke, the author of Hebrews, and James also referred to this same tradition (1 Thess 2:14-15; Luke 7:51-52; Heb 11:32-38; Jas 5:10-11). Recent prophetic figures, such as Onias the high priest³⁷ and John the Baptist, shared this very fate.³⁸

³⁵Although it is impossible to prove the accuracy of the New Testament reports in light of the absence of multiple attestation, it is historically improbable that all of these reports would be invented whole cloth with no historical kernel behind them. Although it is important not to privilege the historical accuracy of the New Testament literature a priori when conducting historical research, to dismiss it a priori as biased propaganda would be to make as egregious an error in the opposite direction

³⁶Jesus referred to the tradition of prophets suffering and being killed on other occasions as well, including Matt 5:10-11; 23:30-31, 34; Luke 6:22-23; 11:47-50.

³⁷2 Maccabees 4:34-36.

³⁸Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 235.

The popularity of this tradition raises an important question: how many prophets were actually killed for their beliefs? The New Testament seems to indicate that all, or at least most, ended their lives as martyrs. However, the Old Testament only records two specific instances of a prophet being killed. First, Jeremiah describes the prophet Uriah who was killed with a sword by King Jehoiakim (Jer 26:20-23). Second, King Joash stoned Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest for publicly preaching judgment against Judah (2 Chr 24:17-22). Additional stories indicate persecution, and even death, for prophets who spoke words of judgment. Obadiah hid a hundred prophets in a cave to spare them from Jezebel's murderous frenzy (1 Kgs 18:4, 13). Elijah also fled the same queen to spare his life (1 Kgs 19:1-8). Jeremiah was frequently persecuted, beaten, and imprisoned (Jer 11:18-23; 20:1-6; 37:11-15; 38:1-9). In their prayer of confession, after hearing Ezra read the Book of the Law, the Israelites admit they had "killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you" (Neh 9:26).

Noncanonical sources tell a similar story of the martyrdom of many of the prophets. *The Lives of the Prophets*, a first century AD Palestinian Jewish work, records the brutal deaths of many Old Testament prophets.³⁹ According to this text, Isaiah was sawn in two by Manasseh,⁴⁰ the Jews stoned Jeremiah, Ezekiel was slain by Israelites in exile because he criticized their idol-worship, King Joram threw Micah off a cliff for rebuking him, and Amos was beaten and killed with a cudgel. Ignatius also spoke of the persecution of the prophets who were inspired by grace to convince unbelievers (*The Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians* 8). The tradition of the martyrdom of the prophets underwent further development in later Jewish tradition. According to John Pobee,

At this stage martyrdom became a *sine qua non* of the prophetic vocation and, therefore, every prophet was regarded as having undergone a martyr's death. . . .

³⁹Charles Cutler Torrey, ed., and trans., *The Lives of the Prophets: Greek Text and Translation* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis), 1946.

⁴⁰The tradition that Isaiah was sawn in two is also possibly hinted at in Heb 11:37 and reported in *The Martyrdom of Isaiah*. See *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed., and trans., R. H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 162.

Indeed, according to midrash standing in the name of R. Jose b. Nehonai, the following were the persecuted prophets: Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Saul, David, and Israel.⁴¹

Willingness to face persecution rather than forsake God has even earlier roots in the book of Daniel. Daniel and his three friends were faced with the same choice—worship a false God or die (Dan 3, 6). The central theme of the stories is that God can and will save those who trust him, and so bowing down to false gods is foolish. After the three friends are spared, King Nebuchadnezzar decrees that he will punish anyone who speaks against the God of Israel: “For there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.” The confidence of Daniel and his friends to boldly face persecution came from their belief in Yahweh, the one true sovereign God (5:23), who could resurrect them to eternal life (12:2-3). Yet even though Daniel and his friends are protected, the author of Daniel wants to portray that not everyone can expect a similar fate, however, they should not fear because their reward will come in the afterlife (Dan 12:1-3). Boudewijn Dehandschutter concludes, “From the earliest times, the idea of example has been an important source for the biblical background of the Christian theology of martyrdom. Biblical “stories” such as 2 and 4 Maccabees, and Daniel in its Jewish-Hellenistic expansion, furnished “models” for Christian behavior in suffering and persecution.”⁴²

As Dehandschutter notes, 2 Maccabees also contains popular stories of martyrdom that may have influenced the first Christians. The people of Israel were facing great calamity at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes (c. 215 BC through 164 BC). The temple was defiled, Jews were forced to eat sacrifices offered to false gods, and thousands were murdered (2 Macc 6:3-11; 8:3-4).⁴³ Yet some stood strong. The scribe

⁴¹John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, ed. Bruce D. Chilton (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1985), 28.

⁴²Boudewijn Dehandschutter, “Example and Discipleship: Some Comments on the Biblical Background of the Early Christian Theology of Martyrdom,” in *Polycarpiana: Studies on Martyrdom and Persecution in Early Christianity*, ed. J. Leemans (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2007), 222.

⁴³Josephus also records these actions of Antiochus. See Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 1:2 in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987).

Eleazar was forced to open his mouth and eat swine flesh, but he spit it out and chose to “die gloriously, than to live stained with such an abomination” (2 Macc 6:19). The incident concludes, “And thus this man died, leaving his death for an example of noble courage, and a memorial virtue, not only unto young men, but unto all his nation” (2 Macc 6:31).

Seven brothers and their mother were also constrained to break the Mosaic Law by eating swine’s flesh. But one of the brothers spoke up and said, “We are ready to die, rather than to transgress the laws of our fathers” (2 Macc 7:2). The seven brothers were slaughtered with the most brutal means of torture. The mother pleaded with her last living son to spare his life, but he replied, “I will not obey the king’s commandment: but I will obey the commandment of the law that was given unto our fathers by Moses. And thou, that hast been the author of all mischief against the Hebrews, shalt not escape the hands of God. For we suffer because of our sins.” (2 Macc 7:30b-32)

The brothers not only suffered deeply for their commitment to the law, but they *expected* to suffer as a result of the sins of Israel. What gave these brothers the courage and willingness to die for the law? Belief in the resurrection (2 Macc 7:14) and belief that the tormentors would be punished (2 Macc 7:19, 36).

Josephus records a similar incident. Temples and statues of Caius were being built throughout the Roman Empire, but the Jews refused to honor him with a statue. Upset that the Jews despised him, Caius ordered an army to persuade them to accept the statue, and if they did not, to conquer them by war. Petronius took two legions of the Roman army, but before he arrived, thousands of Jews came to make petition of him, saying they would die before they allowed the erection of the statue. Petronius refused, and so the Jews replied, “Since therefore thou art so disposed, O Petronius! that thou wilt not disobey Caius’s epistles, neither will we transgress the commands of our law.”⁴⁴ They even threw themselves on the ground, stretched out their throats, and said they were

⁴⁴Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.8.2.

willing to be slain.⁴⁵ Josephus made it clear the Jews were prepared to die for their faith, and he was raised with this conviction in mind.

The Jews died not simply out of stubbornness, but to testify that Yahweh is the one true God. Israel was called to bring this knowledge to the Gentiles (cf. 1 Sam 17:46). “You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord (Isa 43:10), so that “my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6). The Israelites were chosen to declare the holiness and greatness of God to the Gentiles, and suffering was a necessary component of this prophetic witness (Isa 53).

There was precedent that such suffering could bring about conversion of the persecutor, in fact, that was the point.⁴⁶ As a result of seeing the willingness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to face death in the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God” (Dan 3:28). And King Darius recognized the God of Daniel as well (Dan 6:25-28).

By the New Testament era, the Jews had fully embraced the value of dying for the truthfulness of the Law rather than recanting their beliefs. These stories of the martyrdom or miraculous deliverance of the Jewish prophets were well known by the time of Jesus and the apostles.⁴⁷ Although there are significant differences between Jewish martyrdom and Christian martyrdom, early Christians saw their lives and missions in light of this tradition.⁴⁸ The apostles would refuse to compromise their beliefs about

⁴⁵Ibid., 18.8.3.

⁴⁶Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom*, 33.

⁴⁷Christian art and literature of the first three centuries often found inspiration from the martyrdom accounts or miraculous deliverances of the Jewish prophets. See Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 67.

⁴⁸Paul Middleton notes some significant differences between Jewish martyrdom and Christian martyrdom. First, the Maccabean heroes die for the Law, whereas Christians died out of refusal to sacrifice to the gods. Second, while both types of martyrdom deal with a larger conflict, the Jewish form has a more temporal focus—the ransacking and defilement of the Temple. And third, Jews saw suffering as caused by

God, even in the face of persecution and probable death, with the hope that their persecutors would convert to the true faith. Jesus followed the example of the persecuted prophets, and after Pentecost, his apostles ministered with this mindset, hoping their deaths would be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Persecution Began with the Jews

The Old Testament and Gospel narratives provide the necessary background to anticipate persecution of the apostles. The book of Acts, however, provides the initial accounts. The tradition of God's own people killing the prophets was correct, for the first systematic persecution of Christians began at the hands of the Jewish religious authorities.⁴⁹ It was the Jews⁵⁰ who had turned Jesus over to the Roman authorities to face crucifixion (Matt 27:1-2; Mark 15:1; Luke 23:1; John 18:28). As soon as the apostles begin preaching that this same Jesus was the resurrected Messiah, the Jews began to silence and persecute them.⁵¹ They imprisoned and threatened them (Acts 4:13-22), beat them (Acts 5:40), and killed Stephen, a witness for the faith (Act 7:54-60).

God to correct the Jews for their wrongdoings. Christians, on the other hand, saw suffering as coming from Satan and therefore death involves defeating Satan. Middleton grants that Judaism is an important factor in the development of Christian martyrdom, but it is not sufficient. See Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 112-15.

⁴⁹There are two primary reasons persecution began with the Jews. First, Christians were proselytizing the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, which often caused hatred and jealousy from the religious authorities. Even Paul began his evangelism by preaching in the synagogue and trying to convert the Jews (Acts 9:20). Second, Jews believed their dire predicament at the hands of the Romans was due to their unfaithfulness to the laws of God. Thus, to experience God's blessing, they needed to return to the law. From this perspective, Christians were heretics who were calling Jews *away* from God and thus hurting the Jewish community and God's efforts through their nation. Thus, the Jews viewed their treatment of the Christians as legitimate actions against wayward Jews rather than persecution. See Harold Remus, "Persecution," in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime, and Paul-André Turcotte (New York: Altamira, 2002), 431.

⁵⁰To claim that persecution began with the Jewish religious authorities of the first century is not to indict *all* ethnic Jews and is limited to the Jews of the time who rejected Jesus as Messiah and who persecuted the first Christians. The Twelve apostles were all Jewish as well as many of the first disciples. Even Jesus was Jewish! Jesus loved the Jews and focused his primary ministry on reaching out to them.

⁵¹Persecution was not always *from Jews to Christians*. In the second century, many Christians had an intense hostility to the Jews. This is evident in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, a popular writing in some early Christian communities, as the writer claims Jewish ceremonies are from Satan and are his tactic to deceive Christians (2.1-10).

After the death of Stephen (c. AD 37) “there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1b).⁵² The view was sometimes held within Judaism that scattering was a good thing. Second Baruch 1:4 says, “For this reason, behold I bring evil upon this city, and upon its inhabitants, and it shall be removed from before Me for a time, and I will scatter this people among the Gentiles that they may do good to the Gentiles.”⁵³ Saul/Paul was responsible for this scattering because of his fierce persecution, which he further attests to after becoming a Christian (Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9). Can this tradition be trusted historically? James Dunn writes, “In short, a policy of vigorous repression, initially at least directed by Saul from within Jerusalem, and directed against the resurgence of Jesus’ perceived attack on the Temple, can be readily envisaged on good historical grounds and with very plausible historical speculation.”⁵⁴

This was only the beginning of the persecution. Philip the Evangelist was forced to flee to Samaria because of persecution (Acts 8:4-5). Paul faced persecution from the Jews, and often had to flee for his life (9:23-25, 29-30; 13:45-50; 14:5, 19; 17:1-10, 13-15; 18:6-7; 20:3; 21:27-36; 23:12-15). James the brother of John was killed (12:2)

⁵²The claim that a great persecution arose but somehow the twelve apostles were spared may seem implausible. It would seem more likely that the persecutors would specifically target the leaders. However, the key point is not that the apostles escaped persecution since other passages in Acts make it clear they were targeted (4:1-3; 5:17-18; 12:1-19). Luke’s primary point is that while some Christians had to permanently emigrate because of the persecution, the apostles stayed as leaders in Jerusalem for some time. See Richard Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Church,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 428-29.

⁵³*Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. R.H. Charles (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2004), 481.

⁵⁴Dunn says it is “sure” that there was a persecution against Christians by the Jews. His main support is the story in Acts, which is additionally supported by Paul’s own testimony (Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9). It is also likely, says Dunn, that the persecution began in Jerusalem since Paul, a Pharisee, would naturally see Jerusalem as his home base. And the emergence of a radical within the sect of Christians—especially one trained by Gamaliel himself—would have greatly increased the animosity and aversion against Christians. See James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:275-76.

and Peter was arrested because it “pleased the Jews” (12:3). Persecution by the Jews was also taking place in areas outside of Jerusalem, such as Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:14-16). Persecution by the Jews continued until at least the middle of the second century.⁵⁵ In fact, according to Herbert Workman, the Jews could be detected in the background for virtually all persecutions against Christians, even after the time persecution became official policy of the state. This was possible because of how widespread the Jewish dispersion was throughout the Roman Empire.⁵⁶

The first Christians were often protected from Rome (Acts 18:12-17; 19:23-41; 22:22-29; 23:23-28:31). As long as Christianity was considered a sect within Judaism it had protection by Roman law and was considered a *religio licita*. However, once Christianity was considered a variant from Judaism, protection from persecution was no longer guaranteed. This is precisely what happened during the reign of Nero.

Persecution under Gentile Rulers

The Neronian Persecution

Nero was the first Emperor (AD 54-58) to use the power of the Roman state to persecute Christians. It began when rumors spread that Nero had started the fire in AD 64 that burned three entire quarters of the city of Rome and thousands lost their homes.

Needing a scapegoat, Nero blamed the Christians. Tacitus gives the details (AD 115):

Therefore to eliminate this rumor he falsely produced defendants and inflicted the most extraordinary punishments upon those whom, hated for their crimes, the people called Christians. The origin of this name was Christ, whom the procurator Pontius Pilate put to death in the reign of Tiberius; crushed for a while, the deadly superstition burst forth again not only throughout Judea, the source of this evil, but even throughout Rome, to which all horrible and shameful things flow from everywhere and are celebrated. Therefore the first persons arrested were those who confessed; then on their information, a great multitude was convicted not so much on the charge of setting fire as on hatred of the human race. Mockeries were added

⁵⁵Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 154, 184.

⁵⁶According to Workman, there were Jews in nearly all provinces of the Empire, with considerable numbers in Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor. Because of the decay of pagan faiths, and the fascination of Eastern cults, Jews had converts in every land. See Herbert B. Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1906; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 45-47.

to their deaths, so that wrapped in the skins of wild animals they might die torn to pieces by dogs, or nailed to crosses they were burned to death to furnish light at night when day had ended. Nero made his own gardens available for this spectacle and put on circus games, mingling with the people while dressed in a charioteer's uniform or standing in his chariot. As a result there arose compassion toward those who were guilty and who deserved the most extraordinary punishments, on the grounds that they were being destroyed not for the public good but for the savagery of one man" (*The Annals* 15.44.2-5).⁵⁷

Several observations are necessary. First, these words are some of the most ancient indications of how pagans viewed Christians. Clearly Tacitus does not believe Christians set fire to Rome, but were being sacrificed "to the ferocity of a single man." Still, Tacitus believed the rumors that Christians were "a class of men, loathed for their vices" who believed a "superstition," and had a "hatred of the human race."

Second, the fire in Rome was not the source for the misgivings and hatred of Christians. Rather, this brought to head the growing suspicion many Romans already had of this new religion. Conflict inevitably traces back even earlier. Suetonius (ca. 70-ca. 140) mentions the expulsion of the Jews from Rome in AD 49 "at the instigation of Chrestus."⁵⁸ While conclusions must be held with a degree of tentativeness, it is historically probable that *Chrestus* refers to Jesus of Nazareth.⁵⁹

The conflict in Rome not caused by Chrestus, but by the teaching that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah), which generated opposition by the Jews, resulting in the expulsion of many from Rome.⁶⁰ Suetonius had also referenced the persecution by Nero that is consistent with the Tacitus account: "Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief."⁶¹ These references

⁵⁷Herbert W. Benario, "The Annals," in *A Companion to Tacitus*, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World, ed. Victoria Emma Pagán (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 114-15.

⁵⁸Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, MO: College, 1997), 191.

⁵⁹Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 29-39.

⁶⁰Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 191. The account in Suetonius is not given a specific date. If the year is AD 49, it would cohere more or less with the account of Paul's visit to Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth when "Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome" (Acts 18:2).

⁶¹Suetonius, *Nero*, 16.2.

by Tacitus and Suetonius reveal the disgust and hostility Greco-Romans held towards Christians as early as the mid first century.

Third, Tacitus assumes there is a considerable number of Christians in Rome by the early 60s. The amount of victims must have been at least somewhat substantial to gain the attention of the emperor and to act as a sufficient scapegoat for the fires in Rome. While it was certainly a minority of all Christians at the time, for Tacitus to take notice, there were undoubtedly significant numbers killed at the hands of Nero.

Fourth, it appears the official persecution was confined to Rome since there is no mention of persecution elsewhere. However, nothing was done to revoke the laws Nero had put in place against Christians. These laws thus provide sanction and precedent for the formal persecution of Christians from the state. From this point forward, the church was officially in opposition to the Roman state. Frend concludes, “In the 250 years that separate the Neronian persecution in 64 CE from the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, c. 312, Christianity was an illegal and suspect religion whose members were subject to arrest, condemnation and, in many cases, death.”⁶² Most of these persecutions were not at the hand of the Emperor. Rather, most were police actions on the provincial level that would not be recorded in the archives of the nation.⁶³ While few governors would have the desire to instigate a persecution against Christians, if public opinion turned against Christians, governors would indeed put Christians on trial to acquiesce public demand.⁶⁴

Fifth, Tacitus reports that Christians were killed for confessing the *name* of Christ. Once Nero officially condemned Christians for confessing the name of Christ,

⁶²W. H. C. Frend, “Persecution: Genesis and Legacy,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Origins to Constantine*, ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 503.

⁶³Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church*, 26.

⁶⁴G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, ed. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 121.

nothing would prevent other provincial governors from persecuting members who were involved, by definition, with the same deviant and potentially treasonous religion.⁶⁵

Workman notes what this meant for Christians after the reign of Nero:

To become a Christian meant the great renunciation, the joining a despised and persecuted sect, the swimming against the tide of popular prejudice, the coming under the ban of the Empire, the possibility at any moment of imprisonment and death under its most fearful forms. For two hundred years [after Nero] he that would follow Christ must count the cost, and be prepared to pay the same with his liberty and life. For two hundred years the mere profession of Christianity was itself a crime.⁶⁶

Christians who minded their own affairs, and focused on living proper lives before outsiders, were often spared persecution from the state (cf. 1 Thess 4:11). However, leaders who were outspoken for their faith, such as the apostles (cf. Acts 4:13, 5:21), were much more likely to stir the sentiments of Jews and Romans, and thus face the wrath of the state (cf. Acts 12:2-3). The apostles consistently proclaimed the name of Jesus, and thus put themselves in the greatest possible position to face persecution and martyrdom.

Candida Moss questions the extent of the first Roman persecution against Christians and even claims early Christians invented the idea of martyrdom.⁶⁷ She suggests caution in using the aforementioned passage by Tacitus since he wrote “at least fifty years after the events he describes.”⁶⁸ Of course caution should be observed with this passage, as for any historical passage, but why does this imply Tacitus got it wrong? Many historical accounts are written over fifty years after the events, including the writings of Moss herself. The fact that Tacitus is a hostile source against Christianity actually weighs in its favor. In response to Moss’s claim, Paul Maier notes, “This is the

⁶⁵For a more detailed case that persecution for “the name” may have occurred during the lives of the apostles, see chap. 1 under “Defining Martyrdom.”

⁶⁶Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church*, 42.

⁶⁷Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 13-22.

⁶⁸Ibid., 139.

same as suggesting that no one today can write accurately about what happened in the Kennedy administration!”⁶⁹ Remarkably, not a word appears in her book about the supporting passage in Suetonius (*Nero*, 16.2), which also mentions the punishment inflicted on Christians. Moss simply ignores the fact that persecution against Christians is mentioned not only by Christians, but also by two early Roman sources. This is why Maier concludes, “Rarely do both friendly and hostile sources agree on anything, but the persecution of Christians is one of them.”⁷⁰

Reasons for Persecution

There were a plethora of reasons for the hatred, disgust, and persecution Christians faced in the Roman Empire.⁷¹ In the main, “there was a clash of worldviews that was mutually incompatible.”⁷² This played itself out in a few specific ways. First, Christianity was suspect from its inception since followers worshipped a crucified “criminal.” The claim that Jesus died, was buried, and had risen again as the Messiah provoked ridicule and hostility from nonbelievers. Paul recognized this as he considered the cross a “stumbling block” to Jews and “folly” to Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23). The fact that many of the first believers were uneducated peasants added to the narrative that

⁶⁹Paul Maier, “The Myth of Persecution: A Provocative Title, an Overdone Thesis,” *Christian Research Journal* 36 (2013): 55.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹The Romans of course did not interpret their actions as persecution against Christians. Rather, they believed they were *prosecuting* a group of people who threatened the power and wellbeing of the state. From the Christian perspective, however, they were being singled out and persecuted for their convictions regarding the person of Christ and how to live out that conviction in society.

⁷²Middleton observes that the core reason for the conflict between Christianity and Rome was that, given their core monotheistic convictions, Christians simply could not be good Roman citizens: “The Christians’ problem with Imperial Rome was not simply an inherited antipathy to idolatry, preventing them from taking part in local cultic activity, and prohibiting sacrificing to the Emperor. Christian theology and Roman Imperial ideology were meta-narratives competing for the same ground. Both made claims to universality; both had as their focus a *theois aner*. Christianity and the *Imperium* were totalities seeking to explain the physical (and spiritual) realm in ways that were mutually incompatible.” Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 40.

Christianity was a religion of the ignorant, or as Tacitus put it, people who believe a “pernicious superstition.” G. E. M Croix explains,

Christians might also be suspect, as *mali homines*, in the eyes of some governors, because they worshipped a man who had admittedly been crucified by a governor of Judea, as a political criminal, who thought of himself as “King of the Jews.” Their loyalty to the state, whatever they might say, could well appear doubtful, if only because they refused to even swear an oath by the emperor’s Genius. . . . A governor who had such considerations in mind when trying Christians might even decide to find them guilty of *maiestas* (treason).⁷³

Second, Christian rituals raised suspicion. While there were some Christian rituals that had outward similarities to Jewish or Graeco-Roman practices of the time—such as Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the singing of hymns—Christians developed some unique rituals. These rituals include ways of marrying and burying, ecstatic phenomena such as speaking in tongues (1 Cor 12:10, 28-30, 14:1-19; Acts 2:1-13; 10:44-48, 19:1-6), and the giving of the holy kiss (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Pet 5:14; 1 Thess 5:26). While the details of the physical gesture of the holy kiss are unknown, this practice may have contributed to the accusation nonbelievers often raised against Christians being incestuous.⁷⁴ Christians also typically refused to participate in popular social and cultural events such as the theater, circus, or Coliseum.⁷⁵ The odd rituals of Christians, as well as their non-participation in common cultural events, raised suspicion that Christians were a subculture in opposition to the empire.

Third, and perhaps the most prominent reason for persecution, was the refusal of Christians to pay homage to the Roman gods. Because they worshipped an invisible deity that lacked physical representation, Christians were accused of atheism, which was akin to worshipping no god. To reject the gods of Rome was to reject the legitimacy of

⁷³Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, 122.

⁷⁴Wayne A. Meeks, “Social and Ecclesial Life of the Earliest Christians,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Origins to Constantine*, ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 170.

⁷⁵Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church*, 70.

the empire, which was sanctioned by the gods.⁷⁶ To deny proper honor to the gods was to be unpatriotic, and to put the health of the entire empire at risk. Earthquakes, floods, and pestilence were often blamed on people refusing to honor the gods. Tertullian wrote, “If the Tiber rises as high as the city walks, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is a famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, ‘Away with the Christians to the lion!’”⁷⁷ The gods were considered the guardians of Rome, and so protection for the Roman people required they be given their proper honor and respect. The religious practices of the Roman people could not be separated from the flourishing of the state. Frend observes, “The practice by a Roman citizen of an *externa religio* which had not been accepted could be an insult to the gods and an affront to the greatness of the Roman people. Just as a man would not be a citizen of two states so he could not accept two religions.”⁷⁸

The problem was not so much that Christians worshipped Jesus as God but their refusal to show homage to other gods through offering sacrifices. According to Christians, Jesus had died on the cross as the ultimate sacrifice and so no further sacrifice was believed to be necessary. But the stability of the state, according to the Romans, depended upon all citizens offering obeisance to the gods. Exclusive worship of Jesus was believed to alienate the goodwill of the gods and disturb the *pax deorum*—the proper relationship between the gods and humanity. Christians thus bore the blame for various disasters that affected the community. Haykin observes,

Why would Christians, who preached a message of divine love and who were commanded to love even their enemies, be accused of such a vice? Well, if one looks at it through the eyes of Roman paganism, the logic seems irrefutable. It was, after all, the Roman gods who kept the empire secure. But the Christians refused to worship these gods—thus the charge of ‘atheism’ that was sometimes leveled at them. Therefore, many of their pagan neighbors reasoned, they could not love the

⁷⁶Walter H. Wagner, *After the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 132.

⁷⁷Tertullian, *The Apology* 3:47.

⁷⁸Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 106.

emperor or the empire's inhabitants. Christians thus were viewed as fundamentally anti-Roman and so a positive danger to the empire.⁷⁹

While the first Christians to address the charge of atheism were the Christian apologists of the second century, there is no reason to think the situation was previously different.⁸⁰

Conclusion

There was an ancient tradition that the prophets would suffer for their faith. In the books of Daniel and 2 Maccabees, long before the New Testament era, it was believed that prophets would suffer at the hands of their own people as well as secular authorities. And many of them did. Jesus both taught and modeled this tradition to his apostles. He warned them to expect persecution. Jesus carried his cross to his crucifixion, and he called his apostles to do the same. Christians were first persecuted at the hands of the Jews, and then during the reign of Nero, officially persecuted by the Roman government. From at least that point forward, Christians could legally be persecuted *for the name of Jesus*. These factors make it not merely plausible, but likely, that at least some of the apostles would face martyrdom for proclaiming the name of Jesus.

⁷⁹Michael A. G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 37.

⁸⁰Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, 133-40.

CHAPTER 5

A DEFENSE OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine some of the historical evidence that supports the resurrection of Jesus, namely, the suffering and martyrdom accounts of the apostles as witnesses for their faith. This is a *historical* project that can only be determined through the methods of historiography.

This means critics can undermine apologetic significance of the witness of the apostles on at least two fronts. First, they can challenge the historical veracity of the evidence the apostles actually suffered and died as martyrs. Critics could provide an alternate explanation for the belief the disciples suffered and were martyred that better explains the evidence.¹ Second, critics can also undermine the project of historiography itself. In other words, they can raise doubts about the ability of historians to know the past *as it really was*. In today's so-called postmodern² culture it is often said that knowledge of the past as it really was is impossible, since the people who wrote down the historical accounts were biased and had their own political or religious agendas. Since language and culture deeply influence human thinking, according to postmoderns, there can be no objective accounts of the past.³ Thus, claiming to have the truth is seen as a

¹Christianity is historical religion in that the actual occurrence of certain events such as the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus are necessary for it to be truth. If these events happened, then Christianity is true. If they did not, then Christianity is false (1 Cor 15:14, 17). And these claims can be investigated using the normal means of historicity, which is part of the present investigation. The testability of Christianity as a historical religion is unique. See Craig Hazen, "Christianity in a World of Religions," in *Passionate Convictions*, ed. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 140-53.

²Postmodernism has also been referred to as poststructuralism, perspectivism, antirealism, relativism, antifoundationalism, constructivism, and new historicism.

³Modernist history is based on the idea that the researcher could analyze remains from the past and come to reasonable historical conclusions. Postmodernism turns this confidence on its head. According to Bill Readings, postmodernism implies that this approach to history is now impossible: "The end of

power play meant to control others. If postmodernism is correct, it would preclude an historical investigation into the events surrounding the deaths of the apostles, since the past would be permanently beyond reach.

The Historian's Task

To properly respond to the claims of postmodern historians, one must first take a cursory look at historical methodology.⁴ There are undoubtedly challenges to knowing the past. Historians cannot verify an account with indubitable certainty. Thus, the goal of historical investigation is *probability*, not mathematical certainty. While it is true that no historian can verify the truth of a hypothesis in an absolute sense, it does not follow that history is unknowable. Historian Richard Evans writes, “No historians really believe in the *absolute* truth of what they are writing, simply in its *probable* truth, which they have done their utmost to establish by following the usual rules of evidence.”⁵ In his article, “Language and the Truth of History,” C. B. McCullagh observed,

The best explanation historians can think of for their evidence is not always correct. There might be a better one they have not considered, and there might be more evidence that will cast a different complexion upon the historical events that interest them. But if the evidence in support of an explanatory hypothesis is strong, and there is no alternative hypothesis supported nearly as well, it is reasonable to believe it is probably true, at least for the time being.⁶

Even though history involves incomplete data, historians still proceed by basing their confidence upon the available evidence. Since perfect certainty is never achievable,

History opens a demand that we write historically, with an attention to the temporality of our writing. . . . There is no neutral textual space which events can be surveyed and given meaning: to give meaning to an event is itself an event” (Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* [New York: Routledge, 1991], 60).

⁴Considering a methodology for history does not imply that all historians follow the exact same methodology. There is variety in terms of how historians approach their task. But there are general methods and principles practicing historians tend to follow to discover the past. Those who do not follow common principles are often criticized and corrected by the academic community.

⁵Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 189.

⁶C. B. McCullagh, “Language and the Truth of History,” *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 453.

historians work with gradations of plausibility.⁷ Simply because historians cannot prove a hypothesis with *indubitable* certainty does not mean they cannot have *appropriate* confidence that the evidence supports a particular view. Few things in life are absolutely certain. People make decisions every day based upon incomplete evidence that is adequate for the task. So, why should the task of history be any different?

It is true that all historical descriptions leave out certain details. No history can capture the past in its completeness. Since it is not possible to provide exhaustive knowledge of the past, does this make historical knowledge impossible? David Hackett Fischer has rightly called it a historical fallacy to assume that complete knowledge is necessary for truth. He says the holist fallacy

would prevent a historian from knowing anything until he knows everything, which is absurd and impossible. . . . [Whole truth] is an ideal that ought to be abolished from historiography, for it cannot ever be attained. Historians are bound to tell the best and biggest truths they can discover, but these truths are very different from the whole truth, which does not and cannot exist.⁸

Human perspective may be limited, but it can also be accurate. Historical descriptions are certainly not exhaustive, but they may still be true nonetheless. Partial knowledge is not necessarily wrong and is consistent with a modest foundationalism.⁹

⁷As stated in the introductory chapter, historians have recognized a spectrum of epistemological confidence for the examination of historical events. For the purposes of this inquiry, the following methodology will be adopted for evaluating the historical evidence for the suffering and martyrdom of individual apostles: not possibly true (certainly not historical), very probably not true (doubtfully historical), improbable (unlikely), less possible than not (slightly unlikely) possible (indeterminate but not impossible), more possible than not (slightly more possible than not) more probable than not (likely), very probably true (somewhat certain), and the highest possible probability (nearly historically certain).

⁸David Hackett Fischer, *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 65, 66.

⁹There is a significant difference between classical foundationalism, which assumes that knowledge requires certainty, and modest foundationalism, which holds that justification comes in degrees of confidence. For a defense of modest foundationalism, see J. P. Moreland and Garrett Deweese, "The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise," in *Reclaiming the Center*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 81-107.

Approaching History

Historians have to first overcome certain challenges to gain a confident knowledge of history. For instance, both ancient and modern historians are selective in the facts they report. They choose what topics to explore, what sources to read, what experts to quote, and how much space to invest in a subject. Data deemed uninteresting or irrelevant to the writer are often omitted. Does this mean the historical account will be unfair? Not necessarily. There are certain criteria historians can follow to make responsible historical judgments about the *real* past.¹⁰ C. B. McCullagh writes, “These criteria of selection direct and limit a biographer’s task. Within them there is clearly room for both some selection and interpretation, so every biography will reflect the personal views of the historian to some degree. But the room for a personal perspective is much narrower than commonly assumed.”¹¹

Furthermore, as Ronald Nash has observed, selectivity does not necessarily make a historical judgment suspect “since some selections can be more plausible, have more support, and be more reasonable than others.”¹² Because of a deep commitment to truth, sometimes historians select material that is contrary to what they would have hoped to find.

Second, historians utilize a particular methodology to best determine what happened in the past. While practice is not always as “clean” as theory, there is a basic historical methodology historians can adopt to ensure they have the best chance of arriving at accurate historical descriptions. Underlying this entire historical methodology must be a commitment by the historian to be critical of all claims, sources, and

¹⁰For example, historians often do two things to adequately and fairly explain a person’s life: (1) historians generally focus on experiences that were important to the subject, and (2) historians are interested in the subject’s personality as well as the attitudes and motives which influenced his or her behavior. C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 98.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith & Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 86.

conclusions. According to Robert Webb, there are two main phases of historical investigation preceded by an introduction and followed by a concluding phase.¹³

1. *Introductory phase*: The historian must be aware of his own worldview. He needs to make his worldview known so others can consider how it may have shaped his research.¹⁴
2. *First main phase*: This phase involves collecting, interpreting, and evaluating the evidence. At this stage, the historian provides his reasoning and argumentation so readers can determine if he has handled the data in a fair and balanced manner.
3. *Second main phase*: The historian must now evaluate hypotheses that explain the relevant data. The historian now considers alternative hypotheses to see which provides the best account for all the data.¹⁵
4. *The concluding phase*: The evidence is now gathered together into a coherent narrative the historian finds the most plausible representation of the particular past reality. This phase often includes a self-revelation by the historian regarding how his biases may have affected his judgments.

Postmodernism

This brief discussion about historical methodology assumes that historical research can be done. In other words, it assumes the historical project is possible. This is, in fact, the view of most practicing historians. Despite the challenges raised by postmodernism, most historians are *critical* realists about historical knowledge.¹⁶

¹³Robert L. Webb, "The Rules of the Game: History and Historical Method in the Context of Faith: The *Via Media* of Methodological Naturalism," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9 (2011): 67-74.

¹⁴It seems appropriate to reveal some of my own background and biases. Consider a few relevant details about me (1) white, (2) married, (3) male, (4) father, (5) middle class, (6) Protestant evangelical Christian, (7) trained as an apologist and philosopher (in the analytic tradition) (8) political conservative, and (9) in the area of philosophy and apologetics, I have been influenced by many Christian thinkers, such as William Lane Craig, N. T. Wright, J. P. Moreland, and others, yet I read many books of science, philosophy, and history by liberal Christians as well as non-Christians.

¹⁵C. B. McCullagh provides five criteria used by historians to justify historical descriptions, even though they may use them in a slightly different manner: (1) explanatory scope, (2) explanatory power, (3) plausibility, (4) less ad hoc, and (5) illumination. These criteria, according to McCullagh, are not a magic formula to automatically arrive at the truth of an historical event but are fair-minded means to investigate history. The criteria do not all have the same level of importance. They are simply means by which historians can examine hypotheses to arrive at a close proximity to truth. See C. B. McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19.

¹⁶Perez Zagorin, "History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now," *History and Theory* 38 (1999): 9.

Historical scholarship has been quite productive during so-called “postmodernity.” Most historians believe that this production involves more than mere interpretation of the past, but actual increased knowledge about the way things were.¹⁷ Nevertheless, postmoderns have raised important challenges that cannot be ignored. The prevalence of historical relativism is largely believed to be the result of the turn from premodernism, to modernism, and finally to postmodernism.

The Postmodern Turn

The nature and influence of postmodernism has been heavily debated the past few decades.¹⁸ Some philosophers have questioned whether our culture is, or ever truly was, postmodern.¹⁹ Others have questioned the entire premodern-modern-postmodern framework for understanding western culture.²⁰ Nevertheless, according to the standard philosophical framework, Western history can be divided into premodern, modern, and postmodern periods.²¹

¹⁷Georg G. Iggers, “A Search for a Post-Postmodern Theory of History,” *Theory and History* 48 (2009): 123.

¹⁸For a helpful discussion of opposing views on postmodernism, see Myron B. Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

¹⁹For instance, philosopher William Lane Craig concludes, “The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth. In fact, a postmodern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unlivable. People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of *religion* and *ethics*. But, of course, that's not postmodernism; that's modernism! That's just old-line verificationism, which held that anything you can't prove with your five senses is a matter of personal taste. We live in a culture that remains deeply modernist” (William Lane Craig, “God is Not Dead Yet,” *Christianity Today* 52 [2008], accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/13.22.html>).

²⁰Harold Netland, for example, says this construction is unnecessarily reductionistic and simplistic. For example, he points out that if we associated the Enlightenment period is associated with autonomous human thinking and rationality then how do we characterize Romanticism? See Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 55-77.

²¹Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 15-20.

During *premodern* times there was belief in the authority of the church. The universe was seen as teleological and reality went beyond the observable universe. And language reflected accurately reflected an objective reality.²² In the *modern* period, which was characterized significantly by the Enlightenment, all forms of authority were undermined. Moderns looked for an all-encompassing view of reality, but abandoned the teleological view of history. Efficient causes replaced final causes. The modern period was characterized by scientism, reductionism, individualism, certainty, progress, and anti-authoritarianism. In the *postmodern*²³ period, however, the entire modern quest for certain and indubitable knowledge is upended, and so is the conventional view of history.²⁴ Postmoderns think too much faith has been placed in reason and science to understand and improve the world.²⁵ Frank Ankersmit summarizes the core of postmodern thinking: “In a word, instead of the modernist inquiry into the relationship between the true statement and reality, postmodernists turned to an investigation of the nature of the *representation* of reality in and by the text.”²⁶ According to postmoderns,

²²Lawrence Cahoon argues that premodernism could be seen in the social and political conservatism of the 1980s, where there was a call for moral regeneration through the community and church, and in an extreme manner in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. See Lawrence Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 9-10.

²³Defining postmodernism is not meant to imply that there is one postmodern viewpoint. This is not true for premodernism, modernism, and especially not true for postmodernism. There is a significant divergence of how postmodernism is understood by its various adherents. This chapter focuses on general beliefs that postmoderns would accept to varying degrees that have implications for the knowability of history.

²⁴Pauline Marie Rosenau describes the four aspects of conventional history that postmodernism challenge: (1) that there is a real, knowable past that describes human progress and development, (2) that historians should aim for objectivity, (3) that the past can be discovered through reason, and (4) that historians should aim to understand and pass on cultural heritages from one generation to the next. See Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 63.

²⁵Jean-François Lyotard noted, “We can observe and establish a kind of decline in the confidence that, for two centuries, the West invested in the principle of a general progress in humanity. This idea of a possible, probable, or necessary progress is rooted in the belief that developments made in the arts, technology, knowledge, and freedoms would benefit humanity as a whole” (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992], 77).

²⁶Frank R. Ankersmit, “The Three Levels of ‘*Sinnbildung*’ in Historical Writing,” in *Meaning and Representation in History*, ed. Jörn Rüsen (New York: Berghahn, 2006), 108.

knowledge, language, and reality are inextricably linked and can only be discussed in relation to one another. Thus, according to Walter Truett Anderson “no truths in the world are, so to speak, untouched by human hands.”²⁷ Therefore, to claim that one narrative is true is oppressive and exclusive towards those with a different narrative. Clearly, postmodernism raises significant challenges that must be addressed.

Critiquing Postmodernism

Is truth oppressive? If multiple historical narratives are equally legitimate descriptions of the past, then postmoderns seem to be right—claiming one story as *universally* true is a power move that oppresses others. Michel Foucault has argued that it is impossible to separate truth from power, since power cannot be exercised apart from the production of truth.²⁸ Maybe truth is, as Nietzsche suggested, a disguise for power.

It is undeniable that some historical narratives have been used to exclude and oppress others. But to claim that truth itself is oppressive is a strange claim for a postmodern to make. After all, if all truth is locally bound, as postmodernism states, then this is merely a claim from within one local narrative and only applies to that local narrative. Why should this narrative have authority over other narratives that see truth differently? This is why Alvin Goldman noted, “Indeed, if one examines the debunkings of truth on the grounds that truth claims merely cloak a drive for domination, almost all of these debunkings themselves depend on truth claims!”²⁹

As stated previously, it is undeniable that *some* truth claims have been oppressive. But does it follow that *all* truth claims are therefore oppressive?³⁰ No

²⁷Walter Truett Anderson, *The Truth about the Truth* (New York: Putnam, 1995), 9.

²⁸Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings: 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 132.

²⁹Alvin I. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.

³⁰If so, then the claim would be self-refuting. For if all truth claims are oppressive, then the claim that all truth claims are oppressive would also be oppressive. The person making the claim could say that he or she does not think it is true, but then why make the claim?

argument has been forthcoming that reasonably condemns all truth as oppressive. Still, even if truth were oppressive, this would not mean truth is nonexistent or should be ignored. But truth is not oppressive. In fact, just the opposite is true. Stewart Kelly observes, “Getting history right is an effective and powerful basis for critiquing oppressive versions of history.”³¹ Truth is the best antidote against oppression. In fact, truth is the only basis for real freedom.³²

Do words actually reflect reality? The linguistic turn in postmodernism implies there is no longer an objective world that can be known apart from interpretations. Rather, texts only refer to other texts and there is no access to extralinguistic reality.³³ Deconstructionism is thus meant to expose this fact.³⁴ If postmoderns are right, then no belief can reasonably be considered true or false.

It does seem true that much of what one learns about the world comes through linguistic concepts. Language does in fact communicate ideas. And some ideas may even be socially or linguistically constructed. But it does not follow from this that reality can only be grasped *through* language. And it certainly does not follow that there is no objective extra-linguistic reality.

In contrast to the postmodern linguistic turn, Scott Smith has argued that it is possible to make contact with reality.³⁵ According to Smith, language is not necessary to

³¹Stewart E. Kelly, *Truth Considered & Applied* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011), 131.

³²Os Guinness has argued that truth is necessary for freedom: “Real freedom depends on knowing who we are, because we’re most free when we are ourselves . . . we can free a tiger from its cage, but we can never free it from its stripes. Stripes are part and parcel of the tiger. We can free a camel from the zoo, but for heaven’s sake don’t free it from its hump. The hump is part and parcel of being a camel. In other words, we have to discover the truth, the character, the nature of what something is in order for it to be itself and be free. We need to know the truth of what it is. And without truth, there is literally no freedom” (Os Guinness, *A Place for Truth*, ed. Dallas Willard [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010], 48-49).

³³Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 225.

³⁴Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 114-16.

³⁵R. Scott Smith, “Finitude, Fallenness, and Immediacy: Husserlian Replies to Westphal and Smith,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 107-28.

directly access reality.³⁶ For instance, a very young child learns to identify objects and colors and associate them with terms. Children can relate terms to objects, so when they see the object in a different setting, they are able to identify the object for the kind of thing it is. According to Smith, two points follow:

First, we can see things for what they are, and from many noticings we develop the concept of that thing. If this were not the case, how could she [his very young daughter] open an entirely different book with other pictures of fruit and yet be able to pick them out as such when we ask her where they are? . . . Second, it seems impossible for me or anyone else to be able to identify *for her* her experiences of the fruits and shapes. . . . So, just like each one of us, she has to be able to see what a thing is in order to be able to pick it out as a certain kind of thing, and then to match it up with a term.³⁷

People have direct access to and accurate knowledge of many things, including oranges, thoughts, beliefs, emotional states, personal historical experiences, and more. J. P. Moreland notes the incoherence of claiming that *no* beliefs reflect reality: “It seems that to have a basis for thinking that my alleged knowledge of something is distorted, I must presuppose I can know the thing itself veridically and compare my distortion with that knowledge.”³⁸

Even some defenders of historical relativism have been forced to admit that discourse is in some ways constrained by a real past.³⁹ Belief that representations reflect reality keeps history from flying off into fantasy.⁴⁰ Stewart Kelly captures the reason why

³⁶R. Scott Smith, “Postmodernism and the Priority of the Language-World Relation,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 179-82.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 180-81.

³⁸J. P. Moreland, “Two Areas of Reflection and Dialogue with John Franke,” *Philosophia Christi* 8 (2006): 309.

³⁹For instance, Patrick Finney has defended relativism against the charge that it is incapable of providing grounds for critiquing historical atrocities such as the Holocaust. He claims that historical narratives are necessarily local and contingent. Yet he also says, “The Holocaust seems to me to demand imperatively that we retain the notion that our discourse is in some ways influenced by a real past.” He wants to have it both ways and doesn’t clearly articulate how relativism and access to a real past are mutually compatible. See Patrick Finney, “Ethics, Historical Relativism and Holocaust Denial,” *Rethinking History* 2 (1998): 363.

⁴⁰John Gaddis asks a pertinent question: “So how do we bridge the gap between what we know and what we can only argue about? We do it, I think, by coming back to the idea of ‘fitting’ representation to reality. The judgments any historian applies to the past can’t help but reflect the present the historian

most historians reject the postmodern claim that words are incapable of grasping objective reality:

Narratives about the slave trade, the systematic oppression of an entire race, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, segregation, and miscegenation statutes are far more than dangling signifiers in a sea of nonreferentiality. They objectively refer to states of affairs that obtained in the American past, much of it meticulously documented and chronicled. . . . We don't pick up the newspaper in the morning and think, *That cyclone in Myanmar would be really bad if it actually referred to actual people in the objective world. But since it doesn't—whew!* We read the newspaper critically, knowing such reports are fallible, subject to revision, and written with various biases in mind. But assuming that reputable papers (e.g. *The New York Times*) get the facts right at least some (a good deal) of the time, we rightly assumed that stories of bad (or good) things happening genuinely refer. Those who have been to Ground Zero in Manhattan know that stories about September 11, 2001, are not mere fictions or exercises in intertextuality but rather truthful narratives about horrific events that happened “out there” in the world.⁴¹

Other inconsistencies undermine the credibility of postmodernism.⁴²

Postmoderns claim that rather than meaning in a text coming from the author, meaning is gained through the interplay of reader and text. Jacques Derrida has observed, “There is nothing outside the text . . . there has never been anything but writing.”⁴³ The text is not authoritative and its “meaning” is basically irrelevant, but even the most ardent postmodernist, such as Jacques Derrida, cannot follow this belief consistently.

inhabits. These will surely shift, as present concerns do. History is constantly being remeasured in terms of previously neglected metrics: recent examples include the role of women, minorities, discourse, sexuality, disease, and culture. All of these carry moral implications, and they by no means exhaust the list. But the history these representations represent has not changed. It's back there in the past, just as solidly as that still imprecisely measured coastline. It's this reality that keeps our representation from flying off into fantasy” (John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 125).

⁴¹Kelly, *Truth Considered & Applied*, 105-6.

⁴²Rosenau lists seven critical reflections on various forms of postmodernism: (1) Postmodernism devalues theory building, but an anti-theoretical position is still a theoretical position. (2) Postmoderns criticize Enlightenment rationality and reason, yet deconstruction is a very logical and rational instrument. (3) Postmoderns emphasize not making moral judgments or evaluate interpretations as good or bad, yet they emphasize focusing on the marginal and neglected. How is that not a moral judgment? (4) They emphasize intertextuality, yet many postmodern versions, such as those by Derrida, emphasize the text in isolation. (5) Many postmoderns reject modern theory assessment, but they regularly draw conclusions that must be based upon some criteria for judging. (6) Postmoderns criticize modernity for its inconsistency why claiming they need not be consistent. (7) Postmodernists claim that what they write is local, but few truly relinquish truth claims. See Rosenau, *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences*, 176-77.

⁴³Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158-59, emphasis in original.

Philosopher John Searle wrote an eleven-page article in response to Jacques Derrida, challenging and critiquing some of his ideas.⁴⁴ In reply, Derrida wrote a ninety-three-page response, claiming that Searle had misrepresented him and not properly understood his ideas. At one point, Derrida complained that what he meant should have been obviously clear to Searle.⁴⁵ This is an incredibly non-postmodern response to someone who claims the authority of interpretation rides *not* in the text but in what the reader finds it saying to him or her. The practice of postmodernists undermines their beliefs.

In their book *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*, Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier argue that “any reality that lay behind the sources is, finally, inaccessible to us, not matter how skilled we are.”⁴⁶ They conclude that history is not so much about “how it really was . . . than about how that age created reality.”⁴⁷ The problem, though, is that they tell stories about the past they think match up with the facts. For instance, they claim that Augustine believed life on earth was a struggle between the heavenly and earthly realm, that Marx’s theory of causality was the most influential single body of work concerning socioeconomic factors and historical change, that the Black Death wiped out at least one quarter of the European population between 1348-1350, and that gunpowder was brought from Magnolia in 1257. Their postmodern leanings would force them to view these facts as historical creations, and yet they speak of them as if they were about how “it really was.” Perez Zagorin asks a penetrating question:

What then is the status of these historical descriptions, analyses, and interpretations by postmodern theorists of history? They read like conventional accounts and appear to be intended as true and objective representations referring to individuals,

⁴⁴John Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: Reply to Derrida,” *Glyph* 1 (1977): 198-208. Millard J. Erickson brought this example to my attention in his book *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 156.

⁴⁵Jacques Derrida, “Limited, Inc., abc,” *Glyph* 2 (1977): 162-254.

⁴⁶Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 149.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 150.

books, thoughts, and events in a real past, and it's hard to see how their readers could understand them in any other way. Yet their authors evince no awareness of the problematic and self-refuting character of their historical pronouncements in light of their postmodernist opposition to historical realism.⁴⁸

Postmodernists speak as if *their* stories refer to a reality beyond texts. If they desire to be consistent, these historians must sacrifice either their postmodern leanings or stop telling stories about the past as if they are true and consistent with the past. It is difficult to see how they can have it both ways.

The claim that history is unknowable is self-contradictory in one final way. Claiming that history cannot be known presupposes that history can be known. Why? Because the moment a word is spoken it becomes part of the past—it becomes *history*. Understanding, however, involves being able to accurately remember concepts from the past and utilize them in the present. Otherwise, someone could never complete a sentence because the first word would be part of the past once it is spoken and would be historical, and thus unknowable. Therefore, the claim, “History is unknowable,” depends on history being knowable or the sentence would be completely incoherent. Once someone speaks the word “unknowable” the preceding word “history” is already part of the past. Thus, knowledge of the past is necessary to even comprehend the sentence, “History is unknowable.” Again, the claim that history cannot be known is self-contradictory and necessarily false.

Philosopher Norman Geisler gets to the heart of why historical relativism fails: “But we cannot reject all history without engaging in some history of our own. The statement that “The past is not objectively knowable” is itself an objective statement about the past. Hence, the position against the knowability of history slits its own throat.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸Zagorin, “History, the Referent, and Narrative,” 15.

⁴⁹Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 531.

Are historians hopelessly biased? Historians have biases. Every historian is influenced by a variety of factors including race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, political persuasion, and so on. The key question is whether these biases prevent historians from discovering the past, as postmoderns claim, or whether historians can transcend their biases through appropriate and careful methodology. In other words, are historical accounts hopelessly distorted, or can historians sufficiently detach themselves to make reasonable assessments of the past?

Perhaps the most influential book on this matter is Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*. He argues that an objective historian must never be an advocate of a particular view, but rather a neutral and disinterested judge without any external loyalties or commitments in pursuing a particular goal.⁵⁰ Given the difficulty of this task, Novick doubts whether historians can avoid the pit of relativism. Thus, he encourages historians to abandon the ideal of objectively pursuing history.

Thomas Haskell pointed out a significant flaw in Novick's thesis—*objectivity is not neutrality*. One need not be completely neutral to objectively examine a historical text. According to Haskell, most historians know that “history can be and routinely is written by politically committed scholars. Most historians just do not assign “neutrality” and “disinterestedness” the inflated value that Novick suggests. Most . . . would be aghast at the thought that historians must “purge themselves of external loyalties” in order to do their job well.”⁵¹

Historians do not necessarily always approach a document fairly. Objectivity cannot be guaranteed. But the fact that some writers have allowed ideological commitments to taint their historical conclusions does not mean *all* historical accounts are similarly distorted. Many historians have strong biases and yet still attain an objective

⁵⁰Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Association* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.

⁵¹Thomas L. Haskell, “Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice,” as cited in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*, 139.

approach to history through following certain historical methodology.⁵² The academic community regularly corrects faulty historical reconstructions that are driven by ideology rather than by the facts.⁵³

Historians can take a few steps to minimize the influence of bias. Historian Michael R. Licona offers six criteria for how historians can have the best chance of arriving at true reconstructions of the past.⁵⁴

1. *Proper historical method.* Method includes how hypotheses are tested, the manner in which data is compiled, and how competing hypotheses are evaluated. Attention to methodology can help historians overcome their biases.
2. *The historian's worldview should be made public.* The role worldview plays in shaping conclusions has received considerable attention lately.⁵⁵ To help avoid bias controlling our conclusions, historians should make their worldview public and open to scrutiny.
3. *Peer pressure.* Inviting other peers to evaluate a historical hypothesis can help minimize bias because peers often recognize blind spots of individual historians.
4. *Unsympathetic experts.* This step takes peer pressure to the next level by opening historical hypotheses to experts with different worldviews. Sympathetic experts may quickly brush over areas of agreement, whereas critical experts are more inclined to take nothing for granted.
5. *Accounts for the relevant historical bedrock.* There are certain known facts that historians almost universally agree upon. They are considered “bedrock” since they

⁵²J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig offer a helpful distinction between psychological and rational objectivity. Psychological objectivity is the lack of bias or commitment either way on a topic. It is possible to be psychologically objective on an issue that someone has not considered or thought deeply about. Yet, according to Craig and Moreland, psychological objectivity does not imply one cannot be rationally objective, which is simply being able to discern the difference between good reasons and bad reasons for holding a belief. “The important thing,” they conclude, “is that bias does not eliminate a person’s ability to assess the reasons for something. Bias may make it more difficult, but not impossible” (J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003], 150).

⁵³For a few historical examples, see C. Behan McCullagh, *The Logic of History: Putting Postmodernism in Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31-34.

⁵⁴Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 52-62.

⁵⁵This is especially true in the case of the intelligent design controversy. Phillip Johnson popularized how methodological naturalism shapes the conclusions of Darwinists. He argued that Darwinian evolution is the dominant paradigm *not* because of the evidence but because of the reigning worldview—materialism. See Phillip Johnson, *Reason in Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

are so solid and must be incorporated by any legitimate historical hypothesis. Facts that are considered “bedrock” are strongly supported by the evidence and accepted by the majority of scholars. Beginning with historical bedrock puts a check on imaginative reconstructions that ignore the facts.

6. *Detachment from bias*. Licona says this criterion is “nonnegotiable.” This means being primarily concerned with truth rather than how things are preferred to be. Bias is difficult to identify and overcome. Historians need to force themselves to consider contrary evidence. This does not happen automatically, but is the result of an intentional desire to know truth.

These six criteria certainly do not guarantee objectivity. But they can help an earnest historian be detached and fair.⁵⁶ Perhaps the last point is most important. Does situatedness—bias—prevent the access of reality? J. P. Moreland defends a view of situatedness called *attentive influence*, in which situatedness can influence and even taint the possibility of direct knowledge, but direct access is still feasible.⁵⁷ Moreland explains,

I suggest that situatedness function as a set of habit forming background beliefs and concepts that direct our acts of noticing or failing to notice various features of reality. Depending on various factors, such situatedness may yield accurate or inaccurate experiences and beliefs. It is not that we cannot see reality itself. In fact, through effort we can look at things from a different perspective and further confirm or disconfirm our previous viewpoint. Habit-forming beliefs do not stand between a person and reality as do glasses. Rather, they habitualize ways of seeing and thinking, which through effort, can be changed or retained, hopefully on the basis of comparing them with reality itself.⁵⁸

Critics often discount the testimony of the disciples, claiming they were biased towards Jesus and thus unwilling or incapable of reporting truth. John 20:30-31 is often cited as depicting their bias: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John and the other disciples clearly wrote with a bias. But they were also

⁵⁶Allan Megill considers two senses of relativism. Failing to make this distinction, he says, leads to error. The first sense he calls “anything goes” relativism, which is the view that all preferences are valid from some particular perspective. This view, says Megill, cannot be taken seriously. In contrast, “heuristic relativism” is the practice of entering into the position of another to see reality from that point of view. This version of relativism deserves to be taken seriously and is a common practice of anthropologists. This kind of relativism is not in conflict with objectivity or truth, but rather contributes to it. See Allan Megill, “Relativism or the Different Senses of Objectivity,” *Academic Questions* 8 (Summer 1995): 35.

⁵⁷Moreland, “Two Areas of Reflection,” 310-11.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 311.

concerned with reporting truth! This is most evident by their inclusion of embarrassing facts that cast them in a negative light.⁵⁹ Even though the writer of John was not neutral, a solid case can be made for the historical reliability of John's Gospel.⁶⁰

Christians are not the only ones with biases. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins states that he writes with the purpose of persuading religious people to abandon their faith: "If this book works as I intend," says Dawkins, "religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."⁶¹ Does this bias automatically disqualify the truth claims in the book? Of course not! The careful critic will be aware of Dawkins' bias and consider how it affects his arguments, but ultimately evaluate the book based upon the merits of the quality of the case he presents. N. T. Wright observes, "It must be asserted most strongly that to discover that a particular writer has a "bias" tells us nothing whatever about the value of the information he or she presents. It merely bids us be aware of the bias (and of our own, for that matter), and to assess the material according to as many sources as we can."⁶² Bias is undoubtedly a powerful influence over the study of history, but there is no reason to believe it necessarily cripples the historian who follows the usual rules of evidence.

Is history mere storytelling? Hayden White is often considered the originator of postmodern historiography. Scott McKnight considers him "America's leading postmodernist."⁶³ He is not a complete historical relativist, because he acknowledges there are objective historical events. The problem, according to White, is when historians

⁵⁹Mark 4:1-12, 10:32-43, 14:70; Matt 16:23; Luke 24:9-11, 24:13-32, and John 20:24-31 are good examples of the disciples reporting embarrassing material. These kinds of incidents that show Jesus or the disciples in a negative light are unlikely to have been invented by the early church.

⁶⁰See Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2001).

⁶¹Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner, 2008), 28.

⁶²N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 89.

⁶³Scott McKnight, *Jesus and His Death* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 6.

weave these events into larger narratives such as “Holocaust” or “Apartheid” that give meaning as to how various events are interrelated. White says that rather than reflecting mind-independent reality, narratives are mental constructs forced on nature by historians who employ events into a story that has a beginning, middle, and end.⁶⁴ White sees no correspondence existing between historical narratives and reality. Since historians provide competing narratives, none of which correspond to reality, historians are left with simple storytelling.

White can be contested on his claim that narratives impose form on otherwise disconnected and meaningless events from the past. In reality, narratives are objective features of how humans experience their lives. David Carr observes,

It cannot then be said that they [narratives] impose an alien structure on the realities they deal with, systematically distorting them in the process. Far from differing in structure from historical reality, historical narrative shares the form of its object, and can be seen as an extension and refinement by other means of the very reality it is about.⁶⁵

The basic structure of a narrative (beginning/middle/end) is part of the fabric of human existence, not something arbitrarily imported from outside. Individuals see their lives in this manner, and so do groups. Carr writes, “Just as the individual exists through the implicit life-story, so the community exists through a ‘story’ that draws together the shared memory and expectation or projection. Here too, the social present derives its sense from past and future.”⁶⁶ Thus, a narrative is not simply an arbitrary attempt to bring order to disconnected events, but a presentation of real-life events that are connected as part of a larger story.

The most important question, then, is whether a particular narrative is true. Again, Carr gets it just right: “Our story-telling must come to grips with the world as it is,

⁶⁴Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 5.

⁶⁵David Carr, “The Reality of History,” in *Meaning and Representation in History*, 124.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 126.

not as we wish it were. ‘Making sense’ cannot be separated from ‘being true.’”⁶⁷ Above all, the historian must be committed to getting the story straight. Commitment to truth is perhaps the most important characteristic of a good historian.

Conclusion

The question of the fate of the apostles is a distinctly *historical* question. And yet given the challenges raised by postmodernism, it has been necessary to provide a defense of the historical project in general. Postmoderns have raised many objections against the possibility of knowing the past as it really was. Still, there are no good reasons for concluding that the past is permanently beyond reach. Following the rules of historiography offers the historian the best chance of ascertaining the past. Discovering the historical truth for the deaths of the apostles by following careful historical methodology is precisely the aim of this study.

⁶⁷Ibid., 135.

CHAPTER 6

THE MARTYRDOM OF PETER

Peter is mentioned in the New Testament more than any other apostle, including Paul.¹ All four Gospels list him among the first to be called by Jesus to be one of his followers (Mark 1:16-17; Matt 4:18-20; Luke 6:12-16; John 1:40-42). He was in the inner circle of Jesus along with James and John (sons of Zebedee), but is clearly the leader even within this select group. Thus, he was uniquely present at the healing of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51), the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13; Matt 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36), and Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42; Matt 26:36-46). He is regularly depicted as the spokesman for the Twelve (e.g. Mark 10:28; Matt 19:27; Luke 12:41). And in all three Synoptics, Peter is the one who confesses that Jesus is the Christ (Mark 8:29; Matt 16:16; Luke 9:20). Peter is also the primary character throughout the first fifteen chapters of Acts.² Paul corroborates the leading role of Peter in his letters as well.³ The significance of Peter is further portrayed in the sheer number of pseudepigraphical works attributed to him.⁴ PHEME PERKINS observes, "A number of

¹If the different names for Peter (Simon, Cephas, Peter) are taken into consideration, he is mentioned 75 times in the Synoptics and 35 times in the John. He is mentioned a total of 181 times in the New Testament, which is four more times than Saul/Paul. See Martin Hengel, *Saint Peter: The Underestimated Apostle*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 10-11.

²Peter takes charge of finding a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:15). He regularly speaks publicly on behalf of the apostles (2:14-41; 3:11-26; 4:1-22; 5:29; 10:34-48; 11:1-18; 15:7-11). Peter performs powerful miracles after Pentecost (3:1-8; 5:15; 9:32-34; 9:36-43). And Peter becomes a spokesman for the universality of the gospel (8:14; 10:31-48; 11:1-18; 15:7-11).

³In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul lists Peter (Cephas) as the first among the Twelve to see Jesus after his resurrection (1 Cor 15:3). Paul mentions that he went to Jerusalem after spending three years in Arabia and Damascus (Gal 1:18), validating his Christian conversion from persecutor to missionary of the faith. Paul also calls Peter, James, and John "pillars" of the church (Gal 2:9).

⁴Many non-canonical texts carry Peter's name, showing that Peter was considered the foremost apostle from the second to sixth centuries. These include the *Gospel of Peter*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Acts of Peter*, *Preaching of Peter*, *The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, *Acts of Peter and*

Gnostic writings in which Peter is the leading figure confirm the significance of Peter as an authority for true Christian teaching. Clearly, these authors feel the best way to demonstrate that a particular teaching represents the teachings of Jesus is to make Peter its guarantor.”⁵ In light of these facts, it seems understandable that Martin Hengel would consider Peter “the apostolic foundational figure of the church.”⁶

Although Peter denied Jesus three times, he became emboldened in his faith after the resurrection. Acts reports his willingness to suffer for proclaiming the Christian faith (Acts 4:1-2). After being threatened by the Jewish authorities, Peter and John say, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19b-20). When the apostles were arrested a second time and taken before the Sanhedrin, Peter responded, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29b). Morris Inch concludes, “Peter was willing to die at that moment for his faith—not a bad turnabout for a man who went from tilting at windmills to having the faith of a child. Fortunately, his time to die for his faith wasn’t for years to come.”⁷ Peter was clearly willing to suffer for proclaiming his faith because he believed he had personally witnessed the risen Jesus. The fear that overtook Peter at the arrest of Jesus has been replaced with a newfound boldness.

The Historical Question

Scholars disagree significantly over the fate of Peter. Arguably the most influential work defending the traditional view that Peter was martyred during the reign of Nero is Oscar Cullman’s *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*. Martin Hengel considers

Paul, Passion of Peter and Paul, Letter of Peter to Philip, and the Martyrdom of Peter.

⁵PHEME PERKINS, *Peter: Apostle for the Whole Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 151-52.

⁶Hengel, *Saint Peter*, 28-36.

⁷MORRIS INCH, *12 Who Changed the World: The Lives and Legends of the Disciples* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 19.

this the “foundational” work.⁸ Cullman writes, “It is sufficient to let us include the martyrdom of Peter in Rome in our final historical picture of the early Church, as a fact which is relatively though not absolutely assured.”⁹ More recently, Richard Bauckham claims that Peter’s crucifixion in Rome during the reign of Nero can be securely established with “high historical probability.”¹⁰ In contrast, F. Lapham believes the martyrdom tradition dates from the second century and is based on “the most slender of textual and archaeological evidence.”¹¹

The only way to properly evaluate the strength of the case for the martyrdom of Peter is to evaluate each piece of evidence individually and then consider the overall strength of the case. It is important to remember that this is entirely a historical question that is a matter of probability, not certainty. The biblical book of Acts does not report the death of Peter or Paul, and no other early ancient text states it directly. Nevertheless, a host of indirect witnesses help determine the likelihood of Peter’s martyrdom in Rome.

The Archaeological Evidence

This study focuses primarily on the literary evidence since the archaeological evidence is far less conclusive. The earliest statement that Peter and Paul were buried in Rome comes from Gaius (AD 200), as found in Eusebius: “I can point out the trophies [monuments] of the apostles. If you will go to the Vatican or the Ostian Way, you will find the trophies of those who founded this church.”¹² Carsten Thiede considers this positive evidence tracing back to Peter’s martyrdom under Nero in Rome. He believes the

⁸Hengel, *Saint Peter*, 1 n. 1.

⁹*Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰Richard J. Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter in Early Christian Literature,” in *Rise and Decline of the Roman World*, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1992), 26:588.

¹¹F. Lapham, *Peter: The Myth, the Man, and the Writings* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 3.

¹²Eusebius, *The Church History* 25:7, trans. Paul. L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 75.

site would have been known and preserved from the very beginnings. Thiede believes there is uninterrupted evidence tracing back the date of the burial to the day when Constantine built a tomb on the southern slope of the Vatican.¹³ This seems to be a slight overstatement of the evidence. While it is certainly possible Christians remembered and marked in some approximate way the place of his burial in Rome, it is unlikely the bones discovered in the twentieth century excavation at the Vatican are actually those of Peter.¹⁴ In any case, this cannot be proved.¹⁵ It is noteworthy, though, that Rome is the only place mentioned as the scene of Peter's death and the repository of his body. The exact burial spot may be debatable, but Rome is likely the correct city.¹⁶

Cullman considers the reasons against early Christians actually burying the bones of Peter in the vicinity of Nero's garden "almost overwhelming."¹⁷ First, it is improbable they would have buried the bones there during a time of the Neronian persecution. Second, there is no evidence Christians were concerned with relics in the first century.¹⁸ If they were, Cullman asks, why is history silent about the graves of Ignatius¹⁹ or Justin Martyr, highly honored martyrs in Rome? Third, there is no

¹³Carsten Thiede, *Simon Peter: From Galilee to Rome* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 193.

¹⁴Donald P. Senior, "Peter" in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1997), 905.

¹⁵Michael Grant, *Saint Peter: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 157. Grant notes that it is not unlikely the bones of Peter would have been thrown into a common pit. The claim that Peter's bones have been found, according to Grant, has not found general acceptance. It is possible a faithful follower could have tracked down his bones and buried them at the Vatican, but this cannot be proved.

¹⁶Arthur Stapylton Barnes, *The Martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 11.

¹⁷Oscar Cullman, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 152-56.

¹⁸The first traceable interest in relics is the body of Polycarp, typically dated to the middle of the second century. And this is in Smyrna, not Rome.

¹⁹Ignatius' desire to be completely devoured by beasts was likely not fulfilled (*Letter to the Romans* 4.2). In the fourth century, Jerome indicates that his body lies outside the gate of Daphne in Antioch. This shows that the question of the remains of Ignatius was raised long after the first century, when interest in relics was flourishing. See St. Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 33.

demonstrable knowledge of the grave of Peter through (at least) the first half of the second century. Perkins provides an apt summary of the archaeological evidence: “The best one can say is that by Constantine’s time a monument had been built over a site that was, as early as the third century, attested to be the burial place of the apostle.”²⁰ Michael Grant believes the tradition that Peter was buried near his place of execution on the south side of the Vatican to be “very early.” Still, he believes the archaeological evidence is inconclusive: “Archaeology has proved that since about the year 160 this spot has been the object of veneration which early hardened into a firm belief that this was in fact the burial place of the Apostle.”²¹ Rather than having the actual burial site for Peter, it seems equally plausible that Christians considered the place a commemorative site for Peter’s martyrdom in Rome since they did not possess the actual grave. Presently, the archaeological evidence is inconclusive and can only play a minor role in the investigation of the death of Peter.

The Missionary Activity of Peter

The book of Acts portrays Peter preaching and teaching in Jerusalem (2:14-41) Judea, Galilee, Samaria (cf. 9:31-32), and Caesarea (10:34-43).²² First Peter was written to exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1). It is by no means impossible that Peter was engaged in missions to these churches. James Dunn observes, “Since we know nothing of the beginnings of Christianity in Pontus, Cappadocia, and Bithynia, we can hardly exclude the possibility that 1 Pet. 1.1 provides evidence for beginnings during Peter’s life and mission.”²³ Church tradition has Peter ministering in Syria, Greece, Anatolia, and Rome.²⁴ Larry Helyer notes,

²⁰Perkins, *Peter*, 38.

²¹Grant, *Saint Peter*, 155-56.

²²If Peter went to Rome, why is Acts silent about this? While multiple reasons have been offered, the most promising seems to come from Daniel O’Connor. He suggests that Luke chose not to mention the final days of the life of the apostle Peter because the account contained unedifying material, possibly the internal jealousy referred to in 4-6. See Daniel W. O’Connor, *Peter in Rome: The Literary, Liturgical, and Archaeological Evidence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 11.

²³James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids:

These traditions are not manufactured out of thin air. Paul's letters give evidence that Peter was indeed in Antioch of Syria and almost certainly visited Corinth. . . . There is good reason to believe that Peter addresses the believers in Anatolia because he is in some sense their apostle. It may be that many of these people were members of Roman house churches before being forcibly relocated to the eastern fringes of the empire. This correlates with the tradition that the apostle Peter actively served the church in Rome for some years. In short, it is likely that Peter evangelized among Jews and Greeks in the western Diaspora, including Rome, over a period of at least sixteen or seventeen years and possibly more.²⁵

If Peter was in Rome for this period of time, why did Paul not mention him in his letter to the Romans (AD 56/57)? If Peter were there, it seems unlikely Paul would have ignored him. Critics place considerable weight on this objection. Yet, as a possible rejoinder, Martin Hengel emphasizes the significant fracture between Peter and Paul that to some degree never completely healed: "The deep divide that was signified by the dramatic, public, drawn-out dispute between Peter and Paul is something we cannot portray deeply enough."²⁶ He thus considers the silence the result of hard feelings since Paul had publicly criticized Peter for his cowardly hypocrisy and of betrayal of the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:11-14). By contrast, Cullman attributes the silence of Paul in Romans to Peter's missionary activity with his wife (1 Cor 9:5).²⁷ Regardless of the reason, Helyer offers an important perspective: "However we account for this omission, to pit an argument from silence against the widespread tradition linking Peter and Rome seems ill-advised."²⁸ At best, it seems one can only conclude that Peter was not in Rome when Paul wrote the letter. To make a further inference from this silence is to go beyond the available evidence.

Eerdmans, 2009), 2: 1152

²⁴Eusebius and Jerome place Peter in Rome during the reign of Claudius (ca. AD 42.). See *Church History* 2.14.16 and *On Illustrious Men* 1.

²⁵Larry R. Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Peter* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 101-02.

²⁶Hengel, *Saint Peter*, 63, italics original.

²⁷Cullman, *Peter*, 79.

²⁸Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Peter*, 103.

Much has been made of the “another place” that Peter went to after his escape from prison in Acts 12:17. John Wenham has argued that “another place” refers to Rome.²⁹ Most scholars have rejected this thesis, as Rome would have been too distant since Peter soon returned to Jerusalem (Gal 2:7-9).³⁰ Others have suggested that “another place” is a metaphorical reference to Peter’s death in prison in Jerusalem (c. AD 44).³¹ The majority of scholars have rejected this thesis for a variety of reasons.³² The point of

²⁹Although he admits there is a great authority against it, Wenham offers three arguments to defend his views. First, that “another place” refers to Rome makes sense of the twenty-five year tradition cited in Eusebius. AD 42 to AD 67 (the suggested date for Peter’s martyrdom) would be twenty-five years. There is nothing sacred, says Wenham, about the number twenty-five that would have appealed to an imaginative hagiographer. Second, in Romans 15:20-24, Paul says that he does not want to build on “someone else’s foundation.” This suggests, claims Wenham, that the Roman church developed not merely by happenstance of Christian converts, but by the labor and vision of one man, namely Peter. Third, the Cephas-party in Corinth suggests that a group of Peter’s converts may have settled in Corinth after migrating from Rome where Peter had been ministering to them. One objection against this view is the silence of Luke concerning Peter’s sojourn to Rome. Wenham suggests that Luke regularly avoids things that lie outside the scope of his book. Further, mentioning Peter would have been counterproductive to his ministry since it would not be tactful to highlight the founding of the Roman church by a fugitive. Peter was thus better off in disguise. See John Wenham, “Did Peter Go to Rome in AD 42?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972): 94-102.

³⁰Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 99.

³¹Donald Robinson finds the account of Peter’s virtual disappearance after Acts 12:17 difficult to believe. He considers it a “somewhat garbled allegory of Peter’s death.” According to Robinson, the phrase “he went to another place” is an early Christian way of saying he died and went to the afterlife. He dismisses the evidence for martyrdom from John 21:18 and *1 Clement* 5:4-6 and concludes, “We are fully justified then, in the light of the evidence and with some definite alternative suggestion at hand, in saying that in all probability Peter’s martyrdom is a piece of devout fiction, and not an historical fact at all. He thus concludes that Peter likely died in prison in Jerusalem. Warren Smaltz concurs with Robinson and concludes that the release of Peter from jail in Acts 12 “sounds more like an idealized version of Peter’s demise than like a jail delivery” (Warren M. Smaltz, “Did Peter Die in Jerusalem?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71:4 [December 1952]: 214). Guy Davis agrees, concluding, “All that can be said regarding Peter’s supposed Roman visit is that the notion achieved prominence around the middle of the second century” (Guy M. Davis, Jr. “Was Peter Buried in Rome?” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 20 [July 1952]: 168). More recently, F. Lapham has concluded that Peter likely never made it to Rome and that “the tradition of Peter’s Judean [sic] imprisonment is representative of his death and release from earthly chains, and that his departure ‘to another place’ is descriptive of his heavenly reward” (Lapham, *Peter*, 65). See Donald Fay Robinson, “Where and When Did Peter Die?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 64:2 (June 1945): 255-67.

³²One problem for this thesis is that it requires that the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) occur before Peter’s escape from prison (Acts 12:5-11). Second, the narrative in Acts 12 reads like a straightforward account of Peter’s departure away from Agrippa, not a metaphorical reference to death. Luke unequivocally cited the death of James (Acts 12:2), so why would he cryptically mention the death of Peter fifteen verses later? Third, there is early and consistent testimony that Peter visited Rome and was martyred there. Fourth, if Agrippa killed Peter, it is curious why Peter is mentioned three times in two chapters of Galatians without any indication he is dead (1:18; 2:6-10; 2:11-21). Even more troublesome is

the “another place” seems to be that while Agrippa martyred James, Peter escaped to a safe place.³³ The specific location was unimportant to the larger narrative.

However, even if these critics were correct, and “another place” refers to his death, this would not overturn Peter’s *willingness* to face martyrdom and suffer for his beliefs. F. Lapham suggests Herod Agrippa executed Peter shortly after the death of James, the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:2).³⁴ If this were true it would certainly undermine significant church tradition about Peter’s mission and martyrdom in Rome, but it would not overturn the premise that Peter died as a martyr for his faith. In fact, early execution in Jerusalem would still demonstrate the martyrdom of Peter.

Peter in Rome

First Peter 5:13 provides the earliest indirect evidence for Peter’s stay in Rome: “She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son.” According to Richard Bauckham, all recent scholars recognize that “Babylon” refers to the church from which 1 Peter was written.³⁵ The Old Testament city of Babylon was in ruins, so he could not have been referring to that city.³⁶ Rather, it was a relatively common cryptic name for Rome, the enemy of God.³⁷ Like the Hebrews exiled in the Babylon of the Old Testament, Christians in Rome felt themselves as exiles in a foreign land, a sinful city that oppressed the people of God. This fits Peter’s earlier

why Paul would have such harsh words about Peter if he were not alive (Gal 2:11-14).

³³Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 389.

³⁴Lapham, *Peter*, 248.

³⁵Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 542.

³⁶Paul Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 353 n. 73.

³⁷Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 722. At a later time, Jewish and Christian and Jewish apocalyptic texts identify Rome as the oppressor during the end times (*Sibylline Oracles* 5:143, 149; *4 Ezra* 3:1-2, 28-31, *2 Baruch* 11:1-2; *Rev* 14:8; 16:9; 17:5, 6; 18:2 ff). But the reference in 1 Pet 5:13 focuses on the exilic nature of their experience in a foreign land, similar to the Hebrews in ancient Babylon.

reference to their experience as “sojourners and exiles” (2:11).³⁸ If conservative scholars are correct, this is a first century reference to Peter’s presence in Rome, dating possibly as early as the 50s.³⁹ If Peter is pseudonymous, then it dates to the 80s or 90s, at the earliest, most likely in the early second century. Even at this later date, 1 Peter 5:13 would still qualify as good evidence that Peter was in Rome at some time. Bernard Green summarizes the significance of this passage: “Though there are inevitable and inconclusive arguments about its authorship from different scholars and its Petrine authorship must stand at the very least open to serious doubt, it affords striking evidence that it was assumed in the first century that Peter had been in Rome.”⁴⁰

A second line of indirect evidence lies in the likelihood that Mark wrote his Gospel based on the testimony of Peter while in Rome. Papias reports that Mark was Peter’s interpreter and wrote down accurately all that Peter remembered from his experience with Jesus.⁴¹ Although Eusebius recorded the writings of Papias at the beginning of the fourth century, it dates from two centuries earlier and is likely reliable tradition (c. AD 110).⁴² Irenaeus, who likely wrote from the Roman archives, also reports that Mark recorded Peter’s experience with Jesus.⁴³ The only exception among the church fathers was Chrysostom (d. AD 407), who opted for Egypt.⁴⁴ Internal evidence also indicates that Mark was written in Rome. For instance, numerous Latinisms in Mark

³⁸Max Anders and David Walls, *I & II Peter, I, II, III John, Jude*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 90.

³⁹For a defense of Petrine authorship, see Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Peter*, 107-13.

⁴⁰Bernard Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome: The First Three Centuries* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 46.

⁴¹Eusebius, *The Church History* 3.39.15.

⁴²James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 4.

⁴³Irenaeus says, “After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1).

⁴⁴Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew* 1.7.

suggest a Roman origin.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Roman “flavor” of the opening lines as well as the prominence of the centurion’s confession (15:39) are consistent with the Gospel originating in Rome.⁴⁶ Paul’s passing reference in 2 Timothy 4:11, “get Mark and bring him with you”, as well as 1 Peter 5:13, where Mark sends his greeting, place Mark in Rome, most likely with Peter. Although not indisputable, this provides significant corroborative evidence that Peter went to Rome.

Since the middle of the second century, Christian writers unanimously concur that Peter visited Rome. In his *Letter to the Romans* (c. AD 106), Ignatius assumes that Peter had already ministered in Rome.⁴⁷ In the *Apocalypse of Peter* (c. AD 135), Jesus commands Peter to go to “the city of the west,” which is undoubtedly Rome.⁴⁸ Dionysius of Corinth wrote a letter to Roman Christians (c. AD 170) in which he claims that “Peter and Paul sowed among Romans and Corinthians.”⁴⁹ And Gaius, Roman presbyter in the early third century (c. 199-217), claims that Peter and Paul founded the Roman church.⁵⁰ Towards the end of the second century (AD 170s), Irenaeus says that Peter and Paul preached at Rome and laid the foundation of the church.⁵¹ Bernard Green comments on the claim by Irenaeus: “Such a claim could only be made—and it was an important plank in his argument against his opponents—if there was universal agreement that Peter as

⁴⁵Hengel, *Saint Peter*, 40.

⁴⁶Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity*, 162.

⁴⁷That Peter previously ministered in Rome is the assumption of Ignatius’ claim in 4:3, “I do not command you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles; I am free.” See Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 587-89.

⁴⁸Dennis D. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened: A Study of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 360.

⁴⁹Eusebius, *The Church History* 2.25.8.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 2.25.7. James Dunn makes an important observation about the claim that Peter and Paul founded the church in Rome: “The reason why Peter (and Paul) can be described as the founding apostles of the church of Rome is not that they were the first Christians there or first established the church there but that they died there” (Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 2:1068).

⁵¹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

well as Paul had visited Rome.”⁵² Finally, the *Acts of Peter* (AD 180-190) explicitly mentions that Peter went to Rome to challenge Simon Magus.⁵³ In sum, early Christian tradition unanimously mentions Peter in Rome towards the end of his life.

F. Lapham is skeptical of the credibility of these accounts. He suggests that in order to have “superior authority and greater theological credibility,” the Roman church invented Peter and Paul as their apostolic founders.⁵⁴ However, this seems very doubtful since Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Dionysius of Corinth were not even from Rome.⁵⁵ After considering the primary arguments against Peter’s sojourn to Rome,⁵⁶ Michael Grant concludes, “These are all points worth bearing in mind, but they do not add up to anything like a demonstration that Peter never went to Rome. . . . On the contrary . . .

⁵²Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome*, 45.

⁵³If Peter did make it to Rome, as the *Acts of Peter* explicitly indicate, why would Justin Martyr not have mentioned anything about it? First, Justin may be silent about Peter in Rome but it does not follow that Justin was therefore unaware of such a tradition. Second, Markus Bockmuehl observes that “Justin also has nothing to say about Paul, whose presence in Rome few would doubt. Among the more specific considerations, moreover, we may perhaps note that the Dialogue with Trypho is set in Ephesus around AD 135. At this stage there is no reason to assume a familiarity with Roman memories of Peter either on Justin’s part or, for that matter, on the part of the Ephesian church. And neither of the two Roman Apologies touch on matters that require reference to Peter” (Markus Bockmuehl, “Syrian Memories of Peter: Ignatius, Justin, and Serapion,” in *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature: Papers Delivered at the Colloquium of the Institutum Judaicum, Brussels 18-19*, ed. P. J. Tomson and D. Lambers-Petry [Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2001], 133).

⁵⁴Lapham, *Peter*, 93.

⁵⁵I owe this observation to F. J. Foakes Jackson, “Evidence for the Martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 46 (1927): 77-78.

⁵⁶Grants lists eight common arguments against Peter’s stay in Rome: (1) Galatians mentions Peter’s activities in Jerusalem and Antioch, but nothing is said of Rome; (2) Paul ignores Peter in his letter to the Romans; (3) Acts would have mentioned Peter’s trip to Rome since one of its principal goals is to compare Peter and Paul; (4) No tradition of Peter’s residence in Rome is known to *1 Clement*; (5) Later writings mention Peter’s martyrdom but not the location in Rome; (6) Justin Martyr is silent about Peter’s activities with Simon Magus in Rome; (7) The earliest evidence is from Dionysius of Corinth, but he wrongly stated that Peter and Paul were cofounders of Rome, so why believe his statement about Peter? (8) Later tradition reported that Peter was spent twenty-five years in Rome as the sole founder of Rome in order to have a single episcopate. In response to the first point, Grant notes that Peter could have gone to Rome later. To the second point, there were followers of Paul in Rome, but there could have been other followers of Peter as well. The third point ignores that Paul is meant to be the focus of the second half of Acts. He considers points 4 through 7 interesting, but not conclusive. In particular, 4 and 6 indicate there was more than one Christian group in Rome. The last point, says Grant, merely indicates the duration of Paul was exaggerated, but does not entirely undermine his presence there. See Grant, *Saint Peter*, 147-51.

despite such reasons for skepticism, there is a large measure of agreement that Peter *did* go to Rome.”⁵⁷ While the specific date is conjectural, it is *historically very probable* that Peter was in Rome for at least some period of time.

Evidence for the Martyrdom of Peter

The traditional view is that Peter was crucified in Rome during the reign of Nero between AD 64-67. There is a minority of scholars who doubt this account.⁵⁸ Since there is such a plethora of sources for the fate of Peter from the first two centuries, this investigation focuses entirely on the period of living memory. The place to begin is within the pages of the New Testament itself.

John 21:18-19

The earliest reference to the death of Peter is found on the lips of Jesus in John 21:18-19:

“Truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God). And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

The cryptic nature of this passage makes it likely an authentic saying of Jesus.⁵⁹ Some have considered John 21 to be a later addition to an already existing gospel, but no manuscripts have been found lacking chapter 21. Van Belle has made a solid case that chapter 21 was part of the original gospel.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Ibid., 149, 150, italics original.

⁵⁸See Arthur Drews and Frank R. Zindler, *The Legend of Saint Peter: A Contribution to the Mythology of Christianity* (Austin: American Atheist, 1997); Lapham, *Peter*; Michael D. Goulder, “Did Peter Ever Go to Rome?” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 (2004): 377-96.

⁵⁹Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 278.

⁶⁰Gilbert Van Belle, “Peter as Martyr in the Fourth Gospel,” *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity. Festschrift Boudewijn Dehandschutter*, ed. J. Leemans (Leuven, Belgium: Peters, 2010), 288-89.

The context of this verse is important for proper interpretation. In verses 15-17 Jesus had just restored Peter from his threefold denial (18:15-18, 25-27). Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him and after each response, Jesus replies by commanding Peter to either “Feed my lambs,” “Tend my sheep,” or “Feed my sheep.”⁶¹ The implication is clear—Peter is an undershepherd of Jesus and is called to care for the flock and sacrifice his life for them, just as Jesus did. Andrew Lincoln observes,

The force is that Peter will demonstrate the genuineness of his love by caring for those who belong to Jesus, the good shepherd. Jesus has already described what it means to shepherd the flock in 10:1-18, 26-8 and has proved his identity as the good shepherd in laying down his life for the sheep before taking it up again (cf. 10:15b, 17-18). Now Peter is charged with the privilege and responsibility of being the undershepherd who will protect, nourish, and tend the flock of the good shepherd himself.⁶²

Peter had previously said that he would lay down his life for Jesus (13:36). But Jesus knew he was not ready, which is made evident by his threefold denial (13:38). Yet after the risen Jesus restores Peter for his failings, Peter is truly ready to accept his role as shepherd of the flock. Peter now demonstrates his love for the flock by following Jesus even to the point of death (cf. 15:13). Gilbert Van Belle notes, “From Jesus’ prophecy and the evangelist’s aside in 21:19 it is clear that Peter as shepherd will follow Jesus, the good shepherd, to his death. Just as Jesus gives his life for those who follow him (10:11, 15, 17-18; 15:13) and glorifies God, Peter will follow Jesus and die for it, and thereby glorify God.”⁶³

Commentators unilaterally agree that this passage is a prediction of the martyrdom of Peter. Bart Ehrman states the position accepted by scholars across the

⁶¹Ridderbos observes that these three commands by Jesus indicate that Peter is to be a shepherd who takes “total care of the whole flock.” Shepherding is a common image in the Bible for leadership and care for God’s people. God is frequently portrayed as shepherd over his people (e.g., Ps 23; Ezek 34) and Jesus is regularly called the good shepherd (John 10:1-18; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25). See Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 666.

⁶²Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (New York: Hendrickson, 2005), 518.

⁶³Van Belle, “Peter as Martyr,” 295-96.

theological spectrum regarding John 21:19: “It is clear that Peter is being told that he will be executed (he won’t die of natural causes) and that this will be the death of a martyr.”⁶⁴ And most agree that it incorporates a veiled reference to martyrdom by crucifixion.⁶⁵ Yet, there is significant minority who are skeptical.⁶⁶ Bultmann has suggested that the prophecy of Jesus is an old proverb that merely contrasts the robustness of youth with the feebleness of old age: “In youth a man is free to go where he will; in old age a man must let himself be taken where he does not will.”⁶⁷ In other words, at one time Peter was free to go where he desired, but in his old age he will unwillingly be led to his martyrdom.⁶⁸ Thus, according to Bultmann, this passage is not supposed to be taken as a prediction of the crucifixion of Peter.

Even though this interpretation has been accepted by many, Beasley-Murray notes that it is “pure hypothesis, without any evidence behind it, and its application to Peter’s death is hardly convincing.”⁶⁹ Carson states that hypothesis of Bultmann is

⁶⁴Bart Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, & Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84.

⁶⁵For instance, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Dallas: Word, 1999), 408-09; Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, The New American Commentary, vol. 25B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 338-39; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 679-80; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 489-90; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1237-38; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 599; Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 387; Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 366.

⁶⁶For instance, see Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*; Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, & Mary Magdalene*; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 667; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospels and Letters of John*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 905.

⁶⁷R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1971), 713.

⁶⁸It is worth noting that the debate here involves whether or not the martyrdom of Peter was by crucifixion or by some other means. What the debate is *not* about, however, is whether this is a prophecy of the martyrdom of Peter. That is a foregone conclusion. If even Bultmann agrees that this is a reference to the martyrdom of Peter, the traditional interpretation of this passage is on solid ground.

⁶⁹Beasley-Murray, *John*, 408.

against the evidence.⁷⁰ He notes that in the ancient world, the phrase, “stretch out your hands” frequently referred to crucifixion. Specifically, in the second century, certain Old Testament passages that involved the spreading out of arms or hands were often understood as prophetic types of Christ on the cross. For instance, in Exodus 17:12 Moses lifts up his hands in the battle against Amalek. The *Epistle of Barnabas* 12 and Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* 90-91 interpret this as a type of the crucifixion of Christ. Another example comes from Isaiah 65:2b: “I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people.” This was understood as a type of Christ in *The Epistle of Barnabas* 12, *First Apology of Justin* 35, and Irenaeus, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 79. The *Odes of Solomon* makes it clear that the stretching out of hands is a reference to crucifixion (27:1-3; 35:7; 41:1-2). There is also evidence that pagan authors considered spreading out the hands as a phase in crucifixion.⁷¹

Ramsey Michaels doubts the phrase “stretch out your hands” refers to crucifixion, and believes it is rather simply a gesture of helplessness before arrest and execution. His first reason is that neither Moses nor Isaiah literally died by crucifixion.⁷² The Johannine editorial aside in John 21:19a, however, clarifies for the reader that the context is specifically about the death of Peter.⁷³ Michaels’ second reason is that, if it referred to crucifixion, the stretching out of the hands should come after Peter is taken where he does not want to go.⁷⁴ However, Bauer has argued persuasively that the Roman crucifixion victim would have first been forced to carry the *patibulum* (cross beam) on

⁷⁰Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 680.

⁷¹Artemidorus *Onirocriticus*, 1.76; Epictetus *Diatribai* 3.26.22; Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 19.94; Seneca *Ad Marciam de consolitione* 20.3; Dionysius Halicarnassensis *Antiquitates Romanae* 7.69; Plautus *Miles gloriosus* 2.4.7; Tertullian, *De bono pudicitiae* 22. See Van Belle, “Peter as Martyr,” 303.

⁷²Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 1048.

⁷³Borchert, *John 12-21*, 338-39.

⁷⁴Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 1048. O’Connor also considers this a problem for interpreting John 21:18, 19 as a veiled reference to crucifixion. See O’Connor, *Peter in Rome*, 62.

his back while his arms were stretched out and tied to it, and then forced to walk to the place of crucifixion.⁷⁵ This is precisely what happened to Jesus (cf. John 19:17).⁷⁶ Thus, the order in John 21:18 matches the known means of crucifixion.

Raymond Brown does not accept this explanation. Rather, he believes it is better to suggest that the author of John placed the stretching out of the hands first to draw attention to it, since it is key for interpreting the entire passage.⁷⁷ It is important to remember that the form of crucifixion varied widely in the ancient world. There is no formula for how it was always done. Martin Hengel concludes, “Crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners were given full rein.”⁷⁸ Either way, it seems the word order does not significantly undermine the likelihood that “stretch out your hands” is best understood as a reference to crucifixion. Richard Bauckham notes, “Just as 12:33 means that the lifting up from the earth (12:32) is a veiled reference to crucifixion, so 21:19a means that the stretching out of the hands (21:18) is a veiled reference to crucifixion.”⁷⁹ Even if this understanding is mistaken regarding Peter’s death by crucifixion, the narrator’s comments make it evident that it is a reference to Peter’s martyrdom nonetheless: “This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God (21:19a).”⁸⁰

Jesus immediately followed his prediction of the martyrdom by simply saying to Peter, “Follow me” (21:19b). This is an allusion to an earlier conversation between Jesus and Peter shortly before Jesus’ arrest. Peter had asked Jesus where he was going

⁷⁵W. Bauer, *Das Johannes-Evangelium* (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1933), 232.

⁷⁶See William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255 (March 1986): 1455-63.

⁷⁷Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, The Anchor Yale Bible Series (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 1108.

⁷⁸Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 24-25.

⁷⁹Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 548.

⁸⁰Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 519.

and Jesus replied, “Where I am going you cannot follow me, but you will follow me afterward” (13:36). Peter had volunteered to follow Jesus, but failed. Peter did not understand that following Jesus meant facing death, because he did not grasp that Jesus was going to his death. Now, after the death and resurrection, Jesus and Peter are revisiting this conversation, but from the perspective that Peter is finally ready to truly follow Jesus. To follow Jesus now means to shepherd the flock as Jesus did, even to the point of crucifixion (or at least death). Peter is now able to do what he could not do before—to lay down his life in love.⁸¹ William Hendriksen sums up what Jesus meant, “Be my disciple and apostle, and as such follow me in service, in suffering, and in death (by being willing to endure affliction and even martyrdom for my sake).”⁸² D. A. Carson writes, “And thus he [Peter] imitates Christ, not only in the kind of death he suffers (cf. 12:33; 18:32), but also, though to a lesser extent, in bringing glory to God by his death (cf. 12:27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1).”⁸³

Peter must now live his life with the full reality that he will face martyrdom, just as Jesus did. Whether it was by crucifixion (which is very probable), or by another means, and even though it does not provide details of when or where, this passage is undoubtedly the earliest reference to the martyrdom of Peter. It seems appropriate to conclude this section with a quote by Bauckham: “If Peter had died, it is inconceivable that something of the circumstances of his death would not be very well known throughout the Christian churches. The allusion to Peter’s death by crucifixion cannot be a theological fiction: it must presuppose a well-known historical event.”⁸⁴

⁸¹Leander E. Keck, *Luke-John*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 862.

⁸²Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 490.

⁸³Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 680

⁸⁴Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 550.

Second Peter 1:12-15

In 2 Peter 1:12-15 Peter provides his farewell address in the form of a testament. The author is aware that death is pending, because of some sort of crisis, and desires to leave a legacy of his core teachings.⁸⁵ Scripture incorporates many such farewell speeches including Jacob (Gen 49), Moses (Deut 31-32; Josephus *Antiquities* 4.177-193), David (1 Kgs 2:1-9), Paul (Acts 20:17-35), and Jesus (Luke 22:24-38; John 13-17). Including a farewell address was also a common practice in Jewish literature.⁸⁶ Although formal elements of a testament have been difficult to establish because of the plethora of available examples, Jerome Neyrey has identified five common elements:⁸⁷ (1) Prediction of death or departure; (2) predictions of future crises for followers; (3) virtues urged; ideal behavior prescribed; (4) commission; and (5) legacy. These five elements can be found in 2 Peter 1:12-15.⁸⁸

Peter's goal is straightforward—he is about to die and wants to give a reminder to readers of what he has taught them.⁸⁹

Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body [tent], to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body [tent] will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. (2 Pet 1:12-15)

⁸⁵Grant R. Osborne, *James, 1-2 Peter, Jude*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2011), x.

⁸⁶See *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*; 2 Baruch 78-87, *Testament of Moses*.

⁸⁷Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 164.

⁸⁸First, the author predicts his pending death in 1:14, which is why he wrote 2 Pet. Second, he predicts a future crisis for believers, which will involve attacks through false teachers and false prophets (2:1-3; 3:1-7). Third, given the nature of the impending crisis, he exhorts the believers not to fall into sin but to live godly lives (1:3-11; 3:11). Fourth, a commission is implied in that Peter desires his words to be a continual reminder to the people, even when he is gone (1:12-15). Fifth, he leaves a legacy of staying faithful to Jesus the end (3:17-18).

⁸⁹Ruth Anne Reese, *2 Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 138.

The “tent” is a metaphor for the human body, which is common in Scripture (Isa 38:12; 2 Cor 5:1, 4; John 1:14). It indicates that Peter’s remaining time on earth is short. Daniel Keating observes, “The image of a tent always spoke of what was passing and transitory, looking forward to what was stable and permanent.”⁹⁰ And the reference to “departure” (*exodus*) is a euphemism for death.⁹¹

Peter is fully aware that his death is imminent.⁹² He wants to stress early in the letter that his time for ministry is short and that Jesus directly revealed this to him (1:14). The key question is *how* Christ revealed this to Peter. And why did the author add this idea? It is impossible to rule out some unknown prophecy Peter received from Jesus, but this seems unlikely. Rather, Bauckham concludes, “The only plausible reason is that there was a well-known dominical prophecy of Peter’s death which the readers of 2 Peter would know, and so it is natural for the writer to add a reference to this prophecy.”⁹³ So, what is the prophecy to which Peter refers? Four common explanations have been offered:⁹⁴

First, in John 13:36, Peter asks where Jesus is going and Jesus replies, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” Although Peter had

⁹⁰Daniel Keating, *First and Second Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 149.

⁹¹Norman Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 173.

⁹²Some commentators have suggested that the Greek word *tachinē* means “suddenly.” But *tachinē* is better translated as “soon.” There is no sense that an imminent, violent death was already occurring. Rather, Peter senses the prophecy is set to take place soon. See Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 79; and Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter and Jude*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 62.

⁹³Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 50 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 199.

⁹⁴Some have also suggested the *Letter of Clement to James* as a possible source. In the *Letter of Clement to James* 2.2, Peter allegedly says, “Since the days of my death are at hand, as I was taught by our Lord and Teacher Jesus Christ who sent me...” J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 497. However, some have also suggested the *Letter of Clement to James* as a possible source, but this writing is likely dependent upon either John or 2 Peter itself. See Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 201.

expressed his willingness to die for Jesus (v. 35),⁹⁵ Jesus knew he was not yet ready. This passage is a prediction of Peter's future martyrdom, but since it is before the death and resurrection of Jesus, and few details are given, most scholars reject it as providing the primary background for 2 Peter 1:14.⁹⁶

Second, in the mid-second century document (c. AD 135), *Apocalypse of Peter*, Jesus says to Peter, "I have spoken this to you, Peter, and declared it to you. Go forth therefore and go to the city of the west and enter into the vineyard which I shall tell you of, in order that by the sufferings of the Son who is without sin the deeds of corruption may be sanctified."⁹⁷ This passage is unmistakably a *post eventum* prophecy after the martyrdom of Peter. Bauckham writes, "Since it follows a passage which seems dependent on 2 Pet 1:3-11, and precedes a passages which is dependent on the accounts of the Transfiguration, including 2 Pet 1:16-18, it is probable that the prophecy is inspired by 2 Pet 1:14."⁹⁸

Third, according to "Quo Vadis?" from the *Acts of Peter* 35, Peter encounters Jesus while escaping arrest in Rome. Peter asks Jesus where he is going (Latin *quo vadis*) and Jesus replies, "I go to Rome to be crucified." Jesus then ascends to heaven and Peter returns to Rome rejoicing that he can be crucified. The story clearly has the marks of legend and is likely a historical fabrication.⁹⁹ Furthermore, since the story is first attested

⁹⁵All three Synoptic Gospels report a similar claim by Peter (Matt 26:35; Mark 14:31; Luke 22:33).

⁹⁶It seems that commentators who take 2 Pet as authentically Petrine as well as those who believe it is pseudepigraphal both agree that John 13:36-38 is not primarily in view here. Vinson, Mills, and Wilson, for instance, find this explanation unsatisfactory. They conclude, "Given our assessment that 2 Peter is pseudepigraphon, it is unlikely that the writer would rely upon part of the Petrine tradition that cast Peter in an unfavorable light, as is the case with John 13:36-38" (Richard B. Vinson, Richard F. Wilson, and Watson E. Mills, *1 & 2 Peter*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys], 312).

⁹⁷*The Apocalypse of Peter*, as cited in Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 609.

⁹⁸Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 200. Bauckham observes that this need not imply there that *The Apocalypse of Peter* presupposed an earlier prophecy. It is possible this passage relays an earlier traditional saying of Jesus prophesying the martyrdom of Peter, but the form of the saying cannot be determined.

⁹⁹Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville:

between AD 180-190, even if it were historical, it is highly unlikely that it would be the source of revelation from Jesus in 2 Peter 1:14.

Fourth, this is the most likely interpretation.¹⁰⁰ As seen, John 21:18 is undoubtedly an allusion to the martyrdom of Peter, and very probably a reference to crucifixion. Some have questioned this interpretation since it vaguely refers to a future death for Peter but gives no indication of time. John 21:18 indicates that the prophecy will take place when Peter is “old,” but no specifics are offered. Nevertheless, Douglas Moo observes, “But we can surmise that Peter found himself in a situation where persecution had arisen and that he had drawn the conclusion that the Lord’s prophecy about his death was shortly to be realized.”¹⁰¹ Peter has been living in the shadow of the prophecy for decades, yet now that he is substantially older, and persecution is likely increasing, he naturally infers the imminence of the prophecy.

If 2 Peter 1:14 is an allusion to the prophecy of John 21:18 then it is an indirect reference to the martyrdom of Peter. The author of 2 Peter portrays Peter as writing shortly before his death with full knowledge that his martyrdom is imminent. Even if 2 Peter were pseudepigraphical, it would be clear that the author portrayed Peter as likely going to die soon. And if it were written after AD 64, the Neronian persecution would have been well known. Thus, neither Peter nor another writer would need additional revelation, outside of the known tradition from John 21:18, to infer that Peter’s death was imminent.¹⁰² Bauckham captures the significance of this passage: “This makes 2 Peter an

Broadman & Holman, 2003), 310. Peter consistently waffled in his faith throughout the Gospels. For instance, even though Peter promised to lay down his life for Jesus (John 13:37), he shortly denied Christ three times. Yet after Pentecost, Peter boldly proclaimed his faith and willingly faced persecution. The “Quo Vadis” seems contrary to the character of Peter at this stage in his life. It is difficult to believe Jesus would need to chastise Peter once again and remind him of his need to face martyrdom before ascending once again to the Father. Thiede concludes that “the mature Rock, so vividly reminded of Jesus’ prediction in Mk. 13:14, would never have left his flock behind” (Thiede, *Simon Peter*, 190).

¹⁰⁰Schreiner, *John*, 309-10.

¹⁰¹Moo, *2 Peter and Jude*, 63,

¹⁰²Peter Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 196.

early evidence of the Roman church's own tradition about Peter's martyrdom. That Peter is represented in 2 Peter as writing, from Rome, in the knowledge that his death was coming soon, strongly suggests, even if it cannot quite demonstrate, that Peter was known to have died in Rome."¹⁰³

First Clement 5:1-4

First Clement is the first noncanonical document that refers to the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul. While some scholars have denied this claim entirely,¹⁰⁴ a significant number of scholars believe *I Clement* 5.1-4 provides early attestation for their martyrdoms. Bart Ehrman concludes that this passage refers to the martyrdoms of Peter (and Paul).¹⁰⁵

Standard dating for the letter is toward the end of the first century (AD 95-96),¹⁰⁶ although some scholars believe it was written much earlier.¹⁰⁷ This document has special significance because it is the only noncanonical document attesting the deaths of Peter and Paul within the first century, and it is written within one generation of the deaths of the apostles.¹⁰⁸ As Bockmuehl has noted, the references "in quite recent time" and "of our own generation," refer to living memory.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³Bauckham, "The Martyrdom of Peter," 553.

¹⁰⁴For instance, see Morton Smith, "The Report about Peter in I Clement V. 4," *New Testament Studies* 7 (1960-61): 86-88. Also, Goulder, "Did Peter Ever Go to Rome? 377-96.

¹⁰⁵Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1:24.

¹⁰⁶Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 269.

¹⁰⁷See Thomas J. Herron, *Clement and the Early Church of Rome: On the Dating of Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2008). If Herron is correct, and *I Clement* can be dated as early as AD 70, then the testimony of Clement regarding the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul would be enhanced.

¹⁰⁸Internal evidence reveals that one generation had passed from the lives of the apostles. *I Clement* 44:2-6.

¹⁰⁹Markus Bockmuehl, "Peter's Death in Rome? Back to Front and Upside Down," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 15.

Early church tradition is unanimous that Clement of Rome is the author.¹¹⁰

Kenneth Howell concludes,

The testimonies of Hegesippus, Dionysius of Corinth, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus of Lyons leave us in little doubt that the *Letter to the Corinthians* [*I Clement*] was widely circulated and held as a great authority by the second half of the second century. Thus, within fifty to seventy-five years of its composition, the *Letter to the Corinthians* was held in high esteem in the ancient church from Alexandria and Asia Minor in the East to Lyons (ancient Gaul) in the West.¹¹¹

First Clement was commissioned to the church at Corinth by a small group of presbyters in Rome. Clement was the likely secretary of this group, which explains why his name was associated with the letter. And yet, scholarly research has revealed little knowledge of the ethnicity of the author.¹¹²

The problems Clement addresses in the church of Corinth in the 90s appear to be similar as in the 50s, when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians.¹¹³ After following Paul's example of highlighting the positive aspects of a church before offering criticism, Clement shifts directly to the shortcomings of the church at Corinth:

From this came jealousy and envy, strife and faction, persecution and disorderliness, war and captivity. And so the dishonorable rose up against the honorable, the disreputable against the reputable, the senseless against the sensible, the young against the old. For this reason, righteousness and peace are far removed, since each has abandoned the reverential awe of God and become dim-sighted in faith, failing to proceed in the ordinances of his commandments and not living according to what is appropriate in Christ. Instead, each one walks according to the desires of his evil heart, which have aroused unrighteousness and impious jealousy—through which also death entered the world (3.2-4).

¹¹⁰*The Shepherd of Hermas* Vision 2.4.3; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 2 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 3.15-16; 4.22-23; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.17; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.2-3.

¹¹¹Kenneth J. Howell, *Clement of Rome & the Didache: A New Translation and Theological Commentary* (Zanesville, OH: CH Resources, 2012), 11.

¹¹²Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 162.

¹¹³Paul reports a number of problems in the Corinthian church including quarrelling among Christian brothers (1:10-12), jealousy and strife among them (3:3), sexual immorality, greed, drunkenness, idolatry (5:1-11; 6:18), lawsuits among believers (6:1-8), liturgical abuse (11), abuse of spiritual gifts (12-14), and heretical teachings (15:1-49). In Phil 1:15-17, Paul also writes of how some people preach from envy and rivalry, which causes him affliction in prison. Some have even assumed that Paul wrote Philippians while in prison in Rome, although this is uncertain.

The core problem Clement addresses is jealousy (*zēlos*) among the people of God.¹¹⁴ In his first example, involving Cain and Abel, Clement concludes, “You see, brothers, jealousy and envy brought about the murder of a brother” (4.7). The main purpose of the opening chapters of *1 Clement* is that jealousy among believers brings about division, persecution, and even death.

Clement proceeds to offer additional examples of the results of jealousy from the Old Testament including Jacob fleeing from Esau (4.8), Joseph being “persecuted to the point of death” and then entering into slavery (4.9), Moses fleeing Egypt as protection for his life (4.10), Aaron and Miriam being forced to sleep outside the camp in the desert wilderness (4.11), Dathan and Abiram swallowed by the earth as a part of Korah’s rebellion (4.12), and David fleeing for his life while being persecuted by King Saul (4.13). While it is true that not all of these conflicts resulted in death, Clement is particularly interested in cases that end that way, which is why he provides disproportionate detail in the first example of Cain and Abel.¹¹⁵ Clement is clearly making the point that jealousy amongst the community of God leads to the danger and threat of death. This death may come at the hands of a member of the Jewish or Christian community (e.g., King Saul), or at the hand of a secular ruler (e.g., Pharaoh).¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, the point is clear—

¹¹⁴It is unclear precisely what the jealousy was that led to the death of Peter. Grant proposes that it may have been ultraconservative Jewish Christian missionaries who demanded circumcision and rejected the more moderate approach Peter had taken at Antioch, and denounced him to the Roman authorities. Helyer concurs, “Since Peter championed Paul’s law-free gospel, he may also have encountered bitter Jewish Christian opposition. Is it going too far to suggest that some of these opponents informed on Peter’s whereabouts and were indirectly involved in his arrest and martyrdom?” (Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Peter*, 274). This is in fact similar to what happened to Jesus by his fellow Jews. Mark 15:10 reports, “For he perceived it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.” See Grant, *Saint Peter*, 153.

¹¹⁵Cullman, *Peter*, 96.

¹¹⁶The threat of death is clearly present in each of these cases: Jacob fled for his life from Esau, who hated him and wanted to kill him (Gen 27:41). Joseph’s brothers originally wanted to kill him because of their jealousy, until Reuben has the idea to sell him into slavery (Gen 37:18-24). Moses had to flee Egypt as Pharaoh sought to kill him for murdering the Egyptian (Exod 2:11-15). For challenging Moses’s prophetic authority, Miriam’s skin was turned leprous. Aaron pleaded with Moses, “Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten” (Num 12:12a). Dathan and Abiram, as well as their entire family, “went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly” (Num 16:33). While David survived the attack on Saul, it is clear Saul was led by jealousy to kill David (1

jealousy amongst members in the community of God leads to death.¹¹⁷ Clement cites these (above) examples without providing evidence they really happened. The reason is simple—*he did not have to*. He can safely assume they are common knowledge to the audience. He does the same for the fates of Peter (and Paul)—he assumes his audience is fully aware of their martyrdom accounts and accepts them as being true.

The context of the early chapters of *1 Clement* helps with understanding the particular passage that focuses on the apostles Peter (and Paul):

But to stop giving ancient examples, let us come to those who became athletic contenders in quite recent times. We should consider the noble examples of our own generation. Because of jealousy and envy the greatest and most upright pillars were persecuted, and they struggled in the contest even to death. We should set before our eyes the good apostles. There is Peter, who because of unjust jealousy bore up under hardships not just once or twice, but many times; and having thus borne his witness he went to the place of glory that he deserved (5.1-4).

Clement tells that both Peter and Paul were persecuted and struggled in the contest “unto death.” This likely refers to their martyrdom, although grammatical considerations are inconclusive.¹¹⁸ Clement also says that Peter, after experiencing much hardship and persecution, had borne his “witness,” and then he went to the place of glory. It is possible, although unlikely, that “witness” is a reference to the death of Peter, since the term was not commonly used to mean a martyr’s death until the martyrdom of Polycarp in the middle of the second century.¹¹⁹ Bockmuehl is much more confident of what a

Sam 18:11, 25; 19:1; 20:33; 23:15).

¹¹⁷The theme of the destructive results of jealousy is carried up to chap 14. In terms of how Christians should respond, Clement says, “For this reason we should obey his magnificent and glorious will and, as petitioners of his mercy and kindness, fall down before him and turn to his compassionate ways, leaving behind our pointless toil and strife and the jealousy that leads to death” (9.1). Clement then lists specific Old Testament figures that were spared death because they trusted God.

¹¹⁸See Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 366-68. Licona observes that “unto death” appears sixteen times in the LXX and can mean dying or being on the verge of death. Jesus said, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.” (Mark 14:34; Matt 26:38), yet he did not die from this intense grief. A generation later, Polycarp used the same phrase in a manner that undeniably referred to the death of Jesus: “He persevered to the point of death on behalf of our sins” (Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 1.2).

¹¹⁹B. A. G. M. Dehandschutter, “Some Notes on 1 Clement 5, 4-7,” in *Fructus Centesimus: Mélanges offerts à Gerard J. M. Bartelink à l’occasion de son soixantecinquième anniversaire*, ed A.A.R. Bastiaensen, A. Hilhorst, and C.H. Kneepkens (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1989), 189-94. There are two possible earlier exceptions First, Rev 2:13, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness

grammatical analysis can reveal.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, it can minimally be conceded that “witness” is more than “on the way to becoming the technical term for martyrdom.”¹²¹

While a grammatical analysis of *1 Clement* 5:1-4 is favorable but inconclusive, the context strongly implies that Clement was referring to the martyrdom of Peter.¹²² *First Clement* 5 is part of the immediate context of the catalogue of examples in chapters 4-6. Clement provides seven examples of jealousy from the Old Testament in chapter 4 and then seven contemporary examples in chapters 5-6. Of the final list, Peter and Paul are introduced as individuals, jointly in that order. Bockmuehl comments on the significance of this passage:

At least for Christians in Rome and Corinth, it seems, that these two apostles are, at this stage, the most obvious, uncontroversial recent examples of faithful endurance in the face of jealousy and persecution. . . . Rhetorically, the writer seems able to assume that this is known and undisputed, not just in Rome but among his Corinthian readers too.¹²³

Thus, I agree with Bauckham that “Clement probably knew that Peter was martyred, not from any written source but simply as a matter of common knowledge in the church at Rome when he wrote.”¹²⁴

[μάρτυς], who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.” Second, 1 Tim 6:13, “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Jesus Christ, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession.”

¹²⁰He says, “The aorist participle, in both cases used of their ‘witness’ (*martyrēsas*), is clearly understood to mean their martyrdom; it falls under the heading of persecution and struggle ‘unto death’ (*1 Clem.* 5.2) and is the mode and means by which the apostles passed from this world to their place of glory” (Markus Bockmuehl, *Simon Peter in Scripture and Memory* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012], 110).

¹²¹Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vols. 2, 3, trans. Melancthon Jacobus (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909), 71.

¹²²Polycarp seems to know *1 Clement* well. Thus, in his *Letter to the Philippians* 9:1-2, Bauckham argues that Polycarp likely read *1 Clement* 5:4 as meaning that Peter died as a martyr. However, he argues that it is impossible to know which other apostles Polycarp supposes to have visited Philippi, but he could not have intended Peter, or he would have mentioned him by name. See Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 578.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 109.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 560.

Each example in 5-6 emphasizes the evil conclusions that come from jealousy between brothers and sisters. And yet the latter “contemporary” examples are distinguished from the first by their martyrological theme. Regarding the women Danaids and Dircae (6.2), Michael Holmes observes, “In ancient mythology, the daughters of Danaus were given as prizes to the winners of a race; thus it is likely that *Danaids* is a reference to Christian women being raped prior to being martyred. Dirce died by being tied to the horns of a bull and then dragged to death.”¹²⁵

Clement indicates there were a significant number of other Christians who were fiercely persecuted and also became examples because of their faithful witness through suffering.¹²⁶ It seems highly doubtful Clement would have included Peter (and Paul) in this list if they were not martyred.¹²⁷

Michael Goulder rejects that *1 Clement* provides any evidence for the martyrdom of Peter in Rome.¹²⁸ He finds it improbable Peter ever made it to Rome, and believes Peter likely died in his bed about AD 55.¹²⁹ Goulder argues, “Peter was the prince of apostles, and if he was martyred at Rome, every Roman Christian would have known about it. If Clement shows knowledge of Peter’s martyrdom at Rome, then he was

¹²⁵Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 53. This quote was brought to my attention through Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 368.

¹²⁶Tacitus also speaks of a “great multitude” in *Annals* 15:44. This is why many believe Peter and Paul were martyred during the reign of Nero between AD 64-67.

¹²⁷Cullman makes an additional point worth noting: The context of *1 Clement* 5 reveals that the examples of Peter and Paul are constructed in a quite similar way (even though the account of Paul is much longer). The account reveals that they both witnessed to their faith and then provides a euphemistic portrayal of their deaths (“went to the place of glory” for Peter and “up to the holy place” for Paul). Parallelism in the account makes it clear that if one was martyred, the other must have been as well. Since it is universally recognized that Clement speaks of Paul’s death, he must also speak of the death of Peter. See Cullman, *Peter*, 95-96.

¹²⁸Goulder, “Did Peter Ever Go to Rome?” 384-92.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 377, 383.

martyred there. If Clement does not know about it, he was not so martyred.”¹³⁰ Goulder finds it surprising how little Clement seems to know about Peter.¹³¹

Goulder is right that if Peter had died in Rome, every Roman believer would have known about it. But the core problem with Goulder’s position is that it is an argument from silence. There is simply no way of knowing for sure the extent of what Clement knew about Peter. There is record of what Clement *wrote*, but this is not necessarily the same as what Clement *knew*. How does Goulder have privy to what Clement knew about Peter? And how can he assume Clement revealed everything he knew? Maybe Clement knew much more than he reveals and had reasons for not writing it here. In fact, if it was common knowledge, as Goulder suggests it may have been, then Clement would not need to mention it—he could simply take it for granted. Cullman notes,

It is of course probable that not much was said of the particularly painful circumstances that contributed to those martyrdoms. The Christians who had caused the death of other Christians did not offer an edifying example for others. . . . Did the author, who wishes to show the working of the Holy Spirit in the Church of Christ, perhaps have scruples about speaking of this grievous and momentous jealousy?¹³²

Further, O’Connor suggests the purpose of *1 Clement* was to promote better relations between the church and government, hoping to avoid future persecution: “Prudence may also have been a factor in the brevity of the notice; Clement may have refrained from mentioning details that would have endangered relations between Church and State.”¹³³ It is not fair to assume, as Goulder suggests, that Clement only knew what he revealed. As seen, Clement may have had strategic reasons for being reserved.

First Clement provides strong evidence that the martyrdoms of Peter (and

¹³⁰Ibid., 384.

¹³¹Ibid, 387.

¹³²Cullman, *Peter*, 104.

¹³³O’Connor, *Peter in Rome*, 81.

Paul) were part of the living memory of Christians in Rome, and likely in Corinth, towards the end of the first century. According to Bart Ehrman, “By the end of the first century and into the second it was widely known among Christians that Peter had suffered a martyr’s death. The tradition is alluded to in the book of 1 Clement.”¹³⁴ Cullman goes further and suggests that since Clement was writing from Rome, there is good reason to believe Peter was martyred in Rome during the time of the Neronian persecution.¹³⁵ While this is possible, and certainly consistent with the other extant evidence, it seems to reach beyond what the text can deliver. Cullman also concludes that Clement reveals the place of martyrdom since he speaks of “among us” to the notice concerning Peter.¹³⁶ However, the “us” may just as likely refer to *both* the Roman and Corinthian churches, which would indicate it is a larger reference to the body of Christ (or at least Christians alive at that time) rather than simply Roman Christians. In conclusion, I agree with Bauckham, that the only fact that can be confidently ascertained from *1 Clement* is the fact of the martyrdom of Peter. Clement likely knew the specific time, location, and manner of his death, but he chose not to reveal it.¹³⁷

Nevertheless, even if this interpretation is mistaken, *1 Clement* makes it clear that Peter and Paul were willing to suffer deeply and even face death for their belief in the risen Jesus. Clement says these “pillars” were persecuted because of “jealous and envy . . . and they struggled in the contest even to death” (5.2). This does not mean they were persecuted as long as they were alive, but that the persecution ended in death.¹³⁸ Minimally, this passage provides evidence that Peter and Paul were considered examples of faithful endurance for the gospel, even in the midst of suffering, until their deaths.

¹³⁴Ehrman, *Peter, Paul & Mary*, 84. Ehrman also says *1 Clement* “refers to the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul” (Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 24).

¹³⁵Cullman, *Peter*, 97.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 108.

¹³⁷Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 562.

¹³⁸O’Connor, *Peter in Rome*, 74.

Ignatius

Ignatius was an early second century church father who wrote letters to various churches on his way to martyrdom in Rome.¹³⁹ Outside his letters, and a few brief comments by Polycarp (*Letter to the Philippians* 9.1; 13.2), little is known about the life of Ignatius.¹⁴⁰ His letters focus on rooting out doctrinal heresy within the churches and emphasize unity and harmony among believers. Ignatius claims to be the bishop of Antioch of Syria (*Letter to the Romans* 2.2). Most scholars accept the “middle recension,” which includes seven letters to *Ephesians*, *Magnesians*, *Philadelphians*, *Romans*, *Smyrneans*, *Trallians*, and one to Polycarp (c. AD 100-118).¹⁴¹ There are two texts in the letters of Ignatius that provide early attestation for the martyrdom of Peter—*Letter to the Smyrneans* 3.1-3 and *Letter to the Romans* 4.3.

***Letter to the Smyrneans* 3.1-2.** The church at Smyrna and its bishop Polycarp were especially significant to Ignatius. Of all the cities and communities in Asia Minor, he chose Smyrna as his most prolonged visit en route to Rome.¹⁴² It is clear from this letter that Ignatius’ chief concern for the church at Smyrna was Docetism,¹⁴³ although the primary interest is in 3:1-2:

For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection. And when he came to those who were with Peter, he said to them, “Reach out, touch me and see that I am not a bodiless daimon.” And immediately they touched him and

¹³⁹Ignatius was likely arrested with a group of Christians who were persecuted in Antioch and sent to Rome under guarded supervision. He was able to meet Polycarp while traveling through Smyrna. He also met representatives of many other churches, who came out to support him, and he wrote letters to them in return.

¹⁴⁰Scholars are unsure of where Ignatius was born or in what cultural context he was raised. Many believe he grew up in a pagan home, but it is possible he grew up in a Christian family. There is equal uncertainty about his family, whether he was married, or his occupation. And it is not known specifically when or why he died” (Thomas A. Robinson, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009], 1-2).

¹⁴¹Evans, *Ancient*, 270.

¹⁴²Kenneth J. Howell, *Ignatius of Antioch & Polycarp of Smyrna: A New Translation and Theological Commentary* (Zanesville, OH: CH Resources, 2009), 129.

¹⁴³*Letter to the Smyrneans* 1.1, 2; 2.1; 3:1-3; 5.2; 6.1; 7.1; 12.2.

believed, having been intermixed with his flesh and spirit. For this reason they also despised death, for they were found to be beyond death.

Ignatius adopts the canonical tradition of considering Peter the foremost apostle of the early church, both before and after the resurrection. Ignatius refers to “those who were with Peter,” which is a reference to the eleven apostles. While the story of Jesus requesting the apostles reach out and touch him is reminiscent of Luke 24:39, it seems more likely they both rely upon a common tradition since Ignatius provides no additional evidence of reliance upon Luke.¹⁴⁴ Thus, as Bauckham has observed, “He must have been able to assume, as common knowledge, that at least some of the twelve had died as martyrs.”¹⁴⁵ It would be strange if Peter, the only apostle mentioned by name, were not one of these martyrs.

The fact that the apostles “despised death” indicates that Ignatius believed they were willing to suffer and even die for the belief that they had *physically* seen the risen Jesus. Ignatius mentions the willingness of the apostles to suffer and face death as evidence for the reality of the resurrection. While there is no certainty where Ignatius got his information, his letter “does presuppose common knowledge that several of the apostles, including Peter, had died as martyrs.”¹⁴⁶

Letter to the Romans 4:3. This is another commonly cited passage regarding the possibility that Ignatius had knowledge of the martyrdom of Peter. It is the only letter from Ignatius not written to a church or bishop of Asia Minor. Ignatius heaps significant praise upon the Roman church.¹⁴⁷ He shares his desire to be martyred so he can truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and then implores them not to intervene (4.1; 6:1-2).

¹⁴⁴William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 226-27.

¹⁴⁵Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 563.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 564.

¹⁴⁷Ignatius says he has managed to see their faces “which are worthy of God” (1.1), that they aim to please God, not man (2.1), and “at no time have you been envious of anyone” (3.1). In the salutation, Ignatius says the Roman church is “worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of blessing, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy of holiness, and preeminent in love, a church that keeps the law of

The key passage for interest is found in *Letter to the Romans* 4.3: “I am not enjoining you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am condemned; they were free, until now I have been a slave. But if I suffer, I will become a freed person who belongs to Jesus Christ, and I will rise up, free, in him. In the meantime I am learning to desire nothing while in chains.” The letter does not say Peter and Paul were in Rome, but this is clearly the assumption since he is writing to Roman Christians. Perkins believes this may not be a reference to their respective martyrdoms, but to their epistles.¹⁴⁸ However, Bockmuehl writes, “Neither Ignatius nor any other ancient writer suggests that Peter, like Paul, “instructed” the Roman church in *writing*. The only other possibility therefore, is that Ignatius evidently appeals to a local memory of the *personal* presence, ministry and (by implication) the martyrdom of both apostles in the capital.”¹⁴⁹ This claim is further strengthened by the fact that the mention of Peter and Paul, as Cullman observed, “stands in a context in which Ignatius is speaking of his martyrdom and of the attitude of the Roman church towards this martyrdom.”¹⁵⁰ The fact that Ignatius singles out Peter and Paul among the various apostles indicates that he may have been aware of traditions related to their deaths in Rome, the city to which the letter is addressed.¹⁵¹

Ignatius’s desire to be a “freed person” through his sufferings (4.3) and to realize “the things that constrain me,” (6.3) have been taken by some to be an allusion to his desire to share martyrdom with the apostles as well as ascend to heaven to be with them.¹⁵² Ignatius says the apostles are free but considers himself a slave (4.3). Thus,

Christ and bears the name of Jesus Christ.”

¹⁴⁸Perkins, *Peter*, 139.

¹⁴⁹Bockmuehl, “Syrian Memories of Peter,” 140, emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁰Cullman, *Peter*, 111.

¹⁵¹Carl B. Smith, “Ministry, Martyrdom and other Mysteries: Pauline Influence on Ignatius of Antioch,” in *Paul and the Second Century*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Joseph R. Dodson (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 39.

¹⁵²Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Peter*, 276.

according to this view, he would suffer and experience martyrdom as the apostles did and then share in their freedom. While this is a possible interpretation, not all agree.¹⁵³

Schoedel provides a much more convincing explanation:

Surely Peter and Paul were thought of by Ignatius as “free” and capable of commanding obedience even apart from their martyrdom, and surely that is why the bishop recognizes his inability to speak to the Romans with the same authority as they (cf. *Eph.* 3.1; *Tr* 3.3). Ignatius differs from the apostles in that only through martyrdom can he become as they were.¹⁵⁴

Bockmuehl notes, “For now, we may conclude that Simon Peter appears here together with Paul as an apostle and martyr in Rome, and he stands out as the leading source and authenticator of the apostolic gospel.”¹⁵⁵ The two references in Ignatius are not indubitable, but they are significant proof that Ignatius was likely aware of a tradition concerning the martyrdom of Peter (and Paul) in the early second century, well within the period of living memory.

The Apocalypse of Peter

The *Apocalypse of Peter* is a pseudepigraphal work that begins with Jesus sitting upon the Mount of Olives as he teaches Peter and the disciples about the end of the world.¹⁵⁶ In the *Apocalypse of Peter*, Peter is clearly presented as the lead disciple, just as he is in the Gospels and Acts. It is generally agreed that the *Apocalypse of Peter* dates from the first half of the second century (c. AD 135).¹⁵⁷

It is important to distinguish between the various documents often referred to

¹⁵³Bauckham says this cannot mean Peter and Paul were set free through martyrdom, as Ignatius would be. See Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 566.

¹⁵⁴Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 177.

¹⁵⁵Bockmuehl, “Syrian Memories of Peter,” 142.

¹⁵⁶This story is obviously reminiscent of the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13), where Jesus’ three closest disciples request that Jesus tell them about signs of the end times.

¹⁵⁷Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:622.

as apocalypses of Peter.¹⁵⁸ Despite its shortcomings, the Ethiopic *Apocalypse of Peter*, which provides the only complete text, is generally considered the best representation of the original.¹⁵⁹ Still, there is uncertainty of some of the exact wording and content at different points of the *Apocalypse of Peter*.¹⁶⁰ The passage that relates to the martyrdom of Peter is 14:4-6. A popular translation of the Ethiopic text,

I have spoken this to you, Peter, and declared it to you. Go forth therefore and go to the city of the west and enter into the vineyard which I shall tell you of, in order that by the sufferings of the Son who is without sin the deeds of corruption may be sanctified. As for you, you are chosen according to the promise which I have given you. Spread my gospel throughout all the world in peace. Verily men shall rejoice; my words shall be the source of hope and of life, and suddenly shall the world be ravished.¹⁶¹

Since this chapter is the most corrupt of the Ethiopic text, Buchholz has provided a translation with corrections from the Greek text (Rainer fragment):

Behold, I have shown you, Peter, and I have explained everything. And go into a city ruling over the west, and drink the cup which I have promised you at the hands of the son of the One who is in Hades in order that his destruction might acquire a beginning. And you . . . of the promise. . . .¹⁶²

The reference to “a city ruling over the west” is clearly a reference to Rome.¹⁶³

Nevertheless, Lapham argues against the martyrological context of this passage.¹⁶⁴

However, the phrase, “drink the cup which I have promised” is clearly a reference to martyrdom. Jesus used the phrase with martyrological connotations when the Zebedee

¹⁵⁸There is the Ethiopic *Apocalypse of Peter*, the Arabic *Apocalypse of Peter*, the Coptic *Apocalypse of Peter* (discovered in the Nag Hammadi library in 1945), and the Akhmim text (Greek). There are some theological differences between some of these versions. For instance, the Coptic version, which is more gnostic, sees martyrdom negatively when compared with the Ethiopic and Greek texts. See Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened*, 7-9.

¹⁵⁹Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 594.

¹⁶⁰Terence V. Smith, *Petrine Controversies in the Early Church* (Tubingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985), 44.

¹⁶¹Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 609.

¹⁶²Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened*, 345.

¹⁶³Smith, *Petrine Controversies*, 48.

¹⁶⁴Lapham, *Peter*, 95.

brothers requested they reign with Jesus (Mark 10:35-39; Matt 20:20-23). Jesus also uses the same saying in preparation for his own death (Matt 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 18:11). The author of the *Apocalypse of Peter* knew and used the Gospel of Matthew,¹⁶⁵ so it is likely he took this phrase directly from Matthew 20:22-23 and fully understood its martyrological association.¹⁶⁶

Although the expression is somewhat odd, “the son of the One who is in Hades” is likely a reference to Nero.¹⁶⁷ In this statement, “in order that his destruction might acquire a beginning,” Peter’s preaching and martyrdom in Rome is the vehicle by which the power of Satan is broken.¹⁶⁸ Buchholz summarizes the significance of this passage:

This is possibly the oldest known unambiguous allusion to Peter’s death in Rome. It witnesses to the idea that Peter’s death must occur before Satan’s destruction can begin, or to the idea that Peter’s death must occur before Satan can really begin his (final) work of destruction (cf. 2 Th. 2:6-8). Either way, Peter’s death is seen as a sign of the End, and surely this must be a very early idea, one which would not have arisen too long after Peter’s (assumed?) death in Rome and one which would not be incorporated into new works at a date too far removed from that period of time.¹⁶⁹

The *Apocalypse of Peter* provides additional early attestation for the martyrdom of Peter in Rome during the reign of Nero. It must be conceded that this is dependent upon the proper translation of the Rainer fragment, which is far from certain. Taken alone, the *Apocalypse of Peter* would provide modest evidence for the martyrdom of Peter in Rome. However, considered with the rest of the evidence, it is a significant piece of evidence for the traditional story concerning the fate of Peter.

¹⁶⁵Smith, *Petrine Controversies*, 46-48.

¹⁶⁶Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 572.

¹⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 573. Bauckham observes that this is likely a relic of an early Christian reference to Nero as the antichrist, which is specifically related to the persecution of the church and Peter’s martyrdom.

¹⁶⁸Perkins, *Peter*, 135. There is uncertainty about the exact meaning of this phrase.

¹⁶⁹Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened*, 360.

The *Ascension of Isaiah*

Another possible indirect witness for the martyrdom of Peter is found in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, an early second century Old Testament pseudepigraphal apocalyptic text (c. AD 112-138).¹⁷⁰ Jonathan Knight has argued that the *Ascension of Isaiah* was written to address Christians who feared Rome would implement similar policies against Christians as Trajan had adopted in Bithynia in the early part of the second century.¹⁷¹ According to Knight, the death of Isaiah for witnessing to Jesus (chap. 5) brings to mind Trajan's policy of putting Christians to death who continued to proclaim the "name" of Christ. On the other hand, Greg Carey argues it is a polemic against the Jews for their ignorance and apostasy as well as a primary witness to Christ.¹⁷²

The *Ascension of Isaiah* can be divided into two visions. The First Vision (chaps. 1-5) contains the narrative of the martyrdom of Isaiah. It includes the hope that the Beloved will return and destroy the forces that are oppressing them (4.14-18). Beliar becomes angry with Isaiah and Manasseh has him sawed in two (5.1). The Second Vision (6-11) contains an apocalyptic account of Isaiah through the seven heavens with focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus and ultimate defeat of Beliar by the Beloved One (10).

The particular section that is often cited as a reference to the martyrdom of Peter is *Ascension of Isaiah* 4:2-3:

¹⁷⁰The *Ascension of Isaiah* is known through only a dozen Ge'ez manuscripts, with the Ethiopic version being the primary witness because of its completeness. There is a possible further copy that belongs to the monastery of Dabra Bizen in Eritrea, but the political situation makes it unlikely this will surface any time soon. See Ted Erho, "New Ethiopic Witnesses to some Old Testament Pseudepigrapha," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76 (February 2013): 95-97.

¹⁷¹Knight argues that the *Ascension of Isaiah* is a polemic against the Roman Empire in light of the letter written by Pliny to Trajan (AD 112) regarding what to do with Christians who had come to notice in his province. Christians who came to Trajan's attention were given the chance to deny the name of Christ, and offer sacrifices to the Roman gods. Those who did not pass the "sacrifice" test were executed. Knight believes Christians in Rome feared their government would adopt the same strategy. See Jonathan Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved: The Christology, Social Setting and Theological Context of the Ascension of Isaiah* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 1996), 33-39.

¹⁷²Carey does recognize that Knight's proposal is grounded in textual evidence, but believes a literary-rhetorical approach would bring a different understanding of the text. See Greg Carey, "The *Ascension of Isaiah*: An Example of Early Christian Narrative Polemic" *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha* 9 (1998): 65-78.

Then will arise Beliar, the great prince, the king of this world, who has ruled it since its origin; and he will descend from his firmament in human form, king of wickedness, murderer of his mother, who himself is king of the world; and he will persecute the plant which the Twelve Apostles of the Beloved shall have planted; one of the Twelve will be delivered into his hands.¹⁷³

The context of this passage is the prophecy that the Beloved One will return from heaven and send Beliar (Satan) to Gehenna while providing rest for the godly (4.14-21). All those who had supported Beliar will be destroyed (4.18) and hope is provided for those currently facing persecution.

In this passage, “Beliar” clearly refers to Nero, the one who descends in human form.¹⁷⁴ This passage picks up the idea regarding the myth of Nero’s return, which appears in other literature of the time.¹⁷⁵ It would seem possible to interpret this passage as referring to the execution of James (Acts 12:2), except that Beliar is considered the “murderer of his mother,” which is a clear indication of Nero’s murder of his mother Agrippina.¹⁷⁶ The image of Nero brought terror into the minds of Christians and Jews and so he was considered a symbol for Jewish aversion to Rome. This is the symbolic sense in which the image of Nero is used in the *Ascension of Isaiah*.¹⁷⁷

The claim that Beliar (Nero) will “persecute the plant which the Twelve Apostles of the Beloved shall have planted,” is a reference to the persecution of the church. The key question involves the identity of “one of the Twelve,” who will be

¹⁷³Robert Henry Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (London: A & C Black, 1900), 95.

¹⁷⁴Cullman, *Peter*, 112.

¹⁷⁵The *Sibylline Oracles* identifies Nero with Beliar as does the *Ascension of Isaiah*: “Then Beliar will come from the *Sebastenoi*, and he will raise up the height of mountains, he will raise up the sea, the great fiery sun and shining moon, for men. But they will not be effective in him. But he will, indeed, also lead men astray, and he will lead astray many faithful, chosen Hebrews, and also other lawless men who have not yet listened to the word of God. But whenever the threats of the great God draws nigh and a burning power comes through the sea to land it will also burn Beliar and all overbearing men, as many as put their faith in him (3.63-74).

¹⁷⁶Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 1:378. The incident of Nero killing his mother is recorded by Tacitus *The Annals* 14.3-8; Suetonius *Lives of the Caesars: Nero* 34; Dio Cassius *Roman History, Epitome of Book* 61.12-13; Plutarch *Antony* 87.4.

¹⁷⁷Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved One*, 190.

delivered into the hands of Nero. Paul cannot be in mind here, because the author uses the same phrase to refer to the “twelve disciples” in 3:17 and 11:22. Additionally, the *Ascension of Isaiah* never mentions Paul individually, so it seems very unlikely he would be referred to cryptically as “one of the Twelve.” It seems the author has the same technical sense of “the Twelve” as in 1 Corinthians 15:5 and Mark 3:14-19, which clearly refer to the twelve apostles Jesus chose to join him in ministry.

Daniel O’Connor captures the most straightforward way of understanding this text: “If the passage is read without prejudice, the most convincing interpretation is that ‘Beliar’ is a cryptic name for Nero; ‘the plant’ stands for the Church; and Peter is the one of ‘the Twelve’ who is ‘delivered into his hands.’”¹⁷⁸ The passage refers to an apostle who fell into Nero’s hands, which most obviously refers to Peter, the only other apostle in which there is any tradition about his martyrdom under Nero. Just as the “Beloved One” throughout the *Ascension of Isaiah* is a reference to Jesus the “one” of the Twelve likely refers to Peter.

Why would the author¹⁷⁹ not specifically mention Peter? First, even Jesus often spoke in generic terms about his betrayer: “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me” (Matt 26:21). Prophecy is often generalized and vague, and this passage, which is part of the First Vision, is likely no exception. Second, as Bauckham concludes, the tradition of Peter’s death in Rome under Nero would have been commonly known and easily identified by the first readers.¹⁸⁰ *The Ascension of Isaiah* was written during the living memory of Peter.

¹⁷⁸O’Connor, *Peter in Rome*, 69.

¹⁷⁹Many have suggested that a plurality of authors as well as a Christian editor for the *Ascension of Isaiah*. See 2.156. See Robert Henry Charles, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 2:156.

¹⁸⁰Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 568.

Perkins objects that the phrase “will be delivered into his hands” may not be a reference to martyrdom at all.¹⁸¹ Perkins cites Paul’s use of the phrase in reference to a man who has sex with his father’s wife. The church was to “deliver this man to Satan,” which means they were to dismiss him from the fellowship (1 Cor 5.5). However, the phrase is a Semitism which often, although not always, implies destruction of the one who is handed over.¹⁸² The context of the *Ascension of Isaiah* is clearly the persecution of those who oppose Beliar. In a similar context, when Jesus foretells his future death, the same phrase is used. Matthew 17:22 says, “As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day’” This understanding of deliverance into the hands of men as a reference to martyrdom is likely in the mind of the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah*.¹⁸³

This passage in *Ascension of Isaiah* does not explicitly state that Peter was martyred by Nero in Rome, but when Beliar is identified as Nero, with the understanding that Nero’s persecution was confined to Rome, and the likelihood that the “one” refers to Peter, this most likely refers to Peter’s death in Rome under Nero. Cullman may very well be right—*The Ascension of Isaiah* is likely the first and earliest document that attests to the martyrdom of Peter in Rome.¹⁸⁴

The Acts of Peter

The *Acts of Peter* is typically dated to c. AD 180-190,¹⁸⁵ although not all scholars agree.¹⁸⁶ If this standard dating is correct, it falls within the living memory of the

¹⁸¹Perkins, *Peter*, 139.

¹⁸²Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 568.

¹⁸³Ibid.

¹⁸⁴Cullman, *Peter*, 112.

¹⁸⁵Jan N. Bremmer, “Women, Magic, Place, and Date,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 17-18.

life of Peter and thus may have some historical value for this investigation. The *Acts of Peter* clearly contains substantial legendary material from earlier oral tradition.¹⁸⁷ And yet despite the legendary accretions, as François Bovon and Eric Junod have observed, “their value as historical witnesses is not abolished.”¹⁸⁸ Christine Thomas writes, “The mere fact that externally attested first-century individuals appear as protagonists in the pages of the *Acts of Peter* is sufficient to show that these narratives were not fictions completely divorced from historical memory.”¹⁸⁹ She provides an important balance to the role of redactors in the *Acts of Peter*:

Like the storytellers in the first phase, the author of the continuous narrative had limits to creative license: the basic characters, Peter, Agrippa, Nero, Eubula, and Marcellus, were already part and parcel of the narrative. The basic outline of the story was also given. As suggested above, however, this author was not consciously attempting innovation, but was striving to collect and preserve as much of the story of Peter as possible.¹⁹⁰

The writer(s) of the *Acts of Peter* did not simply invent material, but were bound by received tradition. There is reason to believe earlier pre-existing traditions, and in particular *martyrdom* traditions, have been incorporated into the text.¹⁹¹ The traditions

¹⁸⁶For instance, Matthew Baldwin argues that external evidence for a second century Greek version of the *Acts of Peter* is lacking. He argues that certain stories later contained in the *Acts of Peter* may have circulated in the second century, but that there is no evidence for a literary work of this kind in the second century. Rather, he considers the *Actus Vercellensis* a seventh century text that emerged in Spain, which preserves an earlier writing translated into Greek no early than the late fourth century. See Matthew C. Baldwin, *Whose Acts of Peter? Text and Historical Context of the Actus Vercellensis* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

¹⁸⁷Richard A Norris, Jr. “Apocryphal writings and Acts of the martyrs,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31.

¹⁸⁸François Bovon and Eric Junod, “Reading the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” *Semeia* 38 (1986): 163.

¹⁸⁹Christine Thomas, *The Acts of Peter: Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 47.

¹⁹⁰Christine M. Thomas, “The ‘Prehistory’ of the Acts of Peter,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, ed. François Bovon, Ann Graham Bock, and Christopher R. Matthews (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 55.

¹⁹¹The mention of four soldiers in *Acts of Peter* 36 and four times four in Acts 12 suggests, according to István Czachesz, that both accounts of the arrest of Peter derive from a common pre-existing tradition. Furthermore, Ralph Novak observes that “it is rather curious that the traditions concerning the deaths of Peter and Paul would have been preserved by orthodox Christians while the Acts containing the

behind the *Acts of Peter* trace back to the first century.¹⁹² And yet the *Apocryphal Acts* also reflect the situation of the churches in the second and third centuries from which they were written.¹⁹³

The most commonly repeated genre for the *Acts of Peter* (and other *Apocryphal Acts*) is the ancient novel.¹⁹⁴ While not disputing that the genre is novelistic in some capacity, Thomas says it should properly be called a “historical novel”:

The *Acts of Peter* embellish their characters using the same means as the novels, but the relationship to historiography differs considerably. The novels, both erotic and historical, avoid direct reference to commonly known historical events. Although the *minor* characters may be drawn directly from historical figures, neither the *main* characters nor the story refers to the events or public figures who populate historical discourse. In texts such as the *Acts of Peter*, however, the narrative focuses directly on figures of great public significance to the tradents. And it is precisely the most noteworthy events in the lives of the characters that become the province of the Christian writers and storytellers. This is certainly true of Simon and Peter, and even of secondary figures such as Marcellus. However historically worthless or distorted the information in the *Actus Vercellenses* may be, the objective is not to tell something that *may* have happened in the past, using history for décor, but to retell the most significant and well-known events from the public life of an individual; a narrative about noteworthy events of the past is the main objective. The Alexander romance provides the best generic parallel among the novelistic products of the Roman Empire. Alongside of the imaginative and improbable occurrences that form the fabric of the narrative, the romance also narrates all the best-known events of Alexander’s life.¹⁹⁵

Since the *Apocryphal Acts* contain historical memory as well as legend, the difficulty is deciphering between the two. Is there a historical kernel that can be trusted? Some of the events in the *Acts of Peter* are clearly embellishment. For instance, Peter does multiple

traditions were rejected, if the traditions first appeared in these two Acts” (Ralph Martin Novak, Jr., *Christianity and the Roman Empire* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001], 27). See István Czachesz, “The Gospel of Peter and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” in *sDas Petrusevangelium als Teil antiker Literatur*, ed. T. Nicklas and Th.J. Kraus (Berlin, Germany: W.De Gruyter: 2007), 248, 261.

¹⁹²Thomas, *The Acts of Peter*, 49.

¹⁹³François Bovon, “Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of Apostles,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (Summer 2003): 184.

¹⁹⁴See Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 7-10.

¹⁹⁵Thomas, *The Acts of Peter*, 88-89.

miracles¹⁹⁶ that are narrative devices to prove that Peter represents the real Lord and that Simon is an impostor.¹⁹⁷ The feats of Simon Magus are clearly exaggerations as well. Nevertheless, all of the various versions of the *Acts of Peter*¹⁹⁸ tell a similar tale of Peter's activity and martyrdom in Rome, incorporating precisely the same characters: Peter, Simon, Marcellus, Agrippa, and Nero. The consistent reference to the martyrdom of Peter, which finds support from earlier sources (both canonical and extracanonical), indicates it was a fixed tradition by the time of the writing of the *Acts of Peter* at the end of the second century. Before this time, the martyrdom accounts are very reserved and provide only indirect hints that he died in Rome under Nero. "However," says Perkins, "the later tradition quite strongly favors the fact of Peter's martyrdom under Nero, so we may assume that the earlier hints do point to that event as a fact as well."¹⁹⁹ Since there are no other accounts of Peter dying anywhere except Rome, it is likely the tradition of his martyrdom in Rome was so well known at this point that the *Acts of Peter* were bound by this tradition. Thus, while the *Acts of Peter* contains some stories that strain credibility, its testimony to the martyrdom of Peter should not be ignored. Green concludes, "Though the evidence is fragmentary, it does make Peter's having been in Rome and dying there look a virtual certainty."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶Peter did a number of miracles including paralyzing half the body of Rufina, the adulterer (1.2), bidding a dog to condemn Simon (4.9), restoring a shattered statue of Caesar (4.11), ordering a dead tuna fish to come alive and swim again (5.13), giving a seven month old baby a voice to condemn Simon (5.15), and raising the son of the prefect (8.26), the widow's son (8.27), and Nicostratus from the dead (8.28). I am not adopting a naturalistic bias that assumes supernatural events must be legendary. Rather, the quantity and quality of the miracles sets them apart from the canonical gospels and Acts and indicates they (as a whole) serve a literary and theological purpose and are not meant to be taken as historically veridical.

¹⁹⁷Magda Misset-Van De Weg, "'For the Lord Always Takes Care of His own.' The Purpose of the Wondrous Works and Deeds in the *Acts of Peter*," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, 97-101.

¹⁹⁸Various versions of the Acts of Peter include the *Actus Vercellensis*, the Linus Text, Pseudo-Hegesippus, and the Marcellus text.

¹⁹⁹Perkins, *Peter*, 146.

²⁰⁰Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome*, 48.

The tradition surrounding his death by Nero is less secure, however. Outside the *Acts of Peter*, it is only alluded to before the third century in *The Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. It is interesting that the arrest and death of Peter in the *Acts of Peter* have nothing to do with the Neronian persecution. No mention is made of the Roman fire or the blame Nero placed on the Christians. Nero only appears at the beginning of the narrative and briefly at the end, which is an indication it could be a later addition to the text. In the *Acts of Peter*, Peter is arrested because of the jealousy of Agrippa and Albinus whose wives and concubines will no longer have sex with them since their Christian conversions. Cullman believes this may be part of the historical core of the *Acts of Peter* since *1 Clement* reports that the deaths of both Peter and Paul were occasioned by jealousy.²⁰¹ It is uncertain how widely known the tradition of Peter's martyrdom under Nero was in the late second century, but it is significant that the author(s) fail to link them together.²⁰² Thiede seems to come to a fair conclusion, "As far as the existing evidence is concerned, the death of Peter during Nero's fourteenth year cannot be ruled out, but neither, in the nature of the case, can it be proved beyond doubt."²⁰³

Was Peter crucified upside-down? Given the early reference in John 21:18, as well as the fact that it was a common form of punishment for slaves and non-Roman citizens, the crucifixion of Peter is historically likely. However, the claim that Peter was crucified upside-down is open to doubt. In the *Martyrdom of Peter*, when Peter approaches the place of execution, he gives a speech to the people and the cross (36.7-8). He concludes by saying, "But it is time for you, Peter, to surrender your body to those

²⁰¹Cullman may be correct in his assessment of the historical core of the *Acts of Peter* but he does seem to overstate the evidence when he concludes, "From the investigation of *1 Clement* we conclude, not with absolute certainty but yet with the highest probability, that Peter suffered martyrdom at Rome about the time of the Neronian persecution" (Cullman, *Peter*, 109).

²⁰²Bauckham suggests that the dating of Peter's martyrdom under Nero may have resulted not from continual tradition but from the claim by Dionysius of Corinth that they were martyred together at the same place and the same time. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.

²⁰³Thiede, *Simon Peter*, 191.

who are taking it. Take it, then, you whose duty it is. I request you therefore, executioners, to crucify me head-downwards in this way and no other.” Peter gives a final speech while upside down on the cross and then dies (40.11).

It is often assumed that Peter’s request is an act of humility, in that he did not consider himself worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. But the text does not say this. Rather, Peter’s upside down state symbolizes that fallen humanity has now been restored through the cross.²⁰⁴ The narrative indicates that there has been a turning point in cosmic history in the cross of Christ as well as the cross of Peter.²⁰⁵ János Bolyki asks, “Who can be a better example for reversing the world’s corrupted order than Peter who is hung up on the cross head downwards?”²⁰⁶ The world has been turned upside down by sin, and so Peter can see the upside-down nature of the world clearly while hanging with his head downward on the cross. His speech makes clear that Adam, the “first man,” fell head-downwards and turned the cosmos upside down but only through Christ can the world be seen “upright.” Thus, the crucifixions of Jesus and Peter restore the creation (through the New Adam) to its intended functioning.²⁰⁷

Is the upside-down crucifixion of Peter a reliable tradition? The earliest church father who mentions it is Origen in volume 3 of his *Commentary on Genesis* in the mid-

²⁰⁴Monika Pesthy, “Cross and Death in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, 130. Pesthy notes that there is only one contemporary parallel with this account: the 23rd *Ode of Solomon*, where the Logos descends down to a wheel, understood as the cross, and the head and feet are reversed.

²⁰⁵Jonathan Smith observes, “Rather than dealing with an exercise in humility, we have here an *act of cosmic audacity* consistent with an expressive of a Christian-gnostic understanding and evaluation of the structures of the cosmos and of the human condition...For Peter to *request* to be crucified upside down was to deliberately dehumanize himself, to reverse the natural order, and to make of his death an act of rebellion against his manhood and the cosmos” (Jonathan Z. Smith, “Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?” *History of Religions* 9 [1970]: 286, 293).

²⁰⁶János Bolyki, “‘Head Downwards’: The Cross of Peter in Lights of the Apocryphal Acts, of the New Testament and of the Society-transforming Claim of Early Christianity,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, 112.

²⁰⁷Richard Valantasis, “Narrative Strategies and Synoptic Quandaries: A Response to Dennis MacDonald’s Reading of *Acts of Paul* and *Acts of Peter*,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (1992): 238.

third century (c. 230).²⁰⁸ And yet he makes no mention of Peter's prolonged speech. It is uncertain whether Origen derived this from an independent tradition or from the *Acts of Peter*. There is evidence Roman executioners varied their crucifixion practices for their sadistic pleasure, so it is not intrinsically implausible Peter was crucified upside.²⁰⁹ It is possible the tradition preserves an early memory of Peter's upside-down crucifixion, but the evidence is simply inconclusive.

The Apocryphon of James

The *Apocryphon of James* is a pseudonymous text that describes the revelatory teachings of Jesus to James, the brother of the Lord, and Peter in the form of a letter to Cerinthus,²¹⁰ 550 days after his resurrection. The letter contains an "apocryphon" (secret writing) of teachings for James and Peter, but not the rest of the disciples. Unlike the four Gospels, the *Apocryphon of James* consists primarily of sayings delivered in parables and speeches. It was first discovered with other gnostic texts in the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945. It contains a direct "prophecy" that James and Peter would be crucified for their faith:

Or do you not know that you have yet to be abused and to be accused unjustly; and have yet to be shut up in prison, and condemned unlawfully, and crucified <without> reason, and buried <shamefully> as I (was) myself, by the evil one? Do you dare to spare the flesh, you for whom the Spirit is an encircling wall? If you consider how long the world existed <before> you, and how long it will exist after you, you will find that your life is one single day, and your sufferings one single hour. For the good will not enter into the world. Scorn death, therefore, and take thought for life! Remember my cross and my death, and you will live!²¹¹

James and Peter are specifically told by Jesus that they will "be shut up in prison, and condemned unlawfully, and crucified <without> reason." This passage was written

²⁰⁸Recorded by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.

²⁰⁹Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 22-26.

²¹⁰The text is illegible but it is typically taken to be Cerinthus, an early Christian heterodox teacher. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.27-28.

²¹¹Translation by Francis E. Williams in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 35.

specifically from Jesus to James and Peter, so it is likely the author was aware of their actual martyrdoms. Yet the text seems not to be based on the tradition of their martyrdoms (especially since there is no known tradition that James was crucified) but on a creedal summary of the passion and death of Jesus.²¹²

The key question involves the dating of this “prophecy.” Ron Cameron has argued that the *Apocryphon of James* should be dated between the end of the first century and the middle of the second.²¹³ He essentially argues that the sayings in the *Apocryphon of James* are early and independent from the four gospels, and in particular John. If so, this could be valuable early evidence for the martyrdom of Peter, even though there is no indication of when or where it took place. But not all scholars agree. Francis Williams concludes, “To use these criterion, however, one must decide whether they are allusions to the actual text of the Fourth Gospel, or independent discussions of the same questions.”²¹⁴ This is where the problem emerges. Philip Jenkins writes, “Supposed parallels between the *Apocryphon* and the New Testament passages are tenuous, and it really takes the eye of faith to see these resemblances: often, passages cited as parallels are describing broadly similar ideas which were commonplaces of early Christian thought and rhetoric.”²¹⁵ Rather than being an independent testimony to early Christian thought, Jenkins notes, the *Apocryphon* [and other secret texts] “could equally be seen as historical fictions which use the canonical gospels as a springboard for their speculative tales and theological discourses.”²¹⁶

²¹²Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 581.

²¹³Cameron concludes, “The *Ap. Jas.*’s freedom in the use of sayings, the role given to James and Peter as authority figures in the transmission of the tradition, and the use of the technical term for ‘remembering’ strongly suggest that the composition of this noncanonical gospel dates from the first half of the second century” (Ron Cameron, *Sayings Traditions in the Apocryphon of James*, Harvard Theological Studies 34 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004], 123-24).

²¹⁴Francis E. Williams, “The Apocryphon of James (I, 2),” in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 30.

²¹⁵Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 97-98.

²¹⁶*Ibid.*, 98.

The *Apocryphon of James* is written as a “remembrance” of the teachings of Jesus to James and Peter, which was a common technical term used in the early church to indicate the passing on of living memory from Jesus to the disciples.²¹⁷ Does this mean the *Apocryphon of James* contains early, independent sayings of Jesus? Not necessarily. Bockmuehl observes, “Here too we find an allusion to Peter’s crucifixion (5.9-20), but the document’s general tenor is to subvert the traditional appeal to any apostolic memory of Jesus by appealing instead to Gnostic teachings.”²¹⁸ It is clear the author distinguishes himself from the wider Christian community and embraces certain Gnostic beliefs.²¹⁹ While the document appeals to the living memory of Jesus, this is likely a later literary device to convince readers of its credibility rather than a genuine tradition tracing back to the historical Jesus. The claim that the letter was written to James and Peter is another literary device meant to garner credibility for the document. It is certainly curious that no early church father seems to quote from the *Apocryphon of James*. Although some would like to date the *Apocryphon of James* early, the only secure date is that it was written sometime before AD 314, when the threat of martyrdom and persecution of the church officially ended.

While the author of the *Apocryphon of James* was likely aware of Peter’s fate as a martyr, without convincing evidence for an earlier date, this text provides minimal corroboration for the martyrdom of Peter. At best, it shows that the crucifixion of Peter was assumed by both Orthodox and Gnostic circles alike by the end of the second century, at the earliest.²²⁰

²¹⁷Other early Christian writings, such as Acts 20:35, John 15:20, and *1 Clement* 13:1-2; 46:7-8 use the same technical term for “remembering,” which was used to collect, compose, and transmit traditions of and from Jesus. Papias also used it to claim that Mark “remembered” the teachings of Peter and recorded them in his gospel. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.

²¹⁸Bockmuehl, *Simon Peter*, 51.

²¹⁹The audience of the letter likely rejected the doctrine of the atonement, ignored the second coming of Christ and the general resurrection, and desired to ascend without “flesh” to heaven, which they held to be within themselves. See Williams, “The Apocryphon of James (I, 2),” 29-30.

²²⁰The Nag Hammadi texts were written in Coptic, but are clearly translations from Greek

Dionysius of Corinth

Dionysius of Corinth wrote to Roman bishop Soter around the year AD 170. While his goal was primarily pastoral, Dionysius writes to bolster the position of Corinth up against the power of Rome.²²¹ In the letter, he mentions both the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in Rome. Eusebius considers this letter confirmation that both Peter and Paul died as martyrs under the reign of Nero: “You have thus by such an admonition bound together the planting of Peter and Paul at Rome and Corinth. For both of them planted and likewise taught us in our Corinth. And they taught together in like manner in Italy, and suffered martyrdom at the same time.”²²² The claim that Peter ministered in Corinth, while possible, is not explicitly stated in the New Testament. However, while it cannot be verified, it is certainly possible Peter visited Corinth as Dionysius suggests (1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5).²²³ The statement by Dionysius does not say they ministered *at the same time*, but simply that they both “taught us in our Corinth.” Therefore, this claim is not intrinsically implausible that Peter visited and ministered in Corinth. However, the claim that both Peter and Paul founded the church at Corinth and Rome seems more like “ecclesial polemic.”²²⁴ Only Paul is mentioned as the founder (1 Cor 3:10-15). Dionysius is also mistaken about Paul founding the church at Rome. This is verified by his letter to the Romans (AD 55-58), where he explicitly states that he had not yet visited Rome,

originals. Most documents were originally written between the second and third centuries, although some may have originated in the first (e.g. *The Gospel of Thomas*). See D. M. Scholer, “Gnosis, Gnosticism,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 407-11.

²²¹Richard I. Pervo, *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 145-47.

²²²Dionysius of Corinth, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.4.

²²³Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 47. He observes that the Cephas faction (1 Cor 1:11-13) likely arose from personal contact with Peter, since this was likely the case with Paul and Apollos. Further, the church at Corinth was probably familiar with Peter since Paul mentions that Peter’s wife accompanied him on his missionary journeys (9:5).

²²⁴Perkins, *Peter*, 42.

much less been its founder (Rom 1:11-15; 15:20-29). In fairness, though, as Paul Maier writes, “Still, since both apostles were martyred very early in its history, it is understandable that they were quickly deemed honorable founders, so to speak.”²²⁵

Nevertheless, the claim that they “suffered martyrdom at the same time” is doubtful. Since Dionysius may have been mistaken in his claim about the founding of both Corinth and Rome, it is natural to question his claim about the dual martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome. This is unlikely since Peter and Paul would have been executed with different methods. Most likely Dionysius meant that they suffered martyrdom in the same *era* rather than the exact same time (moment). This is consistent with tradition and certainly more plausible. Regardless, even if Dionysius got the specific details wrong surrounding the timing of deaths, he testifies that they both died in Rome during the reign of Nero. In sum, rather than being an independent testimony for the martyrdom of Peter (and Paul), Dionysius attests to how deeply entrenched this tradition was by the middle of the second century.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus wrote his most famous work, *Against Heresies*, at the end of the second century (c. AD 180), which places it within the range of living memory of the apostle Peter. His task was to refute Gnosticism, which had become a significant competitor for the church by the late second century. Irenaeus claims to have personally listened to Polycarp, who was one of the last followers of the apostle John, as a young man in Asia. Eusebius records a letter Irenaeus wrote to Florinus:

When I was still a boy I saw you [Florinus] in Lower Asia with Polycarp, when you had high status at the imperial court and wanted to gain his favor. I remember events from those days more clearly than those that happened recently—what we learn in childhood adheres to the mind and grows with it—so that I can even picture the place where the blessed Polycarp sat and conversed, his comings and goings, his character, his personal appearance, his discourses to the crowds, and how he reported his discussions with John and others who had seen the Lord. He recalled

²²⁵Paul Maier, in Eusebius, *The Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 79 n. 29.

their very words, what they reported about the Lord and his miracles and his teachings—things that Polycarp had heard directly from eyewitnesses of the Word of life and reported in fully harmony with Scripture. I listened eagerly to these things at that time and, through God’s mercy, noted them not on paper but in my heart.²²⁶

Irenaeus indirectly supports this claim elsewhere.²²⁷

Irenaeus provides a reference to the deaths of Peter and Paul in a section committed to defending the scriptural authority of the four Gospels: “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure [death], Mark the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter.”²²⁸ Some have contested that “departure” simply means Peter and Paul left Rome, but this is unlikely.²²⁹ Like the reference in Dionysius of Corinth, it is questionable what Irenaeus meant by Peter and Paul “laying the foundations of the Church.” If he meant that they founded the church, then he is mistaken. But more likely Irenaeus, like Dionysius, meant their deaths made them honorable founders.

Irenaeus mentions the deaths (“departures”) of Peter and Paul, but he does not provide any further details surrounding their fate. He does not mention where, when, or how they died. In fact, natural deaths for both of them would be consistent with the statement in Irenaeus. However, given the strength of the tradition at this time concerning

²²⁶Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.20

²²⁷Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1, Irenaeus says, “We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, but the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith” (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1). He goes on to explain that Mark was the interpreter of Peter, Luke was an associate of Paul who recorded Paul’s experience in his Gospel, and how John, also a disciple of the Lord, published a gospel while in Ephesus in Asia.

²²⁸Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

²²⁹As Bauckham observed, there was sufficient precedent for the term “departure” to mean death in early Christian documents. In response to the claim that “departure” could simply mean leaving, Bauckham concludes, “Since not even later traditions provide the possibility of a time, which Irenaeus could have had in mind, when both Peter and Paul had been in Rome but had left, we must conclude that he meant to refer to their deaths” (Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter,” 585-86).

the preaching and martyrdom of Peter in Rome, it seems most likely that Irenaeus was well aware of the accounts and felt it unnecessary to repeat.

Tertullian

Tertullian wrote *The Prescriptions against Heretics* and *Scorpiace* around the turn of the third century (c. AD 208). He is the last writer that that will be considered, even though he comes right after the close of the living memory. In *The Prescriptions Against Heretics* 36, Tertullian explicitly mentions that Peter was crucified like Jesus: “How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! Where Peter endures a passion like his Lord’s! Where Paul wins his crown in a death like John’s [the Baptist] where the apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and then remitted to his island-exile!”²³⁰ It is true that this statement must be received with caution, especially since it occurs in the incredible story that John was plunged into boiling oil and emerged unhurt.²³¹ Nevertheless, Tertullian is even more specific in *Scorpiace* 15, where he states, like the *Ascension of Isaiah*, that the martyrdoms of Peter (and Paul) took place under Nero: “And if a heretic wishes his confidence to rest upon a public record, the archives of the empire will speak, as would the stones of Jerusalem. We read the lives of the Caesars: At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood the rising faith. Then is Peter girt by another, when he is made fast to the cross.”²³² Tertullian is so confident of his claims that he tells his doubters to examine “the archives of the empire.” If there were no such public records, Tertullian would have automatically undermined his credibility. His appeal to them indicates his confidence that they existed and would corroborate his testimony, if examined.

²³⁰Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 36, as cited in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, Ant-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 3 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 260.

²³¹O’Connor, *Peter in Rome*, 87; Cullman, *Peter*, 117.

²³²Tertullian clearly understands John 21:18 to be referring to the crucifixion of Peter.

Therefore, Tertullian was likely relying upon even earlier public records about the Neronian persecution and the fates of Peter and Paul.

Conclusion

The traditional view that Peter was crucified during the reign of Nero between AD 64-67 has been carefully analyzed. Additional later material that further confirms this tradition will not be analyzed in depth for this analysis has focused on the period of living memory.²³³

This close examination of the evidence indicates that the following points can be regarded to have varying degrees of confidence from works written within the living memory of Peter (until c. AD 200).

1. The martyrdom of Peter—the highest possible probability (John 21:18-19; *1 Clement* 5:4-5; Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 3.1-2, *Letter to the Romans* 4.3; *Apocalypse of Peter* 14.4; *Ascension of Isaiah* 4:2-3; the *Acts of Peter*; Dionysius of Corinth, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25; Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 15). The lack of any competing narrative weighs favorably for the traditional view. The early and persistent tradition is that Peter was martyred for his faith).
2. The crucifixion of Peter—*very probably true* (John 21:18-19; Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 15).
3. Peter was in Rome—*very probably true* (1 Pet 5:13; 2 Pet 1:12-15; *Apocalypse of Peter* 14.4; *Ascension of Isaiah* 4:2-3; Ignatius *Letter to the Romans* 4.3; Dionysius of Corinth, Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25; Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1; *Acts of Peter*; Tertullian *Scorpiace* 15).
4. Martyrdom during the reign of Nero between AD 64-67—*more probable than not* (*Ascension of Isaiah* 4:2-3; *Apocalypse of Peter* 14.4; Tertullian *Scorpiace* 15).

As seen, the individual components of the traditional view regarding the fate of Peter have varying degrees of historical probability. Yet when all the evidence is considered, the traditional view that Peter was crucified during the reign of Nero stands on solid historical ground.

²³³For instance, see the *Muratorian Canon* (c. AD 200; *Teachings of the Apostles* (c. third century); (Pseudo) Hippolytus 1; *Letter of Clement to James* (fourth century); Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (c. AD 313); Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1 (c. AD 324); Aphrahat, *Demonstration XXI: Of Persecution* (§ 23); Macarius Magus III.22 (early fourth century) Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 1 (c. 392).

CHAPTER 7

THE MARTYRDOM OF PAUL

Next to Jesus, the apostle Paul is the premier figure at the beginning of Christianity. His influence has been so vast some have suggested he is the true founder of Christianity.¹ Paul was born in the city of Tarsus and trained since his youth at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), a highly honored teacher of the Torah who was a member of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34-39).² Luke tells that Paul was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28),³ which would have given him boldness in his mission and ensured him proper juridical process.⁴

There is little doubt about Paul's Pharisaic Jewish roots, which was the lens through which Paul understood his newfound Christian faith.⁵ In his letter to the

¹William Wrede, *Paul* (London: Philip Green, 1907). Paul Barnett has responded in depth to this charge, finding it lacking in evidence. Barnett concludes, "While the giants of NT scholarship erected a wall separating Paul from Jesus, it may be observed that equally capable but for the most part less famous historians have demolished it" (Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 22). Furthermore, those at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem agree that Paul faithfully represents the message of Jesus (Acts 15; Gal 2:1-10).

²Many scholars question whether Paul truly studied personally with Gamaliel. Even if Luke overstates Paul's connection to Gamaliel, Paul still would have been deeply influenced by Gamaliel since he influenced the practice of every Pharisee. See Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 35.

³Some scholars have vigorously opposed the reliability of Paul's claim to citizenship. See Calvin Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 19-22. Yet Rainer Riesner demonstrates "that the question has by no means been decided negatively" (Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission, Strategy, Theology*, trans. Doug Stott [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 147-54). For an in-depth defense of the citizenship of Paul, see Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, ed. Bruce W. Winter [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 71-112).

⁴Harry W. Tajra, *The Martyrdom of St. Paul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 1-4.

⁵Alan Segal has argued that although Paul's conversion to Christianity was the most dramatic event in his life, he continued to demonstrate religious truth and understand Scripture through a Pharisaic lens. Paul maintained his Pharisaic training and brought it to good use in his new religious community. See Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

Philippians, he wrote, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee” (Phil 3:4b-5). While Paul spent his earliest years in a thoroughly Hellenistic city of the diaspora, he was clearly shaped by his family and synagogue with the utmost devotion to the Jewish faith. Udo Schnelle sums up the seminal details of Paul’s background:

Paul was a citizen of the Roman Empire who had grown up in significant metropolis of the realm, had disciplined himself in an intensive Pharisaic education (possibly in Jerusalem), and had worked for about three decades in a province of the empire where Hellenistic culture prevailed. He was thus no wanderer between different cultural worlds; he united in himself—like Philo and Josephus—the cultures of Hellenistic Judaism and Greco-Roman Hellenism.⁶

Paul often stressed two priorities of his ministry. First, his mission was to evangelize gentiles (Rom 11:13; Gal 1:16; 2:7). Second, Paul aimed to plant new churches rather than build on the foundations laid by another (Rom 15:20; 1 Cor 3:6; 4:15; Gal 4:19).⁷ And yet before his missionary endeavors, Paul was a fierce persecutor of the early Christian church. Both Luke (7:58-8:3; 9:1) and Paul (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6) report these persecutions similarly, which provides little reason to doubt their veracity. And yet because of a personal appearance of the risen Jesus⁸ (Acts 9:1-19; 22:4-21; 26:12-18), the former persecutor became the church’s foremost preacher and defender of the faith (1 Cor 15:8-11; Gal 1:11-16).

Paul took at least three missionary journeys throughout his life beginning in Arabia (2 Cor 11:32-33; cf. Acts 9:19-25).⁹ His trips included Cyprus and southern Asia

⁶Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 81.

⁷Klaus Haacker, “Paul’s Life” in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 27.

⁸Dunn rightly emphasizes that Paul was not merely commissioned as an apostle by Christ, but by the *risen* Christ. In 1 Cor 9:1, Paul asks, “Am I not an apostle. Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” And in 1 Cor 15:8, Paul says, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 2:531-32).

⁹For an in-depth analysis of Paul’s missionary understanding, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 2:931-82.

Minor (Acts 13-14), Macedonia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth (Phil 4:15ff; 1 Thess 2:2; Acts 16-18), Antioch, Greece and Ephesus (Gal 2:11; Acts 18:18-20:38), and Rome via Jerusalem (Acts 21-28:31). Paul certainly intended to visit Spain¹⁰ (Rom 15:24, 28), and some believe he evangelized Britain.¹¹

When he was first called as an apostle, Paul was told he would suffer deeply for Christ (Acts 9:16), which he came to see as proof of his apostleship and devotion to God (Gal 6:17; 2 Cor 6:4-10; 11:16-33), as well as his imitation of Christ (1 Thess 1:6). Paul recounts his suffering firsthand:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor 11:24-28)

This list of sufferings would not have been persuasive to Paul's audience unless it at least closely resembled his actual experience.¹² And yet, Paul was also stoned, beaten, and left for dead (Acts 14:19). He was attacked by crowds and dragged before magistrates (Acts

¹⁰Scholars are sharply divided over whether Paul made it to Spain or not. The question of Paul's missionary journey to Spain depends upon the reliability of the extra-biblical references. Jürgen Becker believes the accounts in *1 Clement* 5:7 and the Canon Muratori 38 are likely inferred from Rom 15:24, 28 and thus provide no historical evidence for a stay in Spain. In contrast, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor claims that Peter did in fact go to Spain. It would have been fitting for his character, says O'Connor, and the sea journey would not have been prohibitive. However, O'Connor considers Paul's journey to Spain unsuccessful, which is why Paul returned quickly after a mere summer. He believes the entire trip can be accounted for without chronological difficulty in the summer of AD 62. Regardless of whether Paul made it to Spain or not, there is general agreement that Paul met his fate in Rome, which is key for establishing the traditional account of his martyrdom. For an analysis of the evidence for a Spanish mission, see Otto F. A. Meinardus, "Paul's Missionary Journey to Spain: Tradition and Folklore," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 41 (1978): 61-63. See Jürgen Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville: John Knox, 1993); and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: His Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 220.

¹¹See George F. Jowett, *The Drama of the Lost Disciples* (Bishop Auckland, England: Covenant 2004), 182-97. In contrast, John Pollock claims there is not a shred of reliable evidence for Paul's landing in Britain. See John Pollock, *The Apostle: A Life of Paul* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2012), 288.

¹²Stephen C. Barton, "Paul as Missionary and Pastor," in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, 40.

16:19-24). He was constantly in prison¹³ (2 Cor 6:4-5; Col 4:3; Eph 3:1; Philemon 1; Acts 21:33). In spite of these sufferings, he persisted in proclaiming the gospel, expecting the same mistreatment wherever he went (Acts 20:23). Sacrificing the pleasures of this life to advance the gospel, he was unswayed by the difficulty of the task before him (Rom 1:14-16). After listing the suffering and persecution Paul endured, Jürgen Becker concludes, “Yet whatever details we may quote, and however we may take into account the meagerness of our tradition from this period, there can be no doubt that the apostle was subjected to conspicuously frequent and especially severe persecutions.”¹⁴

How could Paul so boldly proclaim the gospel amidst such severe persecution and the possibility of death? The answer lies in his belief that the risen Jesus, whom he claimed to have personally seen, had already defeated death (1 Cor 15:55-56). Calvin Roetzel explains, “Moreover, for Paul as for the later apocryphal writers, the terror of the death of Jesus and the martyrs was neutralized by the belief in the resurrection.”¹⁵ Later Christian martyrs suffered and died for the belief that they would be resurrected like Jesus. But their confidence in the truth of the resurrection reports came *secondhand* from the testimony of others. Paul, on the other hand, had seen the risen Jesus *firsthand*. He was an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ and suffered willingly for what he firmly believed to be true (1 Cor 15: 8; 9:1; Acts 9:1-6). Paul was convinced that Jesus had appeared to him after rising from the dead and he willingly endangered himself for the sake of the gospel. Even if he were to experience the same fate as Jesus, Paul believed he too would experience the power of the resurrection (Phil 3:7-11). Paul was not lying about his belief in the risen Jesus. His suffering and willingness to face death show he really believed it.

¹³For a detailed description of what Paul experienced in his various imprisonments, see Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 195-368.

¹⁴Becker, *Paul*, 170.

¹⁵Roetzel, *Paul*, 175.

The Historical Question

The traditional view is that Paul was beheaded in Rome sometime between AD 62-68 during the latter part of the reign of Nero (AD 54-68). Scholars disagree significantly over the validity of this tradition. Allan Dwight Callahan suggests that the traditional view is “not a credible one.”¹⁶ According to A. N. Wilson, “. . . there is certainly no hard evidence that Paul died the death of a martyr.”¹⁷ Rather, he suggests Paul died in the west while missionizing Spain. On the other hand, John McRay argues that “there is little doubt that he [Paul] died under Nero’s reign in A.D. 67 or 68.”¹⁸ Church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette agrees: “The fact of eventual martyrdom in Rome seems to be well established.”¹⁹ The only way to properly evaluate the traditional view for the martyrdom of Paul is to consider the merits of each individual piece of evidence as well as the overall strength of the case. As with the case for the martyrdom of Peter, it is important to remember that this is entirely a historical question that is a matter of probability, not certainty. The Bible does not state the death of Paul directly, since all the writings cover earlier material.²⁰ But there are some strong biblical hints that Paul viewed his death as imminent, and there is a consistent extra-biblical tradition that can help determine the likelihood of Paul’s martyrdom in Rome.

Similar to the case of Peter, this investigation focuses on the literary evidence. Ernst Dassmann concludes, “Historically assured traces left behind by Paul in the places

¹⁶Allan Dwight Callahan, “Dead Paul: The Apostle as Martyr in Philippi,” in *Philippi at the Time of Paul and after His Death*, ed. Charalambos Bakirtzis (Eugene: OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 84.

¹⁷A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 249.

¹⁸John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 257.

¹⁹Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 74.

²⁰It is true that a majority of scholars accept the seven undisputed letters of Paul and believe that some of the letters, such as the Pastoral Epistles, were written after his death. But even if these letters are pseudepigraphical and written at the beginning of the second century, they still attempt to cover material from within the lifetime of Paul. It would make no sense for a pseudepigraphical author to include concrete evidence for Paul’s death when it claims to be written by Paul himself!

where he lived and worked are always scarce and, in many cases, decidedly rare.”²¹ Most archaeological sources for the death of Paul are late and dependent upon literary evidence and tradition rather than providing independent historical support of their own. The lack of early archaeological findings for the martyrdom of Paul does not discount the tradition, but of course it cannot provide significant corroboration either.

And as with the case of Peter, this investigation focuses on what Markus Bockmuehl has dubbed “the living memory.” Emphasis is placed on the testimony of writers from the first two centuries since this would be the prime time for shared tradition and cultural memory to be transmitted regarding the life and death of Paul.

For Paul, this would involve three generations:

1. Paul and his contemporary associates, assumedly dead by roughly AD 70.
2. The direct followers of the apostle Paul, the last of which died by about AD 135.
3. The second generation followers of the apostles who would have died by about AD 200.

As with Peter, this investigation focuses on the evidence for the martyrdom of Paul within this timeframe.

Paul in Rome

The traditional view has Paul dying as a martyr, specifically in Rome. While the particular location is technically not critical for demonstrating Paul’s death as a martyr, it is important to consider the evidence for his Roman occupation since it is so central to the traditional account and it provides the link to Nero. Unlike the case for Peter being in Rome, there is little scholarly debate regarding Paul. Nevertheless, Dwight Callahan doubts Paul’s Roman journey and suggests he may have died in Philippi in fatal imprisonment.²² However, even if Callahan is right then Paul *still died as a martyr*, which

²¹Ernst Dassmann, “Archaeological Traces of Early Christian Veneration of Paul,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, ed. William S. Babcock (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 282.

²²Callahan, “Dead Paul,” 76.

is the critical piece for establishing the sincerity of his convictions. But as will be demonstrated, the traditional view that Paul made it to Rome is firmly established.²³

Philippians

A case can be made that all the prison epistles were written in Rome.²⁴ Nevertheless, of the undisputed letters of Paul, Philippians provides the strongest case, so that is the focus. Little doubt has been raised regarding Paul's authorship of this letter, which was written from prison (1:7, 13, 14, 17). From the second century Marcionite prologue²⁵ until the eighteenth century it was considered an established fact that Paul composed Philippians from Rome.²⁶ Nevertheless, Corinth, Caesarea, and Ephesus have more recently been suggested as the place from which Paul wrote Philippians.

In *Paul in Chains*, Richard Cassidy offers five internal clues on behalf of Roman authorship. According to Cassidy, it is the cumulative weight of the five references that is decisive.²⁷ First, in Philippians 1:13, Paul refers to “the whole imperial (*praitōriō*) guard.” This reference is best understood in terms of a Roman imprisonment.²⁸ Some have disagreed and appealed to the presence of a *praetorianus* in the city of Ephesus. However,

²³William Babcock makes an important observation regarding the tradition of Paul: “Outside of Rome and western areas dependent on Rome, Paul seems to never have become one of the saints who served as foci of Christian devotion or as patrons of the believer's approach to the divine.” The claim that Paul died in Rome finds continual support from later traditions that consistently connect him to Rome. And there are no traditions connecting him elsewhere. See William S. Babcock, “Introduction,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, xxv.

²⁴See Tajra, *The Martyrdom of Paul*, 51-72.

²⁵In some of the earliest surviving Latin manuscripts for the book of Philippians, Marcion, or some other early Christian scribe, wrote the following preface: “The Apostle praises them, writing to them from Rome, from prison, by Epaphroditus.” This is the earliest external evidence that Philippians was written from Rome. Nevertheless, the origin of the preface is unknown so its historical value is tentative. At best, it traces the tradition back to the second century, which is far earlier than any other tradition.

²⁶Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), xl.

²⁷Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroads, 2001), 126-35.

²⁸Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 367.

as F. F. Bruce observes, “There is no known instance in imperial times of its use for the headquarters of a proconsul, the governor of a senatorial province such as Asia was at this time.”²⁹

Paul’s second phrase, “and to all the rest,” makes it clear he is speaking of people who are learning that his chains are for Christ. Essentially, Paul is saying that his imprisonment for the sake of Christ is becoming known among the imperial guard as the reason for his arrest. Paul clearly wants the Philippians not to be disheartened and to rejoice at the significance of his witness. Cassidy writes, “But it is difficult to imagine that Paul would have expressed such marked satisfaction if it were only in circumscribed setting of Caesarea (with its relatively small number of Roman soldiers and other personnel) that his testimony to Christ was becoming known.”³⁰

The third evidence for Roman authorship is Paul’s reference to “Caesar’s household” as part of his final greeting (4:22). Typically this is taken to refer not merely to members of Caesar’s family and home, but to mean the entire cohort of slaves and freedmen that are staffed for imperial service.³¹ There was a higher number of Caesar’s staff in Rome than any other provincial city. Cassidy concludes, “At a location where large numbers of the imperial household are concentrated, it is not difficult to imagine that there would be a significant number of Christians within their midst.”³²

Fourth, the qualifier for the final greeting “especially” (*malista*) is significant considering the judicial surroundings Paul was facing. Cassidy continues, “Here the point

²⁹F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 11. Bruce goes on to explain that evidence for the existence of a *praetorianus* in Ephesus during this time is irrelevant: “The *praetorianus* mentioned in the three Latin inscriptions was a former member of the praetorian guard who later discharged police duties as a *stationarius* on a Roman road in the province of Asia.” *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 127.

³¹P. T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 554.

³²Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 128.

to be adverted to is that Paul is in a setting where he faces a verdict by the highest imperial tribunal. The person of the emperor now looms large in Paul's situation. Because this is so, Paul finds it useful to convey to his readers greetings *especially* from those of Caesar's immediate household."³³ Paul's judicial setting in Philippians seems to indicate the letter was written from imprisonment in Rome.³⁴

Fifth, a Roman imprisonment of Paul makes the most sense of Philippians 1:14-18. Paul wrote Romans with the intention of visiting Rome and then travelling to Spain (Rom 15:24, 28). Paul did visit Rome, but in chains awaiting trial for capital charges.³⁵ Rather than being ashamed of his chains, he took the opportunity to boldly proclaim Christ to the entire imperial guard (Phil 1:12-14). Even though a few Christians opposed him, most Christians responded favorably to Paul, realizing his chains were a part of the witness God had given him. Cassidy concludes, "Absent the recognition that Paul is writing to the Philippians from stressful circumstances in Rome, this passage remains a conundrum."³⁶

One prominent objection to a Roman authorship is Paul's earlier desire to go to Spain (Rom 15:24, 29), whereas in Philippians he expresses his desire to visit Philippi shortly (Phil 1:25-27). The most likely scenario is simply that Paul changed his mind. His travel plans were clearly in flux and responsive to divine guidance (e.g. Acts 16:6-10).³⁷

³³Ibid., 128-29.

³⁴Cassidy observes that Paul was "almost certainly" facing the charge of treason (*maiestas*), which carried a capital punishment. Ibid., 55-63. He further demonstrates that Paul envisions a lengthy imprisonment in Philippians and imagines a death sentence as a possible outcome of his judicial proceedings. Ibid., 130-31. If this lengthy imprisonment were in Ephesus, it would demand explanation why Acts is silent about this.

³⁵There is no evidence Paul faced capital charges in Ephesus. See Morna Hooker, "Philippians," in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, 106.

³⁶Ibid., 135.

³⁷Gordon Fee observes, "There is every imaginable difference between what Paul hoped to do when speaking as a free man some three or four years before our letter and what he now plans to do at the end of a long and trying imprisonment" (Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. Grant R. Osborne [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999], 34).

Perhaps the most common objection against Roman authorship is the distance between Philippi and Rome. While multiple correspondences are necessary between Paul's imprisonment and Philippi, there is likely plenty of time for all the necessary journeys.³⁸

Thus, Silva concludes that the traditional view of Roman authorship is most likely because it "fits the data at least as well as competing views, and it has the added (though admittedly weak) advantage of being supported by early tradition . . . we are left without a reason to abandon the traditional view."³⁹ While Paul most likely wrote Philippians from Rome, given the significant amount of scholarly disagreement as well as the additional arguments that can be fostered for a variety of locations,⁴⁰ Roman authorship of Philippians must be held tentatively. Thus, the likely authorship of Philippians provides only slight corroborative evidence for a Roman journey by Paul.

Second Timothy

The evidence from 2 Timothy is much more conclusive because Paul refers directly to his imprisonment in Rome: "May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me" (1:16-17; 2:9). Based on this passage, Donald Guthrie concludes it is "a reasonable deduction that Paul is at the time of writing in Rome. It is at least certain that he has already been in Rome and equally certain that he is now a prisoner."⁴¹ The difficulty arises as to how to place this imprisonment in the life of Paul. But the problem can be solved if Paul was released from

³⁸Bruce, *Philippians*, 16.

³⁹Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 7.

⁴⁰For a recent survey of the evidence for and against the various imprisonment options (Rome, Caesarea, Corinth, Ephesus), see Hawthorne, *Philippians*, xl-l.

⁴¹Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 23.

his first imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28; Phil 1:18-19; 24-26: 2:24)⁴² and then later faced a more severe imprisonment in Rome where he expected imminent death (cf. 2 Tim 1:16-17; 2:9; 4:6-8, 16-18).

It may be objected that 2 Timothy is pseudepigraphical, and thus the reference to Rome is unreliable.⁴³ However, as Jerome Murphy-O'Connor has observed, for the Pastorals to win acceptance by the early church "there must have been a very solid link with Pauline circles."⁴⁴ In other words, even if Paul is not the author of the Pastorals (including 2 Timothy), it must have come from a group intimately connected to the apostle Paul. Therefore, whether pseudepigraphical or not, 2 Timothy provides a strong link to an early tradition that favors Paul's Roman occupation.

Acts

Perhaps the strongest piece of evidence for Paul in Rome is found in Acts. Near the end of the book Paul says, "I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans" (Acts 28:17b). The climax of the book of Acts is that Paul has arrived in Rome and was able to preach there: "He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcome all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31). Most scholars today date Acts between 70 and 85, with some into the 90s. Even at the latest reasonable date, Acts would still be within the living memory of eyewitnesses who could easily disconfirm a Pauline hiatus in Rome. The lack of any

⁴²See Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 3-5.

⁴³Some more radical scholars have suggested that the author of the Pastoral Epistles made up the historical allusions to give the letters some degree of credibility. Thus, historical allusions are merely fiction. But, as Guthrie has observed, allusions in the Pastorals as well as the historical references have a sense of realism that is not accounted for on the fictional model, which is why many who take the fictional approach admit there is still a historical core. See Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 28.

⁴⁴Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 357.

early competing narrative for the demise of Paul elsewhere speaks strongly in favor of the traditional view that he was imprisoned in Rome.⁴⁵

It cannot be objected that Rome is a mere add-on to the end of Acts. Acts 19:21 says, “After I have been there [Macedonia, Achaia, and Jerusalem], I must also go to Rome.” Furthermore, the whole purpose of the book of Acts is to record the spread of the gospel to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In comparison with rural Galilee, Rome was considered “the ends of the earth.”⁴⁶ Rome is not meant as an end in itself, but as representative of the entire world. The mission continues as Acts ends. C. K. Barrett captures the point of the reference: “If the Gospel can be preached and the church established in Rome there is no limit to their possible extension.”⁴⁷

One way to escape the reality of Paul’s trip to Rome is to consider Acts an ancient novel void of historical truth.⁴⁸ Although this approach does offer some fruitful literary insights, it should be rejected as the genre of Acts.⁴⁹ For one thing, most novels used fictitious characters, and when they used real historical figures, they had little knowledge about actual events in the figure’s life. On the other hand, Acts is filled with demonstrable historical events and characters.⁵⁰ Rather than fictional, Acts is best

⁴⁵The Alexandrian and Western texts of Acts do vary in significant details regarding Paul’s trip to Rome. But most significantly, they both agree that Paul ended up in Rome. For a comparison, see *Ibid.*, 351-54.

⁴⁶Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary on the Book of Acts*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 677.

⁴⁷C. K. Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary, vol. 1 (New York: T & T Clark, 1994), 80.

⁴⁸Burton Mack, for instance, suggests that the origin of Christianity can be accounted for in terms of mythmaking. Mack argues that after the temple was destroyed in AD 70, Christians had the opportunity to recast the ancient Jewish faith in their favor. Thus, in the late first century, the myth of Jesus swept through many Christian communities and fully took hold in the middle of the second century. See Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament: The Making of the Christian Myth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 11-15.

⁴⁹Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:62.

⁵⁰C. K. Barrett, “The Historicity of Acts,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 52 (1999): 515-34; and Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

understood as an ancient historiographical work, similar in many ways to other ancient histories of the time.⁵¹ Barring new arguments undermining the historical nature of Acts, the majority view that Acts is an historical text provides sufficient evidence that Paul was in Rome.

Extra-Biblical Evidence

Along with the biblical testimony there is early, unanimous evidence from the church fathers that Paul was in Rome.⁵² The first reference is in *1 Clement* 6:1 (c. AD 95-96). Regarding this passage, Glenn Snyder right concludes, “Whatever else may be inferred, we learn that within a generation of his death, Paul was well remembered in Rome.⁵³ Similar testimony can be found in writings of Ignatius (*The Letter to the Romans* 4:1-3) and Tertullian (*Scorpiace* 15:4-6). The *Acts of Paul* also indicates Paul journeyed to Rome. The details, however, vary significantly from the canonical Acts. They have different points of departure and land at different places. Yet this likely indicates they provide independent testimonies to Paul’s voyage to Rome: “The total lack of correspondence between these two depictions of Paul’s voyage to Rome indicates that they are independent accounts.”⁵⁴

⁵¹Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 24-39.

⁵²There is an ancient tradition that suggests Paul met with the Spanish Stoic philosopher Seneca in Rome. Some even claim they met regularly and were close associates. Some believe he then left Rome, partly on the desire of Seneca that Paul preach in Seneca’s home. Although Jerome mentions Seneca’s correspondence with Paul, the earliest manuscripts of the apocryphal letters back and for the between them appear first in the seventh century. There is nothing, however, in the writings of Seneca to indicate he ever met Paul. Thus, while the relationship between Paul and Seneca is certainly possible, it is more likely the result of later Christian legend arising in the fourth century. See Otto F. A. Meinardus, *St. Paul’s Last Journey* (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas Brothers, 1979), 116-24.

⁵³Glenn E. Snyder, *Acts of Paul: Formation of a Pauline Corpus*, ed. Jörg Frey (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 26.

⁵⁴Peter Wallace Dunn, “The *Acts of Paul* and the Pauline Legacy in the Second Century” (Ph.D. diss., Queens College, 1996), 32.

In conclusion, Paul's journey to Rome is firmly established because of the reference in 2 Timothy 1:16-17, the historical account in Acts 28:11-31, the likely authorship of Philippians (and other prison epistles) in Rome, and the early and unanimous tradition from the apostolic fathers. The lack of any competing site for his final imprisonment means there is no good reason to doubt Paul was imprisoned in Rome as the traditional account renders.

Evidence for the Martyrdom of Paul

Scriptural Evidence

Even though Paul suffered deeply and considered his own death a reality (e.g. 2 Cor 5:1-10),⁵⁵ the New Testament does not directly state the martyrdom of Paul. This is to be expected since all the books cover material from before his death.⁵⁶ Yet there are some strong hints that foreshadow his martyrdom in the book of Acts and instances in the Pastoral letters where Paul strongly viewed his death as imminent.

Second Timothy 4:6-8. The majority of scholars consider 2 Timothy pseudepigraphical and written sometime between AD 90-110. If this late dating were correct, it would not undermine the principal argument made here. Even if 2 Timothy is not genuinely Pauline, the text shows what his close followers and disciples viewed about his death one generation removed. In fact, if it is pseudepigraphical, then the author(s) would have written 2 Timothy with awareness that Paul had died, since the letter is typically considered Paul's final will and testament.

Second Timothy portrays Paul in a Roman prison for preaching the risen Christ

⁵⁵In this passage, "tent" refers to the human body and "is destroyed" is a reference to death. Paul knows death is looming, but he explains why he stays focused and motivated on preaching the gospel amidst his suffering and possibly imminent death. Paul believes in the risen Lord and can therefore face death confidently. See David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 29 (Nashville: Broadman Holman, 1999), 248-53.

⁵⁶The one possible exception is the two witnesses who will give their testimony and then be conquered and killed by the beast (Rev 11:3, 7-8). However, scholars have almost universally rejected the idea that the two witnesses are Peter and Paul.

(1:11, 12; 2:8, 9). He has already undergone an initial hearing (4:16-18), and he firmly anticipates his own death (4:6-8). He writes to Timothy to offer instruction, admonition, and encouragement. Paul includes many details in the letter regarding changes he hopes to see in the life and ministry of Timothy, which reveals an underlying concern that he may never see him again.⁵⁷ In anticipation of his own death at the hands of authorities, Paul encourages Timothy to come to him quickly (4:9).

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul considered that his imprisonment could end in death (Phil 1:20-24; 2:17, 23). But in 2 Timothy he has a sense of urgency:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Tim 4:6-8)

This passage is regarded as one of the most explicit references in the New Testament to Paul's looming martyrdom.⁵⁸ Paul expects his imprisonment will end in death (v. 6), he recognizes he has stayed faithful in his ministry, which is coming to an end (v. 7), and he anticipates his final heavenly reward (v. 8).

Paul uses two metaphors that indicate he views his death as imminent. First, he says he is "already being poured out as a drink offering" (v. 6). In ancient sacrificial systems a liquid, such as oil or wine, was often poured out in sacrifice or consecration.⁵⁹ In the Old Testament, the sacrifice of animals involved the pouring out of blood in a similar manner (Lev 16:15-20). Paul is undoubtedly thinking about his own blood being poured out as a sacrifice for the sake of the gospel.⁶⁰ Ignatius used the same metaphor to

⁵⁷Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: His Story*, 232.

⁵⁸David L. Eastman, *Paul the Martyr: The Cult of the Apostle in the Latin West* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 141.

⁵⁹Homer *Odyssey* 12.363; Plutarch *Obsolescence of Oracles* 49; Num 15:5, 7, 10; 2 Sam 23:16-17; Ps 16:4.

⁶⁰George T. Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 195. See also Philo *Flaccus* 190.

indicate his looming martyrdom.⁶¹ Paul is similarly prepared for his blood to be spilt as a martyr. Second, Paul says, “the time of my departure has come.” A “departure” is often used of a soldier who breaks camp or a sailor who unties a ship from its moorings, and it is also a known euphemism for death.⁶² Paul knows he is about to cut ties with this world and enter eternity with Christ. His death is on the horizon.

With his impending death in mind, Paul says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” He says this not to brag, but to encourage Timothy, who will also likely face suffering as Paul did (2 Tim 2:3; 3:12; 4:5). Timothy is encouraged to struggle for the gospel and to suffer as Paul did (cf. 1 Tim 4:10). Paul’s “fight” has brought him to imprisonment in Rome, and now he awaits execution. Yet he has stayed true to his mission and he is calling Timothy, and other future believers, to follow his example amidst doctrinal error, godlessness, suffering, and even the prospect of martyrdom.

Lastly, Paul anticipates the “crown” that awaits him for his life of faithful service (cf. Jas 1:12; Rev 2:10; 1 Pet 5:4). His crown is secured; it just awaits him to receive it.⁶³ Even though Paul is unjustly sentenced to death, he will be declared righteous by the true judge—Christ. He is prepared to depart this world and enter the next. Paul does not fear death, but views it as the climax of his ministry, the consummation of his apostolic calling. Paul has faithfully followed Jesus throughout his whole ministry, and now his faithfulness will extend to his dying for the Lord’s sake.

In conclusion, 2 Timothy does not explicitly state the martyrdom of Paul. This of course would make no sense in a letter attributed to him. But it does clearly indicate that Paul believed his death was imminent as he compared himself to a libation and said

⁶¹Ignatius *Letter to the Romans* 2:2.

⁶²William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 578.

⁶³Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, 196.

he was prepared to depart this world. He was imprisoned and prepared to die as a martyr for the sake of the gospel. Ironically for the conservative position, if 2 Timothy is pseudepigraphical, it *strengthens* the reference to his death since the author would have known about his fate and would have been bound by the known tradition of the time and incapable of fabricating an account of his impending death. Regardless, 2 Timothy 4:6-8 sets the stage for the expectation that Paul would be executed in Rome.

Acts. Although the narrative of Acts ends before Paul dies, it includes hints of the apostle's fate. A large number of English-speaking commentators (probably the majority) hold that the author of Acts was a traveling companion of Paul. So, he would have known about Paul's experiences of persecution.⁶⁴ Paul is willing to die in Jerusalem for the sake of Christ (Acts 19:13). A comparison of Acts 19:21 text with Luke 9:51, indicates that Luke believes Paul travels through Jerusalem on the way to martyrdom.⁶⁵ Stephen was charged in Jerusalem with defaming the temple and law (Acts 6:13). A similar charge is raised against Paul in Jerusalem (21:28). While these are probably trumped up charges to condemn Paul,⁶⁶ he does incite animosity and opposition similar to what brought about the martyrdom of Stephen (v. 30), and is only saved by Roman troops.⁶⁷ In Acts 20, Paul gathers the Ephesian elders at Miletus and warns them to be alert because "wolves" will bring heresy into the flock once he is gone (20:29). After explaining the uncertainty of what will happen to him in Jerusalem, except suffering and imprisonment (20:23), they weep because "they would not see his face again" (20:38). Luke also structures Paul's arrest and imprisonment in Acts after the account of Jesus in his Gospel,⁶⁸ which indicates they will both face a similar fate.⁶⁹ David Eastman explains,

⁶⁴Keener, *Acts*, 1:407.

⁶⁵Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 360.

⁶⁶C. K. Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (New York: T & T Clark Ltd, 2004), 1020.

⁶⁷Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 656.

⁶⁸Richard Longenecker notes that Luke structures his account of Paul's journey to Jerusalem

Both Jesus and Paul go to Jerusalem despite a triple prediction that they will suffer there. Both receive a warm welcome and subsequently enter the temple, where they are seized. Both then endure a series of four trials, during which they are handed over to Gentiles, slapped, declared innocent three times, and subjected to a mob's cry of "Away with him." They submit themselves to God's will and are treated kindly or praised by a Roman centurion (Luke 9:51-23:47; Acts 20:1-27:43). By the end of the accounts, both have fulfilled the preaching ministry given to them. It is striking that Luke does not complete the parallel by recounting the death of Paul. Nonetheless, an audience familiar with Jesus' fate in Luke's Gospel might infer that Paul was headed down a similar road in Acts.⁷⁰

If Luke anticipates the fate of Paul throughout Acts, and Acts was written after Paul's death (as most scholars agree), then why does Acts end with his imprisonment? Why does Luke not recount the fate of Paul? Scholars have ventured a number of possibilities.⁷¹ Yet perhaps the most promising answer lies in considering the purpose for

on five similar terms that roughly parallel those of Jesus: "(1) a similar plot by the Jews; (2) a handing over to the Gentiles (cf. v. 11); (3) a triple prediction on the way of coming suffering (cf. 20:22-24; 21:4, 10-11; see also Luke 9:22, 44; 18:31-34); (4) a steadfast resolution (cf. v. 13); and (5) a holy resignation to God's will (cf. v. 14). As Luke has reserved for Paul the mission to the Gentiles, which Jesus saw as inherent in the Servant theology of Isaiah 61 (cf. Luke 4:16-21; see comments at introduction to Part II: The Christian Mission to the Gentile World), so he describes Paul's journey to Jerusalem in terms reminiscent of the Suffering Servant" (Richard Longenecker, *Acts*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. J. D. Douglas and Frank E. Gaebelin [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 515).

⁶⁹Such comparisons should be held with a degree of caution. Joseph Fitzmyer questions if the comparisons really exist in Luke-Acts or whether they are a product of the reader. Witherington considers it possible to overdo these parallels as Paul does not die in Jerusalem and is saved by the Gentile authorities rather than handed over. However, even George MacDonald claims, "It is certain that the author of Acts knew of Paul's execution in Rome. He has forecast his imprisonment and death to the elders at Miletus (20:23) and claim that he is willing to die at Jerusalem (21:11-14); and the last chapter clearly anticipates Paul's death after his two years of teaching in his rented quarters in Rome (28:30-31). In fact, I would maintain that the author anticipates Paul's death throughout the work by keeping Paul under constant threat of death from the beginning. The reader is never allowed to forget that Paul's career, even more than Jesus', was played out in the shadow of death" (Dennis R. MacDonald, "Apocryphal and Canonical Narratives about Paul," in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 64-66). See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, Anchor Bible, vol. 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 97; and Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 628.

⁷⁰Eastman, *Paul the Martyr*, 18.

⁷¹G. W. Trompf suggests three reasons for why Luke ends abruptly: (1) Luke's work may have lost some literary artistry and aesthetic balance if his second volume ended with a death as his Gospel had. A death not followed by a resurrection might have left readers feelings powerless and hopeless, which Luke considered incommensurate with the message of Christianity. (2) If the traditional account of Paul's martyrdom is correct, then Luke had the problem of Christianity appearing unattractive to potential followers. Further, it creates a strain in the account that the very Roman court that deemed Paul undeserving of imprisonment condemned him to death. (3) A martyrdom account would raise troubling questions of retributive justice in the mind of readers regarding how God could spare Paul so many times and then let him face a ghastly disgrace. Additional explanations include the following: (1) Luke wrote Acts before the death of Paul. (2) Luke knew the fate of Paul and could safely assume his readers did as well. (3) Luke intended to write a third volume chronically these events. (4) Luke wrote a third volume that was either suppressed or destroyed. (5) Paul was released after the two-year imprisonment and Luke died

which Luke wrote Acts. It makes sense why Acts ends quickly upon Paul's arrival in Rome if one remembers that Acts was written to record the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem and Judea through Samaria to the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The purpose of Acts has been accomplished and so Luke ends the narrative.⁷² Acts is not a biography of Paul, a trial brief, or a martyrdom account, but a historical account of the spread of the church from Jerusalem to Rome. Since the gospel had reached Rome, it could now be spread *everywhere*. George MacRae concludes,

The journey of Paul in Acts first to Jerusalem and then to Rome analogously occupies a major part of the book (effectively 19:21-28:31) and represents the working out in the life of the model disciple the same journey toward suffering and death that was Jesus'. The difference is of course that Jesus has already made the journey. Paul can face the prospect of his fate with the confidence that was won for him by Jesus whose journey to death was crowned with resurrection and exaltation. . . . And perhaps it is the confidence of the divine assurance that enables the author of Acts to end his work not with the actual martyrdom of Paul but with the serenity of the Christian mission being fulfilled in Paul's ministry in Rome.⁷³

Another important reason for the abrupt ending of Acts may be that Luke wants to indicate that Christianity and Rome are compatible.⁷⁴ Acts ends during the reign of Nero, but he had not yet begun his persecution of Christians. If Luke wanted to portray peace between Christianity and Rome, then it was wise to end the story before Paul's martyrdom.⁷⁵ It would have been difficult to make this argument while recounting the horrors of Nero. Gunther Bornkamm notes,

before his martyrdom. See G. W. Trompf, "On Why Luke Declined to Recount the Death of Paul: Acts 27-28 and Beyond," in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 232-34.

⁷²Luke uses different characters in the story of Acts to further his end, and when that end is completed, Luke ceases to focus on them. If the life of the character does not end in death (e.g., John, Jesus, Stephen), they abruptly drop out of the narrative (Philip, Peter). Or in the case of Paul, since Luke has no further narrative interest in his fate, the story simply ends. See Daniel R. Schwartz, "The End of the Line: Paul in the Canonical Book of Acts," in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 23.

⁷³George W. MacRae, "Whom Heaven Must Receive Until the Time: Reflections on the Christology of Acts," *Interpretations* 27 (April 1973): 151-65.

⁷⁴Chilton, *Rabbi Paul*, 247.

⁷⁵Luke does go out of his way to indicate how fairly Paul was treated as a prisoner in Rome (28:16b, 30). He also indicates that the Romans had previously wanted to release him in Caesarea (26:30-32; 28:18).

This also makes the silence about Paul's martyrdom perfectly understandable. Acts was written not only to edify the faithful, but to give a defense of Christianity to the pagan empire. The picture of Paul was intended to let the empire have an impression of the greatness of the Christian religion and its peaceable inclinations, and to make Rome resolve on the same prudent and fair attitude toward the church as had already been shown by many representatives of its government in the course of their dealings with Paul.⁷⁶

Acts does not report the death of Paul, but Luke leaves significant hints that he is to be lead down a similar path as Jesus to martyrdom. Thus, while Acts cannot offer direct evidence for Paul's fate, it provides the background expectation that Paul would ultimately die as a result of proclaiming his faith. Since it was written after the death of Paul, and Luke would undoubtedly have been aware of his fate, Acts provides supporting evidence for the traditional view that Paul died as a martyr in Rome. But to fully substantiate the traditional rendition, a look outside the New Testament for corroboration is needed.

First Clement 5:5-7

As stated previously, *1 Clement* (c. AD 95-96) is the first noncanonical document that refers to the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul. Its greatest value is that it is an early account of Paul's violent death written in Rome where there could still be Christians alive who witnessed Paul's imprisonment and death. Given that Clement only refers to Paul twice by name (5:5-7; 47:1),⁷⁷ it is noteworthy that one of them includes a reference to his martyrdom. This is particularly significant since Clement is more concerned with drawing moral lessons from known facts than providing the precision one may expect in a historical work.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 104-05.

⁷⁷Clement may also refer to Paul more generally in one of his references to "the apostles" (42:1, 3) or "our apostles" (44:1).

⁷⁸Bruce, "Paul in Rome: 5 Concluding Observations," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 50 (1968): 270.

While details regarding the manner of his fate are lacking, the immediate context strongly implies that Clement was referring to the martyrdom of Paul.⁷⁹ In the preceding verses, Clement refers to Paul as a pillar of the faith who experienced profound suffering and was persecuted for his faith “even unto death” (5:2). Richard Pervo notes that the reason Peter and Paul were persecuted and ultimately martyred was because of “jealousy and envy.”⁸⁰ And the phrase in 5:7 that Paul was “set free from this world,” implies he was put to death.⁸¹ According to Bart Ehrman, this passage indicates the author was aware of a tradition that Paul was put on trial and eventually executed for his faith.⁸²

First Clement 5:5-7 focuses specifically on the fate of Paul:

Because of jealousy and strife Paul pointed the way to the prize for endurance. Seven times he bore chains; he was sent into exile and stoned; he served as a herald in both the East and the West; and he received the noble reputation for his faith. He taught righteousness to the whole world, and came to the limits of the West, bearing his witness before the rulers. And so he was set free from this world and transported up to the holy place, having become the greatest example of endurance.

It is clear the author of *1 Clement* wants to reveal Paul as a model of endurance for others to imitate. Paul is given considerably more space than Peter, indicating he is the prominent person in this text.⁸³ Even though both Peter and Paul are among the “pillars”

⁷⁹See the previous discussion in chapter 6 on the martyrdom of Peter in *1 Clement* 5:1-4 for details regarding the immediate context of *1 Clement* 5. Similarly to the case of Peter, Clement probably knew Paul was martyred as a matter of common knowledge at the end of the first century.

⁸⁰Richard I. Pervo, *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 132. Pervo doubts the historical value of *1 Clement*, as well as the rest of the Gospels and the book of Acts. But the salient point for this discussion is that he interprets *1 Clement* 5:1-7 as referring to the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul.

⁸¹Dwight Callahan discounts the historical significance of Paul because it does not explicitly say Paul was martyred. But this seems to be too much to demand of such a text. First, Clement is not writing history but drawing lessons from known historical facts. Second, since he was writing from Rome merely thirty years after Paul’s death, when there were still living eyewitnesses, Clement could take it for granted that his demise was well known. Third, Clement does not outright say Paul was martyred but the broad and immediate context strongly implies this was Paul’s fate. See Callahan, “Dead Paul,” 77.

⁸²Bart Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, & Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 173.

⁸³Andreas Lindemann argues the author employs the rhetorical device of *Achtergewicht*, which means Paul is the decisive person in the passage. See Andreas Lindemann, “Paul in the Writings of the Apostolic Fathers,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 29.

of the faith, Paul is the greatest example of endurance—he faced considerable persecution, yet continued to preach the gospel throughout the world, and was ultimately executed for his faith.

First Clement also provides a clue as to when their deaths occur: “To these men who have conducted themselves in such a holy way there has been added a *great multitude* of the elect, who have set a superb example among us by the numerous torments and tortures they suffered because of jealousy.”⁸⁴ Clement’s reference to “a great multitude” is almost identical in wording to Tacitus’ reference to vast numbers (*multitudo ingens*) who were convicted and ultimately killed by Nero.⁸⁵ Bruce concludes, “That this is a reference to the persecution of Christians in Rome under Nero is hardly to be doubted.”⁸⁶ In sum, although one may wish *I Clement* 5:5-7 provided more details regarding circumstances surrounding the fate of Paul, this in no way discounts the substantial evidence it does provide for the traditional view that Paul was martyred under Nero in Rome.

Ignatius

In the early second century, Ignatius was arrested and taken to Rome in chains to face a martyr’s death. He was not writing to address particular controversies in local churches, or to recite important historical facts (such as Eusebius). Rather, he delivered letters through delegates to churches from Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, and Smyrna, and in one case to a particular leader (Polycarp, Smyrna’s bishop). He also sent a letter ahead to the Roman church requesting they not intervene legally to undermine his goal of facing martyrdom in the amphitheater.⁸⁷ His writings are best understood as final

⁸⁴*I Clement* 6:1.

⁸⁵*Annals* 15.44.2.

⁸⁶F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 448.

⁸⁷*Letter to the Romans* 10:2; Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 49-51.

statements of a bishop on the way to face execution, composed in difficult circumstances while travelling under armed guard. Given these circumstances, one should not expect detailed historical accounts of the life, ministry, or death of Paul.

Nevertheless, Ignatius mentions Paul twice by name. Both instances have been taken as supporting the traditional view of Paul's martyrdom in Rome.⁸⁸ *Letter to the Romans* 4:3 says, "I am not enjoining you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am condemned; they were free, until now I have been a slave. But if I suffer, I will become a freed person who belongs to Jesus Christ, and I will rise up, free, in him. In the meantime I am learning to desire nothing while in chains."

The context of this statement is that Ignatius is pleading with the Roman Christians not to interfere in his martyrdom (4:1-2). He willingly embraces his impending execution and desires the Roman church not intervene. Yet Ignatius makes a distinction between his authority and the apostles ("I am not enjoining you as Peter and Paul did"). Peter and Paul had authority to command Roman Christians simply because they were apostles. Ignatius, by contrast, is in chains and only fully attains the status of a disciple through martyrdom.⁸⁹ He has no idealistic expectations that he can become an apostle like Peter and Paul, because they have a greater authority to command believers regardless of their martyrdoms. James Aageson explains,

Ignatius, the bishop, does not expect to become an apostle through his sacrificial death, but rather a true disciple. The time for the apostles is now past, but through martyrdom, a martyrdom shared with the apostles Peter and Paul, Ignatius can attain a special status, as well as the authority this status confers. . . . Ignatius sees suffering and martyrdom as something to be embraced according to the pattern of those apostles who have gone before him. Implicitly, Ignatius sees himself as following the example of Peter and Paul who have gone before him to their deaths in Rome.⁹⁰

⁸⁸For further context and significance of the *Letter to the Romans* 4:3, see the discussion under the martyrdom of Peter, since the passage applies equally to Peter and Paul.

⁸⁹*Letter to the Ephesians* 1:2, 3:1; *Letter to the Romans* 4:1-2; *Letter to Polycarp* 7:1

⁹⁰James W. Aageson, *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 125.

Similarly, William Schoedel argues that the imagery Ignatius uses in his *Letter to the Romans* likely reflects knowledge that Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome.⁹¹ While this interpretation is not impossible, it is more likely that Ignatius is referring to authority rather than martyrdom. Ignatius recognizes that Paul has authority as an apostle but that his own writing has less authority than Scripture. He certainly may have been aware of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul (as will be shown in the next passage), but *Letter to the Romans* 4:3 does not state so.

The second passage, which applies uniquely to Paul, is found in *Letter to the Ephesians*:

I know who I am and to whom I am writing. I am condemned, you have been shown mercy; I am in danger, you are secure. You are a passageway for those slain for God; you are fellow initiates with Paul, the holy one who received a testimony and proved worthy of all fortune. When I attain to God, may I be found in his footsteps, this one who mentions you in every epistle in Christ Jesus.⁹²

It is true that Ignatius includes some exaggeration here, since Paul certainly did not mention the Ephesian church “in every epistle.” Yet it should be clear that Ignatius’ point is to make an intimate link between the church at Ephesus and the apostle Paul rather than to give a precise word count on the number of times he specifically mentions the Ephesians in all his letters.⁹³

In this passage, Ignatius may be referring to the meeting Paul had with the Ephesian elders when they sent him off to imprisonment and eventual martyrdom (Acts 20:17-38).⁹⁴ Ignatius sees his impending martyrdom as following the example Paul has set before him. Ignatius clearly aims to imitate Jesus,⁹⁵ but practically he is following in

⁹¹William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 176.

⁹²Ignatius *Letter to the Ephesians* 12:2.

⁹³Lindemann, “Paul in the Writings,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 36.

⁹⁴Schoedel, *Ignatius*, 73.

⁹⁵Ignatius *Letter to the Ephesians* 10:3.

the footsteps of Paul. Aageson concludes, “Ignatius holds Paul in the highest esteem, sees his own journey to martyrdom for God as following the pattern of Paul’s journey, and visualizes the Ephesians as the passage way of those slain for the sake of God.”⁹⁶

The central question is what Ignatius means by “proved worthy of all fortune.” There are two reasons it is best understood as a reference to Paul’s martyrdom. First, the context reveals that Ignatius considers Ephesus a “passageway” for those who are “slain for God” (martyred). In the wider context, Ignatius points specifically to Paul as an example the Ephesians would recognize as one who was slain for God. And immediately afterward, Ignatius says, “When I attain to God, may I be found in his footsteps.” In other words, Ignatius desires to face martyrdom with courage and commitment as Paul did. If Paul were not martyred, it would make no sense for Ignatius to raise him as his greatest example of imitation since he is in route to his own execution⁹⁷ in Rome.

Second, to be “proved worthy of all fortune” was to deserve the reward of being with God. For Ignatius, this was achieved through imitation of the passion of Christ.⁹⁸ Ignatius says, “It is better for me to die in Jesus Christ than to rule the ends of the earth.”⁹⁹ He echoes Paul’s famous quip: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Ignatius sees his chains as a means of exhortation for other believers, which he bears on account of Christ so he may attain to God.¹⁰⁰ In *The Letter to the Magnesians*, Ignatius said, “If we do not choose to die voluntarily in his suffering, his life is not in us.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, to acquire the greatest reward of being with God, Ignatius must suffer and die

⁹⁶Aageson, *Paul*, 124-25.

⁹⁷Ignatius *Letter to the Ephesians* 1:2.

⁹⁸W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965; corrected ed., Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 2008), 198.

⁹⁹Ignatius *Letter to the Romans* 6:1.

¹⁰⁰Ignatius *Letter to the Trallians* 12:2.

¹⁰¹Ignatius *The Letter to the Magnesians* 5:2.

at the hands of the ruler of this age.¹⁰² Thus, Ignatius lifts up Paul as an example to imitate because Paul was proved worthy of all fortune through his faithful witness, suffering, and martyrdom for his faith. Richard Pervo concludes, “Paul’s martyrdom was a source of encouragement to Ignatius. He was following the path of the great apostle. Ignatius knew, identified with, and imitated Paul as an itinerant, a writer of letters, and a leader who suffered for his faith.”¹⁰³

Ignatius does not mention the manner of Paul’s execution, but he does indicate that it was in Rome.¹⁰⁴ Yet he clearly believes Paul was martyred and he expects to follow his example. The question is where Ignatius got this knowledge. Did he talk to someone who knew the apostles firsthand? Did he meet the apostles? Was he merely passing on legends about their deaths? Byzantium hagiography considers Ignatius the boy Jesus used as an example to teach his disciples about greatness in the kingdom of God (Matt 18:2-5). Jerome says that Ignatius knew Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John.¹⁰⁵ While these claims are difficult to verify, chronologically and theologically speaking, Ignatius was undoubtedly close to the apostles.¹⁰⁶

Even at the latest possible date for his life and martyrdom (c. AD 135), Ignatius falls well within the window of living memory. Part of the significance of this letter is that Ignatius is writing to early Christians within the first generation *after* the death of Paul. If the tradition were not true, there would have been many believers who

¹⁰²Ibid., 1:2. It may seem that Ignatius is teaching a works-based salvation, in which salvation is only acquired for individuals who die as Christ did. But Ignatius makes it clear he believes Jesus suffered for Christians and that believers escape punishment by through faith in him (*Letter to the Trallians* 2:1). Ignatius believes it is his unique lot, mercifully assigned by God, to suffer and die a martyr’s death as Peter, Paul, and Jesus did.

¹⁰³Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 138.

¹⁰⁴See earlier discussion regarding *Letter to the Romans* 4:3 in the section “The Martyrdom of Peter” and the subsection on “Ignatius.”

¹⁰⁵Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 16:2

¹⁰⁶Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church*, 50.

would have corrected it. Yet Ignatius did not feel the need to exaggerate, ignore, or defend the martyrdom account of Paul. Rather, he simply assumes it in his *Letter to the Ephesians* (and possibly in his *Letter to the Romans*), as if it is an established and known fact. It seems reasonable to believe that Ignatius was aware of an early tradition about the martyrdom of Paul in Rome.

Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*

Polycarp wrote this letter to the church at Philippi to encourage them to stay faithful to the core tenets of the faith (*Letter to the Philippians* 7:1) to live out the Christian faith (5:1), and to endure suffering as Christ, Paul, and the other apostles did (1:1; 2:3; 8:2; 9:2; 12:3). It was apparently written right after the death of Ignatius, since Polycarp appears to assume the bishop has died (1:1; 9:1), but has not received final confirmation (13:2).¹⁰⁷ Polycarp is encouraging the church to follow the faith “that was delivered to us from the beginning” (7:2; cf. 3:1-3). Thus, Polycarp links the message he is delivering to the faith as taught by Jesus, Paul, and the first apostles.

Polycarp mentions Paul three times by name (3:2; 9:1; 11:3).¹⁰⁸ Remarkably, one of those references makes it clear that Polycarp is aware that Paul, and the other apostles, had been martyred:

Therefore I urge all of you to obey the word of righteousness and to practice all endurance, which you also observed with your own eyes not only in the most fortunate Ignatius, Zosimus, and Rufus, but also in others who lived among you, and in Paul himself and the other apostles. You should be convinced that none of them acted in vain, but in faith and righteousness, and that they are in the place they deserved, with the Lord, with whom they also suffered. For they did not love the present age; they loved the one who died for us and who was raised by God for our sakes. (*Letter to the Philippians* 9:1-2)

The specific context of this passage is Polycarp’s guidance for Christians to imitate the model of Christ, even if they suffer for his name. The example of Paul is in the wider

¹⁰⁷Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 271.

¹⁰⁸Polycarp makes multiple references and allusions to books of the New Testament including Matt, Mark, Luke, Acts, Rom, Gal, 1 and 2 Cor, Phil, Eph, 1 John, 1 Pet, and the Pastorals. See Lindemann, “Paul in the Writings,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 41-44.

context of Jesus, who was crucified (8:1) and Ignatius, who died as a martyr (9:2). Then Polycarp refers to Paul and the other apostles who “are in the place they deserved, with the Lord, with whom they also suffered” (9:2). The clear implication is that Paul suffered and faced a martyr’s death as Jesus and Ignatius did. Polycarp is linking their examples together as models for the Philippian Christians to imitate. Bart Ehrman indicates that Polycarp was aware of a tradition in which Paul and the other disciples were in fact martyred: “Polycarp shows that he knows that like Paul and the other apostles, Ignatius had already been martyred for his faith.”¹⁰⁹ Polycarp is confident that Christians at Philippi are just as aware of the execution of Paul as they are aware of the crucifixion of Jesus. It is a matter of common knowledge and tradition at the time of Polycarp, sometime in the early to mid-second century, well within the range of living memory. Glenn Snyder concludes, “Therefore, by the middle of the second century, from Rome in the west to Antioch in the east, with Smyrna in between, Paul’s death was being remembered as an example of endurance in faith and as a forerunner of those who would follow his lead.”¹¹⁰

Dionysius of Corinth

Dionysius of Corinth wrote to Roman bishop Soter around the year AD 170. Although the significance of Dionysius for the deaths of Peter and Paul has been previously considered,¹¹¹ it is worth citing the passage again in full: “You have thus by such an admonition bound together the planting of Peter and Paul at Rome and Corinth. For both of them planted and likewise taught us in our Corinth. And they taught together in like manner in Italy, and suffered martyrdom at the same time.”¹¹² Dionysius is writing

¹⁰⁹Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1:327.

¹¹⁰Snyder, *Acts of Paul*, 28.

¹¹¹See discussion on Dionysius of Corinth in this dissertation.

¹¹²Dionysius of Corinth, as cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 2 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890),

to garnish the authority of Corinth instead of capitulate to Rome. Although both Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom in Rome, assumes Dionysius, they both planted and taught the church in Corinth. Dionysius is attempting to put Corinth on the same (or at least similar) footing as Rome.

It is interesting that Dionysius is writing *to* Rome and states that both apostles were martyred there. Since this is well within the living memory of the apostles, the church at Rome could easily have corrected this if it were not true. His whole argument breaks down if Peter and Paul were not known to have died as martyrs in Rome. He states it as if it were simply a known fact. While it may be impossible to know where Dionysius got his information, this statement provides a second century attestation to the existence of the tradition Paul was martyred in Rome. The earlier hints of *1 Clement*, Ignatius, and Polycarp that Paul was martyred in Rome under Nero are made more explicit in Dionysius of Corinth (Eusebius).

Irenaeus

Irenaeus wrote his most famous work, *Against Heresies*, at the end of the second century (c. AD 180), which places it within the range of living memory of the apostle Paul. He wrote *Against Heresies* to refute Gnosticism, which had become a significant competitor for the church by the late second century. Irenaeus believes he has authority to challenge the Gnostics because his teachings are in line with the original apostles. He believes his authority comes directly from the teachings of Peter and Paul, which have been passed down faithfully through a line of unaltered succession.¹¹³

In a section committed to defending the scriptural authority of the four Gospels, Irenaeus references the deaths of Peter and Paul: “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at

131.

¹¹³Aageson, *Paul*, 161-67.

Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure [death], Mark the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter.”¹¹⁴ Some have contested that “departure” simply means Peter and Paul left Rome, but this is unlikely.¹¹⁵

Callahan discounts the significance of this reference. Although he concedes that “departure” may refer to death, he says, “Irenaeus does not say that Peter and Paul actually died in Rome, nor does he say that they were martyred under Nero.” He concludes that “early, unequivocal testimony of Paul’s martyrdom, in Rome or anywhere else, is entirely lacking in early Christian literature.”¹¹⁶ Callahan is right that this passage does not provide “unequivocal” evidence that Peter and Paul were martyred under Nero. But why discount one important piece of evidence just because it does not make the *entire* case? If historians relied upon unequivocal evidence to make judgments very little could be known. Rather, historical knowledge is based upon probability that comes from weighing the totality of the evidence and asking, “What best accounts for the available evidence?” And as seen, there are other early writings that help establish their fates as well. The passage in Irenaeus must be read in light of the totality of knowledge regarding the fates of the apostles. In this case, Irenaeus does refer to the deaths of Peter and Paul, although he does not provide further details. It is true that natural deaths for both of them would be consistent with the statement by Irenaeus. However, Irenaeus was sufficiently close to the Roman church to know its local tradition.¹¹⁷ Given the strength of the

¹¹⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1

¹¹⁵As Bauckham observed, there was sufficient precedent for the term “departure” to mean death in early Christian documents. In response to the claim that “departure” could simply mean leaving, Bauckham concludes, “Since not even later traditions provide the possibility of a time, which Irenaeus could have had in mind, when both Peter and Paul had been in Rome but had left, we must conclude that he meant to refer to their deaths” (Richard J. Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter in Early Christian Literature,” in *Rise and Decline of the Roman World*, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini [New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1992], 26:585-86).

¹¹⁶Callahan, “Dead Paul,” 78.

¹¹⁷Bruce, *Paul*, 454-55.

tradition at this time concerning the preaching and martyrdom of Peter in Rome, it seems most likely that Irenaeus was well aware of the accounts and felt it unnecessary to repeat.

The Acts of Paul

The *Acts of Paul* is typically dated AD 170-180.¹¹⁸ Yet, some scholars have argued that the range of dates should be much larger, encompassing AD 140-200.¹¹⁹ Peter Dunn has made a substantial case that it belongs in the first half of the second century.¹²⁰ If he is right, then there is a Pauline tradition incorporating his martyrdom only separated from him by two or three generations, which is well within the range of living memory, and thus may provide some historical value for this investigation.

However, these kinds of typical dates offered for the *Acts of Paul* rely upon assuming that it is a coherent whole composed by one author. But this assumption has come under increasing criticism. Based on manuscript evidence from the fifth century, Glenn Snyder has argued that the *Acts of Paul* is a composition of separate works that originally circulated independently and had their own stages of growth and development.¹²¹ This is likely true for the *Martyrdom of Paul*, which contains the account of his execution by Nero.¹²² Thus, Snyder concludes it was probably written during the

¹¹⁸Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 50.

¹¹⁹Tertullian refers to the *Acts of Paul* around AD 200, so it cannot be later than this date. A. Hilhorst, "Tertullian on the Acts of Paul," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1996), 162.

¹²⁰Dunn makes six primary arguments. First, external evidence shows it had gained a significant foothold by the end of the second century. Second, *The Acts of Paul* presupposes a role of women that predates the Montanist crisis. Third, the opponents in the text signify a period before AD 150. Fourth, the failure of any signs of Marcionism also suggests an earlier date. Fifth (and controversial), the writer's disregard for Acts indicates an earlier date. And sixth, the orthodoxy of *The Acts of Peter* strongly resembles 2 Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr. See Dunn, "The *Acts of Paul*," 199.

¹²¹Technically, it would be more accurate to refer to the *Acts of Paul* as the *Martyrdom of Paul* throughout this dissertation, since focus is on the section that deals with his execution by Nero. However, since wider scholarship typically refers to the *Acts of Paul* as a unified text, I will refer to the *Martyrdom of Paul* with the broader term *Acts of Paul*.

¹²²Snyder, *Acts of Paul*, 15-17, 254.

reign of Trajan (AD 98-117).¹²³ If this is true, then there is a remembrance of Paul only one or two generations after his death. Additionally, there is reason to believe earlier pre-existing traditions, and in particular *martyrdom* traditions, may have circulated prior to their incorporation into the text.¹²⁴ Thus, with these considerations in mind, *Acts of Paul* cannot simply be dismissed as an entirely legendary account divorced from historical consideration.

The *Acts of Paul* clearly does contain some legendary material, though, such as Paul baptizing a lion and milk spurting from Paul's neck after decapitation (*Acts of Paul* 14).¹²⁵ The characterization of Paul's appearance (*Acts of Paul* 1.3), for instance, is also likely motivated by the text itself rather than offering an independent testimony of his real appearance.¹²⁶ And yet Calvin Roetzel provides an important balance: "As fanciful and entertaining as these stories were, they enjoyed a tie, however loose it was, to history."¹²⁷

¹²³Because of its reliance on the Gospel of John (8:36 and 11:25ff.), the *terminus a quo* for the Martyrdom of Paul is the end of the first century. While there is some anti-imperial eschatology in *Acts of Peter*, it is best understood as anti-Nero. Rather than opposing Christians and Romans, it primarily opposes Paul and Nero. The genre of the *Martyrdom of Paul*, such as its structural components, topics, and themes, fits somewhere between the Synoptics and later martyrdom accounts and the Acts of the Apostles. Thus, Snyder concludes that a late date is not necessary and an earlier date, during Trajan, is probable. *Ibid.*, 59-63.

¹²⁴Ralph Novak observes that "it is rather curious that the traditions concerning the deaths of Peter and Paul would have been preserved by orthodox Christians while the Acts containing the traditions were rejected, if the traditions first appeared in these two Acts" (Ralph Martin Novak, Jr., *Christianity and the Roman Empire* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001], 27).

¹²⁵It is difficult to determine exactly what the milk and lion represent. According to Janos Bolyki, the milk clearly has a symbolic meaning. The opposite of milk is solid food. While both refer to apostolic teaching, solid food is for the spiritually mature and milk is for beginners. The idea, says Bolyki, is that the missionary preaching (the kerygma) is offered as nourishment for beginners. By contrast, Harry Tajra says the milk is a beautiful poetic symbol of immortality. The milk brings nourishment to the Church. As far as the symbolism of the lion, Klauck argues that the lion represents the part of the soul that Plato called "desire." It embodies sexual instinct, which can only be redeemed via baptism. Janos Bolyki, "Martyrium Pauli," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 101; Tajra, *The Martyrdom of Paul*, 130; and Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 65-67.

¹²⁶Jan N. Bremmer, "Magic, Martyrdom and Women's Liberation," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 39. In the case of the martyrdom of Paul, there are earlier records of his death, as we have seen, that help establish its historical core. But the appearance of Paul is first recorded in this text, and seems to meet the needs of the author, and so it is likely a fabrication.

¹²⁷Roetzel, *Paul*, 6.

For one thing, many of the characters, such as Paul, Onesiphorus, Judas, Titus, Luke, Peter, Barsabas Justus, Nero, and Tryphaena are known historical figures.¹²⁸ The author is bound, at least to a degree, to describe their lives and roles in ways that match the known historical tradition. The mere fact that these historically attested characters are part of the narrative shows that the author is not completely divorced from historical memory. There may be redaction, but there is not free-flowing invention. Second, the enmity between Christians and Romans in *The Acts of Paul*, matches the known historical situation from authors such as Tacitus, *1 Clement* 5-6, and *The Ascension of Isaiah* 4. Janos Bolyki concludes, “All this fits into the historical data that we know from Tacitus and other sources about the Neronian persecution of the Christians.”¹²⁹ Third, the teaching of the *Acts of Paul* is mainstream and orthodox—showing no significant signs of heresy or Gnosticism.¹³⁰ It accurately preserves some of the teachings of Jesus as well as important facts surrounding his life. The conclusion to be drawn from these three points is not that the *Acts of Paul* should be taken as straightforward history. The most commonly cited genre for the *Acts of Paul* is the ancient novel.¹³¹ But similar to the *Acts of Peter*, it is probably best understood as historical novel, in which historical memory binds legendary embellishment.

The same challenge arises for the *Acts of Paul* as the *Acts of Peter*—how is historical memory distinguished from legendary embellishment? Some consider the account entirely legendary.¹³² And as seen, there are clearly legendary developments in

¹²⁸ Jan Bremmer concludes, “The figure of Queen Tryphaena is inspired by the homonymous queen, who ruled in Pontus with her son, king Polemon II, as we know from coins minted in the 50s of the first century.” Bremmer clarifies that the goal of *The Acts of Paul* was not historical realism. But this does show that the author was bound by historical tradition and included many historical events and personages. See Bremmer, “Magic, Martyrdom and Women’s Liberation,” 52.

¹²⁹ Bolyki, “Martyrium Pauli,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 105.

¹³⁰ Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 74.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 7-10.

¹³² Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, & Mary Magdalene*, 173.

the text. However, McBirnie observed, “Blown up and fanciful they may be, legends and traditions are often the enlargement of reality, and traditions may not be exaggerations at all, but actual fact.”¹³³ It is true that the writer of the *Acts of Paul* was not aiming to write a straightforward historical narrative of the life, ministry, and death of Paul, but likely combined tradition, legend, and genuine history. Since the *Acts of Paul* matches the early and unwavering account of Paul’s martyrdom in Rome, from both biblical and extra-biblical accounts, the tradition was undoubtedly fixed by the time of its composition.

Harry Tajra captures what is likely to be the historical core of the account of Paul’s martyrdom in the *Acts of Paul*:¹³⁴

1. Paul died in Rome.
2. Paul was martyred during the reign of Nero.
3. Paul was a Roman citizen.
4. Paul was put through some kind of trial and then faced a violent death.
5. Paul was arrested as a result of his preaching.

The *Acts of Paul* provides an important testimony to the martyrdom of Paul in Rome, possibly within one or two generations of his death. With a probable date between the late first century and the early second century, and a likely composition in Asia Minor, the *Acts of Paul* provides considerable support that the traditional view of Paul’s fate had spread beyond the borders of Rome within a rather short time.

Was Paul beheaded? According to uniform tradition, Paul was executed by beheading. To establish that Paul was a martyr, it is not necessary to establish that he was

¹³³William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1973), xxvi.

¹³⁴Tajra, *The Martyrdom of Paul*, 131-33. The main reason the five points listed in the text are considered part of the historical core of *Acts of Paul* is that they find additional support from the early, consistent, and unanimous testimony that Paul, a Roman citizen, was executed for preaching and then executed in Rome during the reign of Nero.

in fact beheaded. He could have died by burning, for instance, and still been a martyr. But since this is a core part of the tradition, it is important to consider its likelihood.

The first reference to Paul's death by beheading is found in the *Acts of Paul*, specifically in *The Martyrdom of Paul*. A few years later, at the turn of the second century, Tertullian became the first church father to state that Nero had Paul beheaded in Rome.¹³⁵ And then in the early fourth century, Eusebius confirms this tradition,¹³⁶ noting that the tombs of both Peter and Paul still exist in his day and could be examined for confirmation.

In account in the *Acts of Paul*, Nero sends a decree that all Christians are to be put to death. Nero commanded the prisoners to be burned to death, but he orders Paul to be beheaded according to Roman law. Schneemelcher finds this depiction not quite logical since beheading was a less severe penalty.¹³⁷ However, this ignores that the text emphasizes the beheading as *according to Roman law*, which would require a different mode of execution for a Roman citizen such as Paul. The part of the narrative that is clearly embellishment is the milk that spurts out at his decapitation. The beheading narrative may have been driven by the theological conclusions the author intended readers to adopt from this episode. However, it seems more likely the tradition was already established by the time the author composed the *Acts of Paul* and the spurting milk was added to provide theological significance.¹³⁸

Romans had a variety of methods of execution.¹³⁹ In terms of beheading, Romans practiced *decollation*, which involved the use of a sword rather than decapitation

¹³⁵Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 15:4; idem, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 36.

¹³⁶Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.

¹³⁷Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. and trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:231.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44:2-5.

with an axe.¹⁴⁰ It was a common form of execution. King Herod had John the Baptist beheaded (Mark 6:27). James the brother of John was “killed with the sword” under Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2). The book of Revelation reports the beheading of those who gave testimony for Jesus and refused to worship the beast (Rev 20:4). Eusebius reports that Caesar “beheaded all who seemed to possess Roman citizenship and sent the rest to the beasts.”¹⁴¹ Eusebius later notes that after proclaiming his faith Apollonius was beheaded according to Roman law.¹⁴² The sword was a symbol of power that brought fear into the hearts of people. Of the governing authorities, Paul said, “He is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom 13:4).

The tradition is unanimous that Paul was beheaded as the means of his execution. Given that there is no alternative claim of how the apostle met his fate, that it was a common form of execution, and that it fits with what else is known about Paul (e.g., his citizenship), it is more probable than not that Paul was beheaded. This cannot be held with the same degree of confidence as his martyrdom, but there is no good reason to doubt that the earliest accounts contain a tradition that dates back to his actual mode of death.

Tertullian

Tertullian was born in Carthage, North Africa in AD 160. He wrote at the turn of the second century and thus falls at the limit of the living memory of Paul. Like the author of *1 Clement 5*, Tertullian primarily depicts Paul as a model of resolute faithfulness

¹⁴⁰Suetonius, *Nero* 49; Tacitus *Annals* 2.32; and John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, ed. Bruce D. Chilton (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1985), 5.

¹⁴¹Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.2.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*, 5.21.

and courage amidst suffering and of martyrdom.¹⁴³ Tertullian shows considerable interest in the martyrdom of Paul, since the church by his day had experienced both suffering and martyrdom.¹⁴⁴ *Scorpiace* 15:5-6 provides a significant reference to the martyrdom of Paul:

That Paul is beheaded has been written in their own blood. And if a heretic wishes his confidence to rest upon a public record, the archives of the empire will speak, as would the stones of Jerusalem. We read the lives of the Caesars: at Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood the rising faith. Then Peter is girt by another, when he is made fast to the cross. Then does Paul obtain a birth suited to Roman citizenship, when in Rome he springs to life again ennobled by martyrdom.

Tertullian reports that Paul was a Roman citizen and links his death to the time of Nero. He is so confident of his claims that he tells his doubters to examine “the archives of the empire.” If there were no such public records, Tertullian would have automatically undermined his credibility. His appeal to them indicates his confidence that they existed and would corroborate his testimony, if examined. Therefore, Tertullian was likely relying upon even earlier public records about the Neronian persecution and the fate of Paul (and Peter, James, and Stephen).

Tertullian makes two further allusions to the execution of Paul (and Peter) in Rome. In the first instance, Tertullian is defending the equal apostolic status of Peter as compared to Paul: “It is a happy fact that Peter is on the same level with Paul in the very glory of martyrdom.”¹⁴⁵ Being on the “same level” does not require they face the same mode of execution, but that they were both apostles who died as martyrs in testimony for the faith. Tertullian is not trying to prove that either apostle was actually martyred, but to place Peter on equal footing with Paul. Tertullian assumes his audience is aware of the martyrdoms—he just makes sure they realize the implications of their equal fates. A few

¹⁴³Robert D. Sider, “Literary Artifice and the Figure of Paul in the Writings of Tertullian,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 106.

¹⁴⁴Roetzel, *Paul*, 72.

¹⁴⁵Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 24.

chapters later, Tertullian mentions again that Paul was beheaded like John the Baptist.¹⁴⁶ Eastman rightly concludes, “The shedding of apostolic blood was central to the foundation and spread of the Christian message in Rome. Because their deaths mirrored those of Jesus and John the Baptist, Peter and Paul became model martyrs who blessed the Roman church.”¹⁴⁷ Tertullian’s references to the apostle Paul show *minimally* that Paul was considered a model martyr by the end of the second century in North Africa.

Conclusion

The traditional view that Paul was beheaded during the reign of Nero between AD 64-67 has been carefully considered. There is additional later material that further confirms this tradition, but it will not be analyzed in depth for this analysis has focused on the period of living memory.¹⁴⁸

This close examination of the evidence indicates that the following points can be regarded to have varying degrees of confidence from works written within the living memory of Paul (until c. AD 200).

1. Paul was in Rome—*the highest possible probability* (possible authorship of Philippians from Rome; 2 Timothy 1:16-17; 2:9; Acts 28:17-31; 1 Clement 6:1; Ignatius, *The Letter to the Romans* 4:1-3; Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 15:4-6; *Acts of Paul*; the lack of any competing narrative).
2. The martyrdom of Paul—*the highest possible probability* (2 Tim 4:6-8; Acts 19:21-28:31; 1 Clement 5:5-7; Ignatius *Letter to the Ephesians* 12:2, *Letter to the Romans* 4.3; *Letter to the Philippians* 7:1; Dionysius of Corinth (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25); Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; *Acts of Paul*; Tertullian *Scorpiace* 15:5-6, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 24, 36). The lack of any competing narrative weighs favorably for the traditional view. The early and persistent tradition is that Paul was martyred for his faith.
3. Martyrdom during the reign of Nero between AD 64-67—*very probably true* (*Acts of Paul*; Tertullian *Scorpiace* 15:5-6; the chronology of Paul’s life¹⁴⁹).

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 36.

¹⁴⁷Eastman, *Paul the Martyr*, 160.

¹⁴⁸Peter of Alexandria (AD 306), Aphrahat *Demonstration XXI: Of Persecution* (§ 23); *Do Poenitentia: Epistola Canonica* 9; *The Acts of Peter and Paul* (AD 350); Jerome (AD 392), *Tractate on Psalm 96*, lines 176-83.

¹⁴⁹Cassidy concludes, “It should now be noted that none of these works [Philippians;

4. The beheading of Paul—*likely* (*Acts of Paul*; Tertullian *Scorpiace* 15:4; *The Prescription Against Heretics* 36; *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 13; Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25; lack of any competing version of his death).

Philemon; Acts; 1 Clement] explicitly states that Nero was involved in Paul's case. Further, neither Philippians itself nor any of Paul's other letters mentions Nero by name. Nevertheless, given the fundamental chronology of Paul's life, it is virtually certain that Nero was the reigning emperor during the time of Paul's imprisonment in Rome . . . virtually all scholars who treat this question locate Paul's imprisonment within the years of Nero's rule" (Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 141-42). See also Robert Jewett, *A Chronology of Paul's Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

CHAPTER 8

THE MARTYRDOM OF JAMES, THE BROTHER OF JESUS

Until recent times, James, the brother of Jesus, was a largely forgotten figure in early Christianity. A cursory reading of the New Testament may give the impression that other figures such as Peter, Paul, Mary, and John, are more important to understanding the early church. Yet, in the past few years, significant studies have attempted to bring proper focus to the critical role James played in the origin and development of the Christian movement.¹ John Painter argues that the grounds for dismissing James are misguided and that it is necessary to recognize him as “a towering figure in the earliest church.”² Similarly, Jeffrey Butz considers James the great “lost hero” of Christianity.³

Then who was James? Part of the difficulty in answering this question is the commonality of the name “James” in the New Testament.⁴ The James focused on here is the eldest brother of Jesus, which is clear because James is listed first among the brothers and sisters of Jesus (Mark 6:3). This is further confirmed in the early second century document known as the *Gospel of Hebrews*, preserved by Jerome, where James is

¹For instance, see Jeffrey Butz, *The Brother of Jesus and the Lost Teachings of Christianity* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005); Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, eds., *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Patrick J. Hartin, *James of Jerusalem: Heir to Jesus of Nazareth* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2004); John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1997); Pierre-Antoine Bernheim, *James, Brother of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1997).

²Painter, *Just James*, 1.

³Butz, *The Brother of Jesus*, 18.

⁴The six most important people named James include (1) James the Lord’s brother, (2) James the son of Alphaeus, one of the twelve apostles, (3) James the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles, (4) James the Less, son of Mary the wife of Clopas, (5) James the father (or brother?) of Judas, one of the Twelve, and (6) Jude the brother of James (identified author of the epistle of Jude). See James B. Adamson, *James: The Man & His Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 8-10.

addressed as “my brother.” Since Paul refers to the wives of the brothers of Jesus, James was likely married (1 Cor 9:5).

James was also an apostle. During his visit to Jerusalem, Paul says, “But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:19). According to F. F. Bruce, the most natural reading is that Paul considers James an apostle.⁵ Attempts to translate Paul’s passage to indicate that he did not consider James an apostle have been unsuccessful.⁶ Unlike Luke, Paul does not limit the title “apostle” to the twelve. Paul considered himself an apostle, equal in authority to those who were apostles before (cf. Gal 1:17). Those who were considered apostles had seen the risen Jesus (1 Cor 9:1), even if, like James and Paul, they were not part of the Twelve. Thus, according to Paul, “apostles” was a broader category that included Peter, the Twelve, James, the rest of the apostles, and finally himself (1 Cor 15:5-8).

Although James is never labeled “the Just” in Scripture, he is consistently painted in church tradition as being extraordinarily righteous. As Johannes Munck has observed, James was only one of two people designated in the relevant literature as “the Just,” including Jesus and Simon, the son of Onias.⁷ The first reference to James “the Just” is found in the *Gospel of Thomas* 12, which says, “The disciples said to Jesus, ‘We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?’ Jesus said to them, ‘No matter where you are, you are to go to James the just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.’” The *Gospel of Hebrews*, in the fragment preserved by Jerome, also contains an early second century reference to James as being righteous. The martyrdom of James also may have contributed to his being considered a righteous sufferer alongside

⁵F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John: Studies in Non-Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 89.

⁶Roy Bowen Ward, “James of Jerusalem in the First Two Centuries,” in *Aufstieg Und Niedergang Der Römischen Welt* (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter Co, 1992), 780-81.

⁷Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, trans. Frank Clarke (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1959), 116 n. 2.

Jesus and Stephen.⁸ The tradition of the righteousness of James comes to fruition in Hegesippus:

He was called “the Just” by everyone from the Lord’s time to ours, since there were many Jameses, but this one was consecrated from his mother’s womb. He drank no wine or liquor and ate no meat. No razor came near his head, he did not anoint himself with oil, and took no baths. He alone was permitted to enter the sanctum, for he wore not wool but linen. He used to enter the temple alone and was often found kneeling and imploring forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like a camel’s from his continual kneeling in worship of God and in prayer for the people. Because of his superior righteousness he was called the Just and *Oblias*—meaning, in Greek, “Bulwark of the People” and “Righteousness”—as the prophets declare regarding him.⁹

This passage is clearly filled with exaggeration, as well as historical inaccuracies,¹⁰ but it captures the consistent and widespread tradition that James was considered righteous “from the Lord’s time to ours.” Bernheim concludes, “There are hardly any valid reasons for doubting that James was a pious Jew who was faithful to the law, in particular in the sphere of purity and worship in the temple. The image that can be derived from Acts and the letter of Paul is not opposed to such a portrait.”¹¹

James was one of the leaders of the early church. During his second trip to Jerusalem, Paul met with the three “pillars” of the faith—James, Cephas, and John (Gal 2:9). James is mentioned first to indicate his leadership in Jerusalem, as opposed to Peter who was the leading missionary to the Jews.¹² This coheres with the account in Acts, where James is singled out as the leader of the elders, the key person Paul visits in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17-26). It also matches the message sent by Peter to James before he departed for another place (Acts 12:17), indicating James was already the prominent

⁸Painter, *Just James*, 273.

⁹Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 2 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 23

¹⁰For instance, Hegesippus presents James as the high priest, but this is impossible since he was not a Levite and his Davidic lineage would disqualify him.

¹¹Bernheim, *James, Brother of Jesus*, 214-15.

¹²James Montgomery Boice, *Galatians*, in vol. 10 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. J. D. Douglas and Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

figure among the brothers and likely already the principal leader (or at least the *burgeoning* leader) of the Jerusalem church. James demonstrates his leadership at the Jerusalem Council when he singlehandedly makes the final call on the question of gentiles and the law (Acts 15:14-21). The leadership of James is further corroborated in various early church fathers and Gnostic writings.¹³

While there is little debate James was the leader of the early church,¹⁴ there is debate about *when* James became the leader in Jerusalem. William Scarborough, for instance, argued that there is no doubt James became leader of the Jerusalem church after AD 42 when Peter “departed and went to another place” (Acts 12:17).¹⁵ On the other hand, Matti Myllykoski asks why, if this was the case, Peter did not resume leadership upon his return? Along with Painter and Bernheim, Myllykoski suggests that Peter was the leader of missionary activity while James was the leading figure in Jerusalem.¹⁶ Yet regardless of when James became the leader of the Jerusalem church, Ward rightly concludes, “That James was a leader of the Jerusalem *ekklesia*, as witnessed by Paul

¹³For instance, see the *Gospel of Thomas* 12; Hegesippus, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.4; Clement of Alexandria, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1.3-4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.1 *Apocryphon of James* 1:1-3; *Pseudo-Clementine Contestatio* 1:1.

¹⁴One exception is S. G. F. Brandon, who asks, “If James thus assumed the leadership of the Church during the critical period described by Acts, why are there only these three brief and enigmatic references to him?” Brandon suggests that James was *persona non grata* to the author of Acts, and that by the time it was written, James had already faded from significance. Yet this suggestion falls short for one primary reason: As the brother of Jesus, James would have been so well known that the author of Acts would have no need to provide his qualifications or mention him excessively. Luke could justifiably assume James was well known and respected as the leader of the Jerusalem church. Acts was not written as a history of the church, or to answer the questions that are of most interest today. Rather, it was written to record the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem and Judea through Samaria to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Luke included James insofar as he was necessary to advance the larger purpose of Acts. See S. G. F. Brandon, “The Death of James the Just: A New Interpretation,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to Gershom G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues, and Friends* (Jerusalem: Central, 1967), 60.

¹⁵William J. Scarborough, “James the Just,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 9 (1941): 234-35.

¹⁶Matti Myllykoski, “James the Just in History and Tradition: Perspectives of Past and Present Scholarship (Part I),” *Currents in Biblical Research* 5 (2006): 88.

(and), is not disputed in any of our sources. The only difference is at what time he became such a leader and what he was called.”¹⁷

The majority of theologians and scholars believe that the siblings of Jesus, including James, did not believe in him during the pre-resurrection ministry of Jesus. Certain passages in the Bible have traditionally been mustered to indicate that they were not disciples before the resurrection (e.g., Mark 3:20-35; 6:2-4; John 7:3-5; 19:25-27). Yet recently a significant number of scholars have challenged the traditional view and suggested that these passages may be open to divergent interpretations.¹⁸ Even Richard Bauckham has held that it is more likely that James already belonged to the inner circle of the disciples before the crucifixion.¹⁹ Butz concludes, “Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection not because James did *not* believe, but precisely because he *did*.”²⁰

However, Butz admits that the only evidence anywhere in the gospels that Jesus’ family may have been among his followers during his ministry is found in two passages in the Gospel of John. First, the brothers of Jesus are present when he turns water to wine (2:12). Butz cites Painter to the extent that this gives “the impression that *the brothers were an essential part of the following of Jesus.*”²¹ Bauckham considers this the best evidence the family of Jesus were among his followers during his ministry.²² However, as Licona has observed, “The occasion of Jesus’ miracle apparently had no

¹⁷Ward, “James of Jerusalem,” 810-11.

¹⁸Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 261-63; Bernheim, *James, Brother of Jesus*, 76-100; Butz, *The Brother of Jesus*, 20-47; Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, 9-24; Painter, *Just James*, 11-41; Myllykoski, “James the Just in History (Part I)”]; Ward, “James of Jerusalem,” 786-91.

¹⁹Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 57. However, Michael R. Licona has relayed to me in email correspondence (Oct 9, 2013) that he discussed this with Bauckham, and Bauckham has since reconsidered this view.

²⁰Butz, *The Brother of Jesus*, 44.

²¹*Ibid.*, 37, emphasis in original.

²²Richard Bauckham, “James and Jesus,” in *The Brother of Jesus*, 106-07.

relation to his itinerant ministry. Jesus was simply present as a wedding guest and is even hesitant to perform a miracle.”²³ The context would lead one to believe Jesus was together with his siblings on a family outing rather than a ministry venture. This is clear because of Jesus’ reluctance to perform his first miracle (2:4). Second, the most explicit statement to support the unbelief of the brothers is John 7:5: “For not even his brothers believed in him.” Butz says this passage gives the impression that “Jesus’ brothers were regularly in his company, and certainly not estranged from him.”²⁴ Butz concludes that the brothers and *everyone else did not believe in him*. But John does make a distinction between the belief of his disciples and that of his family. While it may be true that full understanding and belief comes after the resurrection, John makes it clear that while the family of Jesus did not believe in him (7:5), his disciples did in fact believe as a result of seeing his first sign (2:11). Licona points out that this is why the world would hate the disciples, because they *did* believe in Jesus (15:18), and yet the world does not hate his brothers because they did *not* believe (7:7).²⁵ From these two passages in John, Butz concludes, “When one assess *all* of the evidence in the gospels, on balance *there is more evidence to support a positive role for Jesus’ family in his ministry than a negative one*.”²⁶ However, given that neither of these passages offers positive evidence for their belief during his ministry, in the way Butz claims it does, it must therefore be conceded that the balance of the evidence favors unbelief.²⁷ Evidence for their nonbelief is multiply

²³Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 452.

²⁴Butz, *The Brother of Jesus*, 38.

²⁵Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 447.

²⁶Butz, *The Brother of Jesus*, 39, emphasis in original.

²⁷Butz draws much of his arguments from Painter (*Just James*). This is true for many other scholars who reject the traditional position regarding the family of Jesus during his ministry as well, such as Hartin (*James of Jerusalem*). Thus, if Painter’s position is unsustainable then it will have a ripple effect into the arguments of later scholars who rely upon Painter. For a sharp critique of the position held by Painter, see Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 440-55.

attested (John and Mark), and also fulfills the criterion of embarrassment.²⁸ Contra Butz, when all the gospel evidence is considered, there is more evidence that the brothers were not believers during Jesus' ministry and became so on an appearance of the risen Jesus.

There is little doubt the risen Jesus appeared to James.²⁹ According to Paul, James had an appearance of the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:7). Most scholars consider it essentially certain that this refers to the brother of Jesus.³⁰ Paul had met James on multiple appearances and would have acquired firsthand information about his experience with the risen Jesus (Gal 1:19; 2:9; Acts 15:1-21; 21:18).

Unfortunately, the appearance to James is not recorded in the Gospels or Acts. But it is confirmed in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*³¹ as well as the *Apocryphon of James*, which may contain an independent tradition of Jesus' sayings within a larger account of the risen Jesus appearing to James and Peter.³² Interestingly, the *Apocryphon* concurs with the Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7, which identifies the same two individuals—Peter and James—as recipients of secret sayings from Jesus. Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 200) also preserves the tradition that Jesus appeared to James, John, and Peter and imparted higher knowledge to them.³³ The tradition that Jesus appeared to James is early, unanimous, and widespread and there is no convincing reason to reject it.

²⁸Licona asks, "Why would all four canonical Gospels paint a negative picture of Jesus' brothers, writing during or after the period in which James had been a leader of the church in Jerusalem? This would only serve to undermine the church authority the Evangelists would be expected to support" (Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 455).

²⁹William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989), 63-66.

³⁰Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1207.

³¹Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 2.12.

³²Ward, "James of Jerusalem," 793-96.

³³Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1.4.

The Martyrdom of James

Biblical Evidence

No biblical writer directly reports the death of James. Even Acts, which reports the martyrdoms of Stephen (7:54-8:1a) and James, son of Zebedee (12:2), ignores the demise of James the Just. Why is this? Painter claims that Luke was silent “because of the prestige attached to James as a martyr.”³⁴ Painter suggests Luke intentionally suppressed the role of James, who Painter considers a hard-liner on the position of the law, and preferred to emphasize Paul’s law-free gospel. Given that Luke reports the deaths of Stephen and James, son of Zebedee, why did he not also report the death of James? Two points can be made in response. First, Painter’s claim that Luke intentionally suppressed James is an argument from silence. How does Painter know that this was Luke’s hidden intention? He must provide more than a possible motivation. Second, there is a more convincing reason for Luke’s silence—reporting the death of James did not advance the larger narrative Luke was telling about the expansion of the gospel from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Stephen’s death was integral to get the disciples to minister beyond Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria (8:1b-2). And the death of James, son of Zebedee (12:2), provides the link to the arrest of Peter and the persecution by Herod, which led to Peter’s departing to another place (12:17), and the shift to focusing on the missionary activity of Saul/Paul (Acts 12:25). As already seen, Luke drops key characters when they have served his purposes, so given his larger goal in Acts, why *should* he include details regarding the death of James? How would this advance his larger narrative? The status of James as the leader of Jerusalem and the eldest brother of Jesus, as well as his martyrdom, would have been well remembered and passed down faithfully in church tradition. Given his larger goal in Acts, there would have been no compelling reason to include the execution of James.

³⁴Painter, *Just James*, 56.

James 5:6 has sometimes been understood as a reference to martyrdom: “You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.” According to Painter, the reference to the “righteous one” is an autobiographical account by the author. Since Painter assumes the epistle of James is pseudonymous and appears after his death, he believes this passage should be understood in relation to his martyrdom.³⁵ If the letter is pseudonymous, then this may be a possibility. But this raises a host of other difficulties that would need to be addressed.³⁶ While the “righteous” person could be an individual such as Christ, Stephen, or James, it is more likely a general reference to a certain class of people. In 5:16b, James says, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” This is meant as a generic truth about the power of prayer. James then uses Elijah as a specific example of a righteous one whom God answered his fervent prayers (5:17-18). While James and Jesus would fall under the general category of “righteous” ones, the reference in 5:6 is unlikely to be to either of them since there is no tradition that their deaths came at the hands of the rich.³⁷ Thus, it is necessary to look outside the canonical books for evidence for the martyrdom of James.

Josephus

Jewish historian Josephus provides the earliest account of the death of James in *Antiquities* 20.197-203 (c. 93/94). In the wider context, there is a discussion about the difficulties Rome was having with its residents, which led to the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The specific passage regarding James allows the dating of his execution to AD 62, since Josephus places his death between two Roman procurators, Festus and Albinus.³⁸ Upon the death of Festus, Nero had appointed Albinus as the next

³⁵Ibid., 259.

³⁶See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 9-21.

³⁷Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 180

³⁸E. Mary Smallwood, “High Priests and Politics,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962):

procurator. But during the brief transition period, Ananus, who was appointed high priest by Herod Agrippa II, seized the opportunity provided by the vacancy in the procuratorial government, to have James, the brother of Jesus (and others with him) stoned to death.

While many scholars have disputed the statement by Josephus about Jesus in *Antiquities* 18, the reference to the death of James in *Antiquities* 20.197-203 is largely undisputed.³⁹

And now Caesar, upon hearing the death of Festus, sent Albinus into Judea, as procurator; but the king deprived Joseph of the high priesthood, and bestowed the succession to that dignity on the son of Ananus, who was also himself called Ananus. Now the report goes, that this elder Ananus proved a most fortunate man; for he had five sons, who had all performed the office of a high priest to God, and he had himself enjoyed that dignity a long time formerly, which had never happened to any other of our high priests: but this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent; he was also of the sect of the Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews, as we have already observed; when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority]. Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned; but as for those who seemed the most equitable of the citizens, and such as were the most uneasy at the breach of the laws, they disliked what was done; they also sent to the king [Agrippa], desiring him to send to Ananus that he should act so no more, for that what he had already done was not to be justified; nay, some of them went also to meet Albinus, as he was upon his journey from Alexandria, and informed him that it was not lawful for Ananus to assemble a sanhedrin without his consent;—whereupon Albinus complied with what they said, and wrote in anger to Ananus, and threatened that he would bring him to punishment for what he had done; on which king Agrippa took the high priesthood from him, when he had ruled but three months, and made Jesus, the son of Damneus, high priest.⁴⁰

Eusebius also records this account in a very similar manner as in Josephus.⁴¹ The significance of this passage is that it provides historical support for the existence of James, indicates that he was well known and influential among Christians and Jews in

25-26.

³⁹Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 178.

⁴⁰*The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987).

⁴¹Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.21-24.

Jerusalem, and establishes his death at the hands of religious leaders. Josephus was in a good position to know the details surrounding these reported events. He had become a Pharisee six years earlier and was likely serving as a priest at this time in Jerusalem.⁴²

In scholarship in the early twentieth century, the passage by Josephus was more disputed than it is now.⁴³ Today, the majority of scholars accepts the authenticity of this extended passage, and according to Gerd Luedemann, consider it “probably quite reliable.”⁴⁴ The reasons are twofold. First, it is difficult to understand what the motivation would have been for a possible forgery of this passage.⁴⁵ Why would a Christian invent the death of James in such a non-committal fashion that lacks a clear and compelling confessional statement?⁴⁶ Second, James is introduced as “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.” This is precisely the type of designation that would be expected for a Jew. If a Christian interpolated the passage it would likely say “the brother of Jesus, who *was* the Christ.” Henry Little concludes,

If a Christian had added the statement about James, one would also expect some additional remarks concerning the importance of James, such as a more detailed account of the death of James or an implication that James was martyred for his faith. The brief statement concerning the sentencing of James, a mention which is incidental to the main point of the section, with no further details of his life or of his death, suggest that the incident recorded by Josephus in *Antiquities* XX.200 is authentic.⁴⁷

Josephus does not indicate why James was put to death. He merely indicates that Ananus “formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be

⁴²Ward, “James of Jerusalem,” 785.

⁴³Matti Myllykoski, “James the Just in History and Tradition: Perspectives of Past and Present Scholarship (Part II),” *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2007): 64.

⁴⁴Gerd Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 62.

⁴⁵Bernheim, *James, Brother of Jesus*, 2-3.

⁴⁶Paul Winter, “Josephus on Jesus,” *Journal of Historical Studies* 1 (1968): 289-90.

⁴⁷Henry D. Little, “The Death of James, the Brother of Jesus” (Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 1971), 11-12.

stoned.” The *reasons* for his death are consider next. For now, it is sufficient to indicate that Josephus bears early and reliable testimony to the execution of James in AD 62.

There is no good reason to doubt this account.

Hegesippus

A more detailed account of the trial and execution of James appears in Hegesippus, who according to Eusebius “came in the generation after the apostles” (c. AD 170). His writings about James are in Book 5 of his *Memoirs (Hypomnemata)*, which have been preserved in Eusebius:

Now some of the seven sects, which existed among the people and which have been mentioned by me in the Memoirs, asked him, ‘What is the gate of Jesus?’ and he replied that he was the Saviour. On account of these words some believed that Jesus is the Christ. But the sects mentioned above did not believe either in a resurrection or in one’s coming to give to every man according to his works. But as many as believed did so on account of James. Therefore when many even of the rulers believed, there was a commotion among the Jews and Scribes and Pharisees, who said that there was danger that the whole people would be looking for Jesus as the Christ. Coming therefore in a body to James they said, ‘We entreat thee, restrain the people; for they are gone astray in regard to Jesus, as if he were the Christ. We entreat thee to persuade all that have come to the feast of the Passover concerning Jesus; for we all have confidence in thee. For we bear thee witness, as do all the people, that thou art just, and dost not respect persons. Do thou therefore persuade the multitude not to be led astray concerning Jesus. For the whole people, and all of us also, have confidence in thee. Stand therefore upon the pinnacle of the temple, that from that high position thou mayest be clearly seen, and that thy words may be readily heard by all the people. For all the tribes, with the Gentiles also, are come together on account of the Passover.’

The aforesaid Scribes and Pharisees therefore placed James upon the pinnacle of the temple, and cried out to him and said: ‘Thou just one, in whom we ought all to have: confidence, forasmuch as the people are led, astray after Jesus, the crucified one, declare to us, what is the gate of Jesus.’ And he answered with a loud voice, ‘Why do ye ask me concerning Jesus, the Son of Man? He himself sitteth in heaven at the right hand of the great Power, and is about to come upon the clouds of heaven.’ And when many were fully convinced and gloried in the testimony of James, and said, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ these same Scribes and Pharisees said again to one another, ‘We have done badly in supplying such testimony to Jesus. But let us go up and throw him down, in order that they may be afraid to believe him.’

And they cried out, saying, ‘Oh! oh! the just man is also in error.’ And they fulfilled the Scripture written in Isaiah, ‘Let us take away the just man, because he is troublesome to us: therefore they shall eat the fruit of their doings.’ So they went up and threw down the just man, and said to each other, ‘Let us stone James the Just.’ And they began to stone him, for he was not killed by the fall; but he turned and knelt down and said, ‘I entreat thee, Lord God our Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And while they were thus stoning him one of the priests of

the sons of Rechab, the son of the Rechabites, who are mentioned by Jeremiah the prophet, cried out, saying, 'Cease, what do ye? The just one prayeth for you.' And one of them, who was a fuller, took the club with which he beat out clothes and struck the just man on the head. And thus he suffered martyrdom. And they buried him on the spot, by the temple, and his monument still remains by the temple. He became a true witness, both to Jews and Greeks, that Jesus is the Christ. And immediately Vespasian besieged them.⁴⁸

The account in Hegesippus is considerably different than the one in Josephus. In Josephus, James is a secondary figure (to the Sadducean high priest Ananus), whereas in Hegesippus focus is clearly on the righteousness and martyrdom of James. The account of James breaking the law in Josephus is replaced with his innocence in Hegesippus, even at the hands of his executioners. And Hegesippus adds that James was thrown from the temple and beaten to death to Josephus' claim that he was condemned to stoning.

There is little agreement among scholars on the integrity of this passage by Hegesippus.⁴⁹ Guy Schofield argues the detailed presentation of the account has the ring of accuracy and that there are stronger grounds for accepting it as authentic than rejecting it.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Johannes Munck considers the picture of James "ambiguous and contradictory" and questions whether it provides any valuable historical information at all.⁵¹

Close analysis of the text reveals certain tensions that call for caution in determining the historical value of this account. First, after James testifies to Jesus, Hegesippus says, "Many were convinced and rejoiced at James's testimony." If so, why would they not try to save James? The narrative makes it clear the events took place over a considerable period of time. Even if they were unsuccessful, it seems they would have

⁴⁸Eusebius of Caesaria, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.8-18, as quoted in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and H. Wace, trans. A. C. McGiffert (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890): 1:125-27.

⁴⁹Myllykoski, "James the Just in History (Part II)," 32.

⁵⁰Guy Schofield, *In the Year 62: The Murder of the Brother of the Lord and its Consequences* (London: George & Harrap & Co., 1962), 13-15.

⁵¹Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, 117.

at least tried to stop the death of James. Second, the account seems to be patterned after the deaths of Stephen and Jesus. James prays a prayer similar to the one delivered by Stephen at his death (Acts 7:59-60) and Jesus before his crucifixion (Luke 23:34). On the other hand, while this could be chalked up as Christian invention, it seems at least possible that James would have chosen to die by repeating the same lines as his brother, of whom he had faithfully followed for the last three decades. Third, the claim, “They buried him on the spot by the temple, and his gravestone is still there by the temple” seems questionable. Butz believes this claim has a “genuine element of veracity,” since it could have been verifiable by examining the temple.⁵² In contrast, many scholars have felt uneasy about affirming this since it seems to contradict Jewish law.⁵³ The temple was destroyed in AD 70, a century before the time Hegesippus wrote his account, and so the gravesite could likely not in fact be confirmed, as Butz suggests.⁵⁴

These points certainly lead to caution in evaluating the historical value of the account in Hegesippus, but they provide no reason to discount the entire tradition. The key points to be drawn from Hegesippus are the corroboration that James was stoned to death and that the cause of the action taken against him was his witness to Jesus. This final point could not have been gleaned from Josephus, although it is consistent with what he reports.⁵⁵ Even though there is exaggeration and historical inaccuracies in this account, a historical kernel can be ascertained. F. F. Bruce considers that

when the embellishments are stripped of, the story amounts to this: the high priest and his colleagues, alarmed at the growth of militant messianism, which threatened

⁵²Butz, *The Brother of Jesus*, 112.

⁵³Yaron Z. Eliav, “The Tomb of James, Brother of Jesus, as *Locus Memoriae*,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 97 (2004): 42. Strict Halakhic rules forbid any sort of impurity in the area of the temple, which makes use of the temple area for a gravesite very unlikely. Various proposals have attempted to resolve this difficulty by relocating the tomb elsewhere, such as the Valley of Jehoshaphat, but this contradicts the tradition as cited by Hegesippus.

⁵⁴Little, “The Death of James,” 27.

⁵⁵James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:1095.

to embroil the nation with the Roman power, demanded that James should disown his Nazarene claim that Jesus was the Messiah. His refusal to do so led to his death.⁵⁶

Clement of Alexandria

A second Christian account of the death of James can be found in the writings of Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150-215). The account of Clement is preserved by Eusebius⁵⁷ and is purportedly found in the seventh book of the *Hypotyposes*. Eusebius places the quote at the beginning of his chapter on the apostles, right after the ascension, but long before the extended quote by Hegesippus. Eusebius first cites Clement to establish that James was selected as the “bishop” of Jerusalem (*Hypotyposes*, Book 6) and then he provides the quote indicating his death:

The Lord after his resurrection imparted knowledge to James the Just and to John and Peter, and they imparted it to the rest of the apostles, and the rest of the apostles to the seventy, of whom Barnabas was one. But there were two Jameses: one called the Just, who was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and was beaten to death with a club by a fuller, and another who was beheaded.”⁵⁸

Little concludes that this passage has virtually no similarity with the account in Josephus, except the name James. He even suggests the different titles could indicate they are referring to two different men.⁵⁹ Given that Clement appears not to mention the stoning, it has been assumed that the original Christian account of the death of James used by Hegesippus, Clement, and the *Second Apocalypse of James* lacked the reference to stoning found in Josephus, and thus would indicate that Clement may have preserved an independent Christian tradition.⁶⁰ Luedemann suggests that the purest form of the

⁵⁶Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John*, 116.

⁵⁷Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1.4-5.

⁵⁸ Eusebius of Caesaria, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1.4b-5, as quoted in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff & H. Wace, trans. A. C. McGiffert (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 1:104.

⁵⁹Little, “The Death of James,” 13. Painter concurs that Clement is likely independent of Josephus since the stoning is not included. He argues that perhaps Clement did not want to portray James as dying by stoning, which was a more lawful form of execution. Rather, he wanted emphasis placed on James being a priest or even the high priest. See Painter, *Just James*, 116.

⁶⁰Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, 120-21. Painter suggests that Clement provides access to an

Christian tradition, which he believes is found in Clement, is mutually exclusive with that found in Josephus.⁶¹

But this conclusion may be too hasty. While Clement does not explicitly mention stoning, he *does* mention that James was “thrown down from the parapet.”⁶² Being pushed down from a significant height is one of the initial and integral steps of execution by stoning.⁶³ It is certainly possible that Clement, in his shortened version, only included the first and last parts of the execution of James as recorded in Hegesippus.

Bauckham concludes,

There is no need to postulate either an earlier version of Hegesippus’ own text or an original version of the source common to Hegesippus and the *Second Apocalypse of James* which lacked the stoning, and so nor is there any need to postulate dependence on Josephus at any stage. Josephus and the Christian tradition which we have in two forms (Hegesippus and the *Second Apocalypse of James*) are completely independent accounts of the death of James. The one element they have in common (that he was executed by stoning) shows that the Christian tradition, like Josephus, had some access to historical fact.⁶⁴

While Clement undoubtedly had some access to historical fact, the evidence is not compelling, as a few recent scholars have suggested, that he provides an early independent account of the death of James. It is for good reason the majority of modern

early independent Christian tradition of the death of James that Hegesippus has combined with Josephus in rendering his own account. James Painter, “Who Was James?” in *The Brother of Jesus*, 53. Butz also suggests that Clement’s account varies from Josephus and that it is “possible that Clement was drawing on an alternative tradition that was independent of Josephus” (Butz, *The Brother of Jesus*, 108).

⁶¹Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 173.

⁶²The precise location of the parapet is unknown. It is questionable whether someone from the time of Hegesippus or Clement would have known the particular dimensions of the temple since it would have been destroyed at least a century earlier. The data suggests three possible locations, with the first two most probable: (1) the top of Solomon’s Porch, which is located on the east side of the court and would have been about thirty-seven and a half feet. (2) The top of the Royal Porch on the south side of the court, which would have been at least fifty feet. (3) The top of the Temple itself. Nevertheless, once the three accounts of James being thrown from the temple (Hegesippus, *Second Apocalypse of James*, and the *Pseudo-Clementines*) are considered, there is reason to suggest there was an early tradition of James being cast from the temple. See Little, “The Death of James,” 62-70.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 87-89.

⁶⁴Richard Bauckham, “For What Offence Was James Put to Death?” in *James the Just and Christian Origins*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1999), 205-26.

scholars agree that Clement is dependent upon Hegesippus.⁶⁵ The account in Clement provides early third-century evidence for the tradition of the execution of James within Christian circles, but it is likely not independent of Hegesippus.

The First Apocalypse of James

The *First Apocalypse of James* is an early third century Gnostic text based upon a series of personal revelations James receives from Jesus.⁶⁶ There is no doubt this text refers to James the Just, as Jesus says, “I have given you a sign of these things, James, my brother. For not without reason have I called you my brother, although you are not my brother materially” (*First Apocalypse of James* 24.14-15). It may initially appear that Jesus is denying that James is his brother, but this is not so. Rather, this passage reveals the Gnostic belief that Jesus did not take on a physical body. This is made clear later in the dialogue when Jesus appears to James after his crucifixion: “Never have I suffered in any way, nor have I been distressed. And this people has done me no harm” (*First Apocalypse of James* 31.15-24). Along with reporting an appearance to James, the *First Apocalypse* also reports the tradition that James was called “the Just” as well as that he was the principal leader in the early church. Clearly it preserves some accurate history.

The *First Apocalypse of James* is typically divided into three sections: (1) a conversation between Jesus and James before the crucifixion; (2) a dialogue between James and the risen Jesus; and (3) Jesus’ prediction of the death of James. Stanley Jones argues that there is no reason for denying that the *First Apocalypse of James* is dependent upon Hegesippus.⁶⁷ And yet he gives only one point of contact between the two

⁶⁵F. Stanley Jones, “The Martyrdom of James in Hegesippus, Clement of Alexandria, and Christian Apocrypha, Including Nag Hammadi: A Study of Textual Relations,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 29 (1990): 328.

⁶⁶Only two extant versions of the *First Apocalypse of James* have been published. One of them is the Tchacos Codex and the other from the fifth of the Nag Hammadi codices. Both versions are in Coptic, yet there was likely an original in Greek dating from the end of the second century to the beginning of the third. Mikael Caley Grams Haxby, “The *First Apocalypse of James*: Martyrdom and Sexual Difference” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2013), 21-26.

⁶⁷Jones, “The Martyrdom of James in Hegesippus,” 334.

documents to demonstrate dependency. Painter seems to be right in his assessment: “Certainly the one point of contact is insufficient to show that the *First Apocalypse* was dependent on Hegesippus, especially when other differences between the two works are given due weight.”⁶⁸ The writer of the *First Apocalypse* may have been aware of Hegesippus, as well as other traditions, but there is not sufficient reason to conclude he depended entirely upon him as Jones suggests.

While there were formerly debates about the damaged ending of the martyrdom account, the *First Apocalypse of James* is now considered an example of martyrdom literature.⁶⁹ In fact, the entirety of the text aims to prepare James (as well as the reader) for martyrdom.⁷⁰

There is substantial debate about whether the *First Apocalypse of James* originated in Jewish Christian circles or whether it is primarily Gnostic.⁷¹ Either way, the martyrdom account in the *First Apocalypse* likely predates the Gnostic influence.⁷² The historical value of this text lies not in that it contains an independent early tradition of the martyrdom of James, although this may be a live option. Rather, the value lies in that it shows how the tradition of the martyrdom of James was embraced by Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic sources. The fact that the martyrdom tradition of James appears in Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic texts within a century and a half from the event, suggests an early, widespread, and consistent tradition regarding the fate of James. The tradition of the martyrdom of James must have been quite strong at the time of the writing of the *First*

⁶⁸Painter, *Just James*, 180.

⁶⁹Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 159.

⁷⁰Haxby, “The *First Apocalypse of James*,” iii.

⁷¹Myllykoski, “James the Just in History (Part II),” 57-59. Some have argued that the persistent use of “Rabbi” for Jesus indicates that the text has a Jewish Christian origin. But as Myllykoski pointed out, this need not necessarily imply contact with the Jewish Christian tradition.

⁷²Painter makes the observation that while the text does have Gnostic elements, the persecution and martyrdom of James is decidedly non-Valentinian, and thus likely antedates Valentinian influence. (e.g., Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 10; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.33.9). See Painter, *Just James*, 169.

Apocalypse for a Gnostic text to incorporate the execution of James rather than transforming the entire tradition.

The *Second Apocalypse of James*

The *Second Apocalypse of James* is part of tractate four of the Codex V of the Nag Hammadi Library. There is no agreement about the dating of the *Second Apocalypse*, although many scholars date it as early as the first half of the second century.⁷³ Little dates it sometime between AD 400, when the manuscripts at Nag Hammadi were buried, and AD 62, when James was killed. Regardless of the precise date, the *Second Apocalypse* preserves an additional early Gnostic tradition of the martyrdom of James.

As in the *First Apocalypse of James*, the key figure is clearly James the Just, the brother of Jesus. The text contains two primary sections—a discussion of the revelatory discourse James experienced with Jesus in Jerusalem after his resurrection (written by Mareim, one of the priests), and a depiction of the martyrdom of James. James ends his revelatory discourse with a prediction of the destruction of the temple and its cult, which is the final offence that causes the priests and all the people and the crowd to have him stoned to death (*Second Apocalypse of James* 60.15-63.32).

Two significant facts stand out for this investigation. First, James is stoned as part of his execution as in the tradition from Josephus and Hegesippus. The narrator records that “all of them were saying with one voice, ‘Come, let us stone the Just One.’ And they arose, saying, ‘Yes, let us kill this man, that he may be take from our midst. For he will be of no use to us.’”⁷⁴ Thus, the stoning is preserved in Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic traditions. Second, as in the Christian tradition (Hegesippus), his death comes as

⁷³Myllykoski, “James the Just in History (Part II),” 63.

⁷⁴James M. Robinson, ed., *The Second Apocalypse of James*, trans. Charles W. Hedrick, The Nag Hammadi Library in English (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1977), 254.

a result of his explicit proclamation of the teachings of Jesus.⁷⁵ In both accounts it is claimed that those who prosecute James have gone astray (*Second Apocalypse of James* 62.7 and *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.15). In the *Second Apocalypse* the crowd seized James and struck him, dragged him upon the ground, put a stone on his abdomen and then said, “You have erred!” Specifically, it is his preaching against the temple that riles the crowd. This is similar to the charge raised against Jesus (Mark 14:58), which suggests it may rely upon an earlier tradition.

Because of these similarities, and a few more, Jones suggests that the author of the *Second Apocalypse of James* is dependent upon Hegesippus. He considers this the simplest explanation.⁷⁶ The two accounts are certainly similar, but the differences count heavily against dependency. For instance, although James is stoned in both accounts, he is beaten to death with a fuller’s club in Hegesippus, which is missing in the *Second Apocalypse*. And the method of stoning in the *Second Apocalypse* is much closer to Jewish law than in Hegesippus.⁷⁷ The accounts also differ over who puts James to death. In the account in Hegesippus, it is the “scribes and Pharisees,” but in the *Second Apocalypse* the priests execute him. While there is not likely direct dependence, as Jones suggests, there is a common tradition about the martyrdom of James.⁷⁸

According to Bauckham, this common tradition is likely an early second century Jewish Christian source.⁷⁹ Thus, he concludes there are *at least* two early streams of tradition recounting the death of James. On the other hand, given the complexity of the tradition, Painter believes the *Second Apocalypse* draws on a tradition independent from

⁷⁵Of course, the *Second Apocalypse of James* has a Gnostic interpretation of these teachings. The key point is that both accounts agree that James taught the message of Jesus, which angered the crowds and religious leaders, and was put to death for it.

⁷⁶Jones, “The Martyrdom of James in Hegesippus,” 331-33.

⁷⁷See Little, “The Death of James,” 71-93.

⁷⁸Ward, “James of Jerusalem,” 809-10.

⁷⁹Bauckham, “For What Offence?” 204.

Josephus and Hegesippus that flowed through an early form of Jewish Christian Gnosticism.⁸⁰ If this were the case, there would be at least three independent traditions of the death of James. Although it is difficult to know for sure what the original sources were for the various accounts, the *Second Apocalypse* (as well as the *First*), reminds that the tradition of the martyrdom of James had to be early, widespread, and consistent for three competing sects (Jewish, Christian, Gnostic) to proclaim it.

Pseudo Clementines

The Pseudo-Clementines consist of two novels (*Recognitions* and *Homilies*) that contain a fictional account of the journeys of Clement of Rome. The narrative is addressed to James the Just in the voice of Clement, even though it is a pseudepigraphical account. According to the *Recognitions*, Clement went on a spiritual journey that eventually led him to Christ. He met Barnabas and Peter, and then joined Peter on a missionary trip.

The Pseudo-Clementines, in the final form they exist today, were written between the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries. Yet most scholars agree that both *Recognitions* and *Homilies* relied upon an earlier Jewish Christian source (*Grundschrift*) written in Syria in the third century.⁸¹

Section 1:66-1.71 of the *Recognitions* is a subsection of a larger text, embedded within the Pseudo-Clementines, often referred to as *The Ascents of James*. The name comes from an incident where James ascends the Temple steps to join a public debate about whether Jesus is the Messiah. He uses Scripture to argue that the Messiah would come twice, once in humbleness and then again in glory. Through seven days of debate, James persuades the people and the chief priest to get baptized. But then an “enemy” came and persuaded the people in opposition to James, creating an uproar that

⁸⁰Painter, *Just James*, 177.

⁸¹Robert E. Van Voorst, *The Ascents of James: History and Theology of a Jewish-Christian Community*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 112 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 2.

led bloodshed and other violent acts. Eventually they “threw James from the top of the stairs, and when he fell was as dead, so he did not strike him a second time” (*Ascent of James* 1.70.8).⁸² It soon becomes evident the “enemy” is the pre-converted Saul, who is engaging in one of his violent persecutions of the Christian church. Some scholars consider this episode as a redaction of the account of the martyrdom of James using the ravaging of Saul against the church in Acts 8:1-3 as a guide.⁸³

Given the similarities and differences between the account of the martyrdom of James in Hegesippus and *The Ascents of James*, scholars have come to diverging conclusions regarding the original source(s).⁸⁴ The most significant difference between the accounts is that James survives the fall in *The Ascents of James*, whereas in Hegesippus and the *Second Apocalypse of James* he is subsequently killed—beaten with a club in the former and stoned in the latter. His opponents leave thinking he is dead, and so they don’t strike him again (*Ascent of James* 1.70.8). It could be suggested that this contradicts the account in Josephus, Hegesippus, and the *Second Apocalypse*. However, this section is clearly the result of redaction since James needs to be kept alive for further events in the story.⁸⁵ It is interesting that both Hegesippus and the *Second Apocalypse of James* agree with *The Ascents of James* that James did not die as a result of this fall—the fatal blow came later.⁸⁶

⁸²This English translation of the Syriac comes from W. Frankenberg as recorded in Voorst, *The Ascents of James*, 74.

⁸³Myllykoski, “James the Just in History (Part II),” 83.

⁸⁴For instance, Stanley Jones believes *The Ascents of James* is dependent upon Hegesippus. On the other hand, Gerd Luedemann argues for an archetypal source they both rely upon. Van Voorst has argued that there is likely an earlier source behind R 1.33-1.71. His main arguments are that the ideology and context of R1.66-71 differs significantly from other parts of R1 and the rest of the Pseudo-Clementines. (29-46). See Jones, “The Martyrdom of James,” 328-31; and Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 176.

⁸⁵Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 176. Given the willingness of the author of the Pseudo-Clementines to redact the tradition according to his purposes, Bauckham concludes that the account provides little help in reconstructing what really happened. Any differences, says Bauckham, can be explained as the author’s reuse of material for his own purposes. See Bauckham, “For What Offence?” 206.

⁸⁶Myllykoski, “James the Just in (Part II),” 75.

As stated previously, there is no consensus on the substantially similar martyrdom accounts in Hegesippus, the *Second Apocalypse of James*, and the Pseudo-Clementines. While there are some significant differences, the similarities are most important for this investigation, since they likely indicate an early, common tradition. The three martyrdom narratives share the location of the events (at the Temple), the significant number of spectators, a speech by James defending the teachings of Jesus that are ultimately rejected by the religious leaders who decide to kill him, and his fall. The Pseudo-Clementines provide further support for the persistent tradition that James publicly proclaimed the message of Jesus and suffered persecution for his faith.

Why Was James Killed?

Given the reference to the death of James in Josephus, as well as later Christian and Gnostic sources, there is little doubt James was executed in AD 62. But a key question remains—*why was James killed?* If he were killed for political reasons unrelated to his faith, then he would hardly qualify under the traditional definition of a martyr. The accounts of the death of James in Hegesippus, the *Second Apocalypse of James*, and the Pseudo-Clementines indicate that James died as a result of his proclamation of the Christian faith, even though they differ on the particulars. This traditional view has been embraced by most scholars. James Dunn believes it is enough to conclude that “[a]t all events, we can be confident that the tradition of James being sentenced to judicial execution by stoning is well rooted in history, that the move against James was at high priestly instigation, and that the reason was the intersectorian rivalry provoked (probably) by the success of the early preaching and claims about Jesus.”⁸⁷

Yet recently some scholars have questioned the reliability of this tradition, and believe that when focus is placed on the account in Josephus, it renders a very different verdict.⁸⁸ Unlike Hegesippus (and Clement), the *Second Apocalypse of James*, and the

⁸⁷Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 2:1095.

⁸⁸James S. McLaren, “Ananus, James, and Earliest Christianity. Josephus’ Account of the

Pseudo-Clementines, Josephus does not explicitly tie the death of James to his Christian proclamation. Rather, Josephus reports that James and his companions were condemned to stoning as “lawbreakers.” The accounts all agree, though, that James was executed at the hands of the Jewish authorities.⁸⁹ Condemnation as a lawbreaker would be consistent with a number of crimes according to Jewish law. Yet Michael R. Licona makes a keen observation: “However, in the New Testament, Christians were often regarded as lawbreakers by the Jewish authorities because they were perceived as promoting ideas that were contrary to the Jewish Law (Acts 6:13; 18:13; 21:28).”⁹⁰ The key factor for determining the nature of the “crime” is the penalty of stoning. Religious leaders attempted to stone Jesus on multiple occasions for blasphemy (John 8:58-59, 10:30-39, 11:8; cf. Luke 4:16-30). Darrell Bock rightly draws attention to this fact:

What Law was it James broke, given his reputation within Christian circles as a Jewish Christian leader who was careful about keeping the Law? It would seem likely that the Law had to relate to his Christological allegiances and a charge of blasphemy. This would fit the fact that he was stoned, which was the penalty for such a crime, and parallels how Stephen was handled as well.⁹¹

Although Josephus does not provide the specific reason for the death of James, blasphemy is consistent with his condemnation as a lawbreaker. Even so, McLaren suggests that if Josephus wanted the readers to understand that the charge against James was religious, he would have stated this explicitly.⁹² But this is an argument from silence. The reason Josephus may not give specific details as to the nature of the crime is that it was not integral to his larger focus on the reckless behavior of Ananus the high priest,

Death of James,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 52 (2001): 1-25.

⁸⁹This point is not insignificant, for it shows similarity in how the brothers James and Jesus were killed. Craig Evans notes that “two Galilean brothers—Jesus and James—were put to death either indirectly or directly by two high priestly brothers-in-law—Caiaphas and Ananus” (Craig A. Evans, “Jesus and James Martyrs of the Temple,” in *James the Just and Christian Origins*, 237).

⁹⁰Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 457.

⁹¹Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge against Jesus in Mark 14:53-65* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 196 n. 30.

⁹²McLaren, “Ananus, James, and Earliest Christianity,” 16.

which led to his quick dismissal by King Agrippa. One cannot conclude that later Christian writers necessarily embellished the stories of James dying as a martyr from the absence of details in Josephus—he was motivated by different interests in his report about James. Even though further details are lacking, Josephus considering James a lawbreaker for blasphemy is consistent with later Christian accounts that he died as a Christian martyr.

McLaren also suggests that the crime may have been entirely “trumped up in order to score a victory over a rival faction.”⁹³ This “trumped up” charge could be from either a personal grudge or competition with a contrary party within Jewish politics. Yet it seems unthinkable that Ananus would have acted contrarily to his understanding of Jewish Law. James must have been sentenced for a crime that Jewish Law considered stoning an appropriate punishment.

Another possible reason for the stoning of James is that he was charged with seducing the people to idolatry (Deut 13:1-18), which is a clear violation of the second commandment. Deuteronomy 13 provides three groups of people who are to be killed for “seducing” the people to worship other gods. The first group is false prophets: “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams” (13:1-3a). A false prophet who leads people astray is to be put to death (v. 5). Technically, a prophet in the Old Testament was one who is a “proclaimer” and “forthteller.”⁹⁴ In the ancient Near East, a prophet was commonly considered an ambassador of the gods who claimed to speak for them and champion their cause.⁹⁵ While Jesus could have been understood as a prophet in this

⁹³Ibid., 17-18.

⁹⁴Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary, vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 230.

⁹⁵Ibid.

manner, it seems unlikely for James, since it is never reported he prophesied or worked miracles.⁹⁶

The second category in Deuteronomy 13 is someone who secretly entices his or her own relatives to follow other gods. Deuteronomy 13:9-10 says how to treat such an offender: “But you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” As a public leader in the early church, it is difficult to consider James one who “secretly” led the people to worship other gods.

The third category regards towns that have been led astray to worship other gods: “And behold, if it be true and certain that such an abomination has been done among you, you shall surely put the inhabitants of that city to the sword, devoting it to destruction, all who are in it and its cattle, with the edge of the sword” (Deut 13:14b-15). Focus in this passage is on the punishment to be merited to the town that is led astray by “worthless fellows.” Punishment for those who lead the town astray is not described, unless it is assumed they are to be killed with the sword along with town members. This final category seems difficult to apply to James since focus is on punishing the town gone astray, rather than the perpetrators of the idolatry.

The question is whether there is leeway in the application of these principles beyond the specific cases cited in Deuteronomy 13. In other words, while it is a stretch to include James in these particular examples, is there precedent for thinking he could have been stoned for enticing the people to “go after other gods”? Rabbinic literature considered one who led a town astray a *maddiah*—a term that had application beyond the specific examples in Deuteronomy 13.⁹⁷ Bauckham explains,

⁹⁶Bauckham, “For What Offence?” 226. I am heavily indebted to Richard Bauckham for my analysis of the reasons for the death of James. He provides the most promising and insightful explanation for his death.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 228.

In that case, the Mishna extends the punishment by stoning from the *mēsît* [one who secretly leads another astray] to include also the *maddiah*, but not the deceiving prophet, whose execution takes a less severe form. The Babylonian Talmud's comments on *m. Sanh. 7:10* record two other rabbinic views: that all three categories in Deuteronomy 13 incur death by stoning, and that only the *mēsît* is to be stoned, while the deceiving prophet and the *maddiah* are both to die by strangulation (*b. Sanh. 67a*).⁹⁸

Bauckham is right to raise the question of the application of the Talmud and Mishna to the late Second Temple period. They were written much later and may not provide direct insight to the legal ruling regarding the death of James. However, Bauckham observes that they do “illustrate the sort of halakhic differences that could easily have existed at that time.”⁹⁹ The Talmud and Mishna provide a plausible explanation for why Josephus reports that James was condemned to death by stoning that broadly matches what is found later in Christian and Gnostic sources.

For instance, in the account by Hegesippus, there are four warnings that the people are “going astray” or have “gone astray” because of James’ teachings about Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees specifically ask James to “persuade the crowd not to err regarding Jesus.” The Greek term has the meaning not of erring morally but of rejecting the God of Israel.¹⁰⁰ Clearly, in the account by Hegesippus, the primary concern of the religious leaders who condemn James is that he is leading the people to idolatry. A similar statement also appears in the *Second Apocalypse of James*. Right after throwing James down and placing their feet on him along with a large stone, the scribes cry out, “You have erred!” In Hegesippus, James leads the people astray, whereas in the *Second Apocalypse of James* it is James who is led astray. Both agree that James was killed specifically for his theological error that involved “going astray.” Given James’ theological error appears in both Christian and Gnostic sources—that are likely independent—it must have been a part of an earlier tradition.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 230.

Both explanations entertained here can plausibly account for why Josephus described James as being condemned to death by stoning. And the idea that the execution of James was related to his proclamation of his Christian faith finds later support in both Hegesippus and the *Second Apocalypse of James*. This is why in his recent monograph on James, Patrick Hartin concludes, “Taking the traditions of Josephus together with those of Hegesippus, Clement, and Eusebius himself, one concludes that there is a basic historical core that testifies to the fact that James did indeed die the death of a Christian martyr.”¹⁰¹

Even if James did not die as a direct result of his faith, he certainly believed it sincerely and willingly put himself in danger to advance it. He ministered publicly in unstable times when his life could have been in danger at any moment. He was certainly aware of the cost many before him had paid for publicly embracing the new faith: Jesus, the founder of Christianity and his older brother, was killed for blasphemy (Mark 14:53-65), the Twelve were arrested by the Sadducees for their healing and preaching ministry (Acts 5:18), Stephen was stoned for proclaiming that Jesus would destroy the temple and overturn the customs of Moses (Acts 6:14), and James the son of Zebedee, one of the original three “pillars,” was killed by Agrippa (Acts 12:2). James may have had a more conservative view of the law, but he nevertheless publicly identified himself as the leader of this group, and in fact had now become one of the three pillars, along with Peter and John (Gal 2:9). F. F. Bruce has suggested that James’ limited association with Paul may have even contributed to his illegal execution.¹⁰² James certainly would have been aware of this possibility and yet he gave Paul’s gentile mission approval (Acts 15:13-20). The key point for this investigation is this: James willingly put himself in danger as the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem, which was based on the identity of its executed leader (his brother) as an enemy of Rome, and where many of the original leaders

¹⁰¹Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, 147.

¹⁰²Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James, and John*, 110.

suffered and were killed for their faith. The best explanation for James' willingness to suffer and die for his faith is that he believed he had seen the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:7).

Conclusion

The traditional view that James was martyred in Jerusalem in AD 62 has been carefully analyzed. There is additional later material that further confirms this tradition,¹⁰³ but it will not be analyzed in depth for this analysis has focused on material that falls within (or close to) the living memory of James.

This close examination of the evidence indicates that the following points can be regarded to have varying degrees of confidence from the early tradition regarding James:

1. James was executed by stoning—*the highest possible probability* (Josephus *Antiquities* 20.197-203; Hegesippus *Hypomnemata* Book 5 as recorded in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23; Clement of Alexandria *Hypotyposes* Book 7 as recorded in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.1.4-5; *Second Apocalypse of James* 60.15-63.32)
2. James died as a Christian martyr—*very probably true* (likely interpretation of Josephus *Antiquities* 20.197-203; Hegesippus *Hypomnemata* Book 5 as recorded in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23; Clement of Alexandria *Hypotyposes* Book 7 as recorded in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.1.4-5; *First Apocalypse of James*; *Second Apocalypse of James* 60.15-63.32).
3. James was thrown down from a high structure at the Temple—*more probable than not* (Hegesippus *Hypomnemata* Book 5 as recorded in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23; *Second Apocalypse of James* 60.15-63.32; Clement of Alexandria *Hypotyposes* Book 7 as recorded in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.1.4-5; Pseudo-Clementines 1.70.8; consistency with Josephus *Antiquities* 20.197.

¹⁰³For instance, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23; Origen, *Contra Celsum* I.47, II.13; *On Matthew* X.17; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 20.1; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 2.7-9; the Manichaean Psalm Book.

CHAPTER 9
THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN, SON OF ZEBEDEE

John was the younger brother of James, son of Zebedee. He was a fisherman in Galilee with his older brother and father until he was selected by Jesus to be among his closest followers (Mark 1:16; Matt 4:21-22, 10:21-22; Luke 5:1-11).¹ Although there are four people named “John” in the New Testament,² the apostle John is often designated as the “son of Zebedee” or the “brother of James” to separate him from the others.

There is only one recorded scene in the Gospels in which John is singled out without reference to his brother. John says to Jesus: “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (Mark 9:38). But Jesus rebuked him, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward” (Mark 9:39). Rather than showing that John is particularly intolerant among the disciples, as some have suggested,³ it may be that John is simply speaking on behalf of *all* the disciples. That fact that John uses “we” indicates that he was speaking for the Twelve, although he certainly could have been the instigator. The larger point of this passage is that all the disciples,

¹Since James is typically mentioned before John, he is often considered the older brother. However, John is mentioned first four times in Luke-Acts (Luke 8:51; 9:28; Acts 1:13; 12:2), which may be because of his prominence.

²There is John the Baptist (Mark 1:1-8; Luke 1:5-17; 3:2-20; 7:18-35; John 1:19-28), Simon Peter’s father, named John (John 1:42; 21:15-19), John Mark (Acts 12:12; 13:4-5; 15:37-41; 2 Tim 4:11), and John, who was of the high priestly family of Annas (Acts 4:6).

³Emil G. Kraeling, *The Disciples* (Skokie, IL: Rand McNally, 1966), 130.

including the most privileged ones, such as John, fail to understand what the passion means for their life and mission.⁴

John also appears in an important narrative alongside his brother, James. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus sent messengers ahead of him to make preparations in a Samaritan village. But the people rejected him since he was headed to Jerusalem. When James and John heard this they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:54b). But Jesus rebuked them and they went to another village (9:55). Their response is certainly reminiscent of the words of Elijah to the captain of fifty men (2 Kgs 1:10-12) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24-29). Is this seemingly harsh response why James and John were given the title “Sons of Thunder” (*Boanerges*)? Alan Culpepper suggests that it may not have been a disparaging nickname, but a promise of what they could become.⁵ After all, Peter was certainly not rock-like in his faith when Jesus renamed him the “rock” (Matt 16:18).

John always appears among the top four names in the lists of the twelve disciples (Mark 3:14-19; Matt 10:2-4; Luke 6:14-16). He is even mentioned second in Acts, right after Peter (Acts 1:13). With Peter, John healed a man (Acts 3:1-7), and again with Peter, he spoke publicly with boldness about what they had “seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). John did not base his belief in Jesus upon secondhand reports, but was an eyewitness of the risen Jesus (Acts 1:1-11; 4:20). Regardless of his fate, he undoubtedly was willing to suffer and face persecution for this conviction. Seeing Jesus alive from the grave gave John, along with the rest of the apostles, the boldness to keep preaching the faith even after facing imprisonment (Acts 4:1-3, 13).

⁴William Lane observes that after each of the three prophecies of the passion, Mark inserts the response of at least one of the inner disciples: Peter (8:31-33), John (9:38-41), and James, with John (10:32-40). The point is that even the most privileged disciples fail to understand the reality and significance of his death until *after* the resurrection. See William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 342.

⁵R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 40.

The last biblical report about John shows him becoming a missionary with Peter (Acts 8:14-25).⁶ Given his prominence in Acts alongside Peter, Culpepper concludes that John “was remembered as one of the leading apostles of the early church, ranking second only to Peter in his importance in the church in Jerusalem prior to the Jerusalem conference and the emergence of James as the leading voice of the Christian community in Jerusalem.”⁷ Paul considers John one of the “pillars” of the church along with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus (Gal 2:9).

John was among the inner circle of the twelve disciples. The Gospel of Mark reports that Peter, James, John, and Andrew were present at the discourse at the Mount of Olives (13:3). Along with Peter and James, John uniquely witnessed the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:37-42), the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13; Matt 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36), and joined Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42). It is interesting that these three instances each relate to death—*preparing* for death (Jesus in Gethsemane), *rising* from the dead (Jairus’ daughter), and *appearing* after death (Jesus, Moses, and Elijah). Could it be that Jesus is uniquely preparing the three of them to face martyrdom by showing them God’s power over death? Brian Incigneri suggests that Mark presents the “inner three” as key figures in his narrative because the readers would have already known that they were faithful to the point of martyrdom.⁸ There is solid evidence Peter and James the son of Zebedee died as martyrs, but what about John?

The traditional view is that the apostle John was the author of the five Johannine writings (Gospel of John, three epistles, and Revelation), was the “beloved disciple” who sat by the Lord’s side at the Last Supper, and died a natural death at an

⁶It is certainly ironic that John, who once asked Jesus if he should send down fire to burn up the Samaritans (Acts 9:54), now travels to Samaria to pray that they might receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-15).

⁷Culpepper, *John*, 48.

⁸Brian C. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark’s Gospel*, Biblical Interpretation Series 65 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 348.

advanced age in Ephesus (c. AD 103). Even though this is a minority position among scholars, this view has experienced a sort of resurgence.⁹ Since the writing of the Gospel is typically dated to the mid-90s, identifying John the apostle as the author lends credibility to the traditional view that he died a natural death as an old man in Ephesus. It is certainly possible John could have written the Gospel after returning to Ephesus from Patmos and then faced martyrdom at an advanced age, but there is only inferential evidence this is the case.¹⁰ Therefore, the authorship of the Gospel is inextricably linked with John's fate. It is important to realize that questions of the authorship of the traditional Johannine texts are distinct from issues of inspiration and canonicity.¹¹

Authorship of the Gospel of John

Proponents of the traditional position provide both internal and external evidence.

⁹Recent proponents of the traditional view include Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 22-41; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 82-90; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 24-29; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:81-139.; Andreas Köstenberger, *John*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 6-8; Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 23-30; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 4-25; John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM, 1985).

¹⁰Robert Eisler believes a late martyrdom for John is "undoubtedly historical." He claims it is more probably that "the real truth has survived in the legend of the Evangelist John being given the poison-cup. That he survived this treatment, unharmed like another Mithridates, is obviously a pious invention, but it may be true that he was sentenced to drink the hemlock-poison by a human provincial governor wanting to preserve the venerable old man from a worse fate." Robert Eisler, *The Enigma of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Methuen & Co, 1938), 174-75. This is an interesting hypothesis, although it is almost entirely conjecture.

¹¹The Gospel of John, for instance, is anonymous. Revelation claims to have been written by a "servant John" who bore witness to all he saw about Jesus (Rev 1:1-2). But it does not indicate *which* John this is. Just as there is disagreement about the author of Hebrews without questioning inspiration, there can be disagreement about the writings typically attributed to John. That is why Leon Morris concludes, "Even the most conservative among us need not feel bound to espouse any particular view of authorship [for the Gospel of John]" (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 4).

Internal Evidence

The classic defense of internal authorship for the Gospel of John comes from B. F. Westcott at the beginning of the twentieth century. In five stages, he argued the author must be (1) Jewish, (2) from Palestine, (3) an eyewitness, (4) one of the twelve apostles, and (5) the apostle John.¹² His first two points are largely accepted, but there is much more debate about the last three. The last two in particular are critical points for establishing the internal case of authorship. And this relies upon demonstrating that the author of the fourth Gospel, John the son of Zebedee, is the beloved disciple. Regardless of the identity of this disciple, it is clear that he (or she) is the source behind the Gospel: “This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true” (21:24). The question is, is John the son of Zebedee the beloved disciple?

Traditionally the answer to this question has been yes. As seen, many contemporary scholars defend this view. But many *conservative* scholars disagree. Thus, this is an issue in which even conservative scholars differ amongst themselves. Ben Witherington, for instance, defends the view that Lazarus was the beloved disciple.¹³ A. T. Lincoln has argued that the beloved disciple is not a real participant in the action, but is a literary device meant to draw in the reader.¹⁴ Richard Bauckham identifies John “the Elder” as the beloved disciple and the author of the Gospel of John. Second century writers, according to Bauckham, understood this was not the apostle John, but in the

¹²B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Authorized Version with Introduction and Notes* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1882), v-xxviii.

¹³Witherington argues that Lazarus was the beloved disciple who wrote the Gospel of John as well as the three epistles but *not* Revelation, which he claims was written by John of Patmos. He believes the beloved disciple (Lazarus) died in Ephesus and was confused with John of Patmos. A number of other scholars have adopted this view as well, including J. N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black, 1968), 29-32. See Ben Witherington III, *What Have They Done with Jesus?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 141-66.

¹⁴A. T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 20-26.

course of time their identities were fused.¹⁵ George Beasley-Murray concludes that the beloved disciple is an unknown historical figure although in his estimation, he (or she) is not a member of the Twelve,¹⁶ yet he writes, “In the end we have to admit that these are all guesses, some with less and some with more plausibility.¹⁷ The important point for this investigation is not to settle the issue, but to highlight the diversity of views *within* conservative scholarship. There simply is no settled view as to the identity of the beloved disciple and every view has varying degrees of difficulty. While the evidence for identifying the apostle John as the beloved disciple is stronger than many scholars concede, the conclusions must be tentative as to the value internal evidence provides for authorship of the Gospel of John and thus his traditional fate in Ephesus.

John 21:21-23a is typically cited as a passage to indicate that the apostle John would live a long life: “When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about this man?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!’ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die.” Of course, applying this to the longevity of John’s life relies upon identifying John as the beloved disciple. If the beloved disciple is not John, then this passage loses its force. Frederick Weidmann writes,

Does this passage [John 21:21-23] furnish information regarding the longevity of John’s life? In light of modern scholarship on the text, there is no readily available answer to the question. The periscope may or may not furnish information about the lifespan of the beloved disciple; that character may or may not be John. In

¹⁵Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 368, 393-416. As support for this view, Bauckham observes that this happened with Philip the apostle and Philip the evangelist.

¹⁶George, R Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), lxxii-lxxiv.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, lxxiv.

approaching an area of study in which “the questions are numerous and so too the answers—numerous and embarrassing,”¹⁸

Weidmann thus concludes that “one must, at best, be tentative.”¹⁹

A number of other possibilities, such as John Mark, Thomas, Nathanael, Matthias, the rich young ruler, Paul, Benjamin, and Gentile Christianity have been advanced and critiqued.²⁰ And yet the point should be clear—while a strong case can be made to identify the apostle John as the beloved disciple, the internal evidence does not require it.²¹ The diversity of opinions among conservative scholars drives one to be cautious regarding conclusions as to the identity of the beloved disciple and to the extent the internal evidence from the Gospel of John provides support for the traditional view regarding the fate of the apostle John.

External Evidence

Analysis of the external evidence must begin with the observation that the early church seems to unanimously identify the apostle John as the author of his respective Gospel. Nevertheless, this position has been challenged from both conservative and liberal scholars alike. D. A. Carson observes that from the end of the

¹⁸Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Function and Background of the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 115.

¹⁹Frederick W. Weidmann, *Polycarp & John: The Harris Fragments and Their Challenge to the Literary Traditions* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 139.

²⁰Culpepper, *John*, 72-85.

²¹John the apostle is the most likely candidate for the beloved disciple, although Lazarus comes in a close second. The positions held by Bauckham (John the elder) and Beasley-Murray (unknown historical figure) must be considered possible. The position held by Lincoln seems least probable since the beloved disciple is not presented as a literary device but an actual historical person. Perhaps the strongest point in favor of identifying the beloved disciple as the apostle John is the close access he has to Jesus. The beloved disciple appears at crucial moments throughout the Gospel of John (John 13:23; 19:26-27; 20:1-10; 21:1-8, 20-25), which is a privilege reserved primarily for the Twelve. And furthermore, the beloved disciple is shown in close relationship to Peter throughout the Gospel of John, which is true of the apostle John (Acts 3:1-4, 11; 4:1-22; 8:14-25). As for Lazarus, it is noteworthy that Mary and Martha approach and refer to Lazarus as “he whom you love” (John 11:3). Shortly after the raising of Lazarus the beloved disciple is explicitly identified (13:23). If Lazarus were the beloved disciple, it would also make sense of the rumor that the beloved disciple would never die (John 21:23). Lazarus had already died and been raised, so perhaps they believed he would live again until the resurrection.

second century forward “there is virtual agreement in the church as to the authority, canonicity and authorship of the Gospel of John.”²² According to Carson, the earliest unambiguous citation that the Gospel of John was written by “John” is found in Theophilus of Antioch (c. 180): “And hence the holy writings teach us, and all the spirit-bearing [inspired] men, one of whom, John, says, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.’”²³ Nevertheless, while the author is identified as “John,” Theophilus does not explicitly indicate John *the apostle* is meant. This may be the natural way to take the passage, but it is not required.

The *Muratorian Canon* (c. AD 170-220) also identifies John the apostle (i.e., Son of Zebedee) as the author of the Gospel: “The Fourth of the Gospels is that of John, [one] of the disciples. . . In the same night it was revealed to Andrew, [one] of the apostles, that John should write down all things in his own name while all of them should review it” (lines 5, 15).²⁴ Eckhard Schnabel claims the context argues strongly for John the Son of Zebedee, although nothing is known of the author or what sources were used.²⁵ Bauckham notes that John is described as a “disciple,” whereas Andrew is called an “apostle.” This is an interesting observation that may be consistent with his thesis, but one simply does not know why the author designated them differently or what he meant by it. He may have simply used the titles interchangeably without difference, as does the New Testament (Luke 22:11, 14).

²²Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 28.

²³Theophilus of Antioch, *Theophilus to Autolytus* 1.22, as cited in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 103.

²⁴Eckhard Schnabel, trans., “Canon Muratori” (a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Baltimore, MD, November 20, 2013), 1.

²⁵*Ibid.*

Irenaeus

The most important second century support for the traditional view of the authorship of John comes from Irenaeus. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus says, “John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.”²⁶ That this refers to John the apostle is considered “unmistakable”²⁷ since in another section Irenaeus says, “Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.”²⁸ Thus, Irenaeus believed in one John of the apostolic age (John the Baptist would have been earlier) who was the son of Zebedee and one of the pillars of the ancient church (Gal 2:9). This apostle John, according to Irenaeus, was the beloved disciple who lived in Ephesus until the reign of Trajan (AD 98-117).

However, Bauckham rejects this understanding of Irenaeus and believes he was referring to a different “John” as the author of the fourth Gospel. He observes that Irenaeus used the term “apostles” for more than the Twelve, including Paul, Barnabas, the Seventy, and even John the Baptist. Bauckham concludes, “If John the Baptist was an apostle by virtue of testifying to Jesus and persuading many to believe in him, then John’s namesake the author of the Gospel of John must certainly also be an apostle, regardless of whether he was one of the Twelve.”²⁹ However, another passage in Irenaeus is helpful to discern which John he was referring to. According to Irenaeus, John “referred to the primary Ogdoad, in which there was as yet no Jesus, and no Christ, the

²⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1, as cited in *The Apostolic Fathers—Justin Martyr—Irenaeus, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 414.

²⁷Andreas J. Köstenberger and Stephen O. Stout, “‘The Disciple Jesus Loved’: Witness, Author, Apostle—A Response to Richard Bauckham’s *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18 (2008): 224-25.

²⁸Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1, as cited in *The Apostolic Fathers—Justin Martyr—Irenaeus*, 1:414.

²⁹Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 462.

teacher of John. But that the apostle did not speak concerning their conjunctions, but concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, whom he acknowledges as the Word of God.”³⁰

Irenaeus clearly believes this John was the author of the fourth Gospel for he proceeds to cite John 1:1. He also considers this John an apostle who was taught by Jesus. The most natural way to read Irenaeus is that he is referring to the apostle John, one of the Twelve, who was the author of the fourth Gospel. But as Bauckham observes, the case is not as straightforward as some have taken it to be and it must be conceded that it is at least *possible* Irenaeus refers to another John.

The significance of the testimony of Irenaeus is that he records Polycarp’s association with John in several of his writings.³¹ If Polycarp accurately records the testimony of the apostle John, and Irenaeus received his testimony from Polycarp, then there is a strong living memory directly from the apostle to Irenaeus. In suggesting that the apostle John may have been martyred in the early AD 40s, Boismard recognizes that it is necessary to demonstrate that the traditional reading of Irenaeus is “very questionable.”³² There are three common approaches that aim to undermine the testimony of Irenaeus.³³

First, Irenaeus was confused. Irenaeus mistakenly reported that the apostle John was the author of the Gospel when in fact it was another. Could Irenaeus have been confused about which John wrote the Gospel? Answering this question involves looking at the relationship between the apostle John and Papias as well as the relationship between the apostle John, Polycarp, and Irenaeus.

Irenaeus claimed that Papias was a “hearer of John.”³⁴ But Eusebius rejects this interpretation: “But Papias himself, in his preface, by no means claims that he had been a

³⁰Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.9.2.

³¹Ibid., 4.14.1-8; 5.33.4, “Letter to Florinus,” and “Letter to Victor.”

³²Marie-Émile Boismard, *Le Martyre de Jean L'apôtre* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1996), 77.

³³Weidmann, *Polycarp and John*, 126-33.

³⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4.

hearer and an eyewitness of the holy apostles but says that he had learned the basics of the faith from those who had known them.”³⁵ Thus, according to Eusebius, Papias did not directly speak to the apostles, but received their words third-hand from those who personally knew the apostles. If so, this could presumably lead to a greater likelihood of confusion on the part of Irenaeus regarding the teachings of Jesus. Interestingly, however, in his *Chronicle* Eusebius states a different view: “Irenaeus and others record that John, the theologian and apostle, survived until the time of Trajan. After this Papias of Hierapolis and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, both of whom had heard him, became well known.”³⁶ In this passage, Eusebius states his belief that Papias and Polycarp were contemporaries and that Papias was a hearer of the apostle John. Thus, Eusebius either contradicted himself or changed his mind. Additionally, both Jerome (c. AD 342-420) and Philip of Side (c. fifth century) disagree with Eusebius and hold that Papias was a disciple or “hearer” of the apostle John.³⁷ Given that Jerome often closely followed the teachings of Eusebius, he must have had good reason to demur on this issue. And finally, Monte Shanks notes that there are at least fourteen different Papian fragments from known authors, as well as two from unknown authors, that associate Papias with the apostle John. Thus, Shanks concludes, “In fact, as one surveys all of the Papian fragments it becomes obvious that Eusebius is in the minority regarding Papias’s relationship to the apostle John.”³⁸ It seems unlikely Irenaeus was confused about the relationship between Papias and John. But could he have been confused about the relationship between John, Polycarp, and himself?

³⁵Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 3 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 39.1.

³⁶Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 733.

³⁷Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 18; Philip of Side, *Church History*.

³⁸Monte A. Shanks, *Papias and the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 291.

There is little debate that Papias and Polycarp lived and ministered at the same time in Asia. Both Irenaeus and Eusebius agree that these two great bishops were contemporaries.³⁹ The key issue, in determining whether or not Irenaeus was confused regarding the testimony of John, is the relationship between Irenaeus and Polycarp. Prominent scholars such as C. K. Barrett and R. H. Charles have concluded that Irenaeus was simply mistaken about which John influenced Polycarp.⁴⁰

In his *Letter to Florinus*, Irenaeus claimed that as a boy he “listened eagerly” to the teachings of Polycarp, who recounted the experiences the apostle John had with the Lord.⁴¹ Eusebius preserves an additional passage from *Against Heresies* where Irenaeus recounts his relationship to Polycarp:

But Polycarp also was not only instructed by the apostles, and acquainted with many that had seen Christ, but was also appointed by apostles in Asia bishop of the church of Smyrna. We too saw him in our early youth; for he lived a long time, and died, when a very old man, a glorious and most illustrious martyr’s death, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, which the Church also hands down, and which alone are true.⁴²

After analyzing these two passages closely,⁴³ Shanks concludes,

The implication is that in Irenaeus’s letter to Florinus we learn that his relationship with Polycarp began in his childhood, while in *Against Heresies* we discover that their association extended into the period that Irenaeus referred to as “our first maturity.” Such a period could range from childhood to early adolescence or to early adulthood, and thus would have involved a number of very influential years.

³⁹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4. For an in-depth analysis of this evidence, see Shanks, *Papias and the New Testament*, 70-73.

⁴⁰C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 105; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), xlix.

⁴¹Irenaeus, *Letter to Florinus*, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V.20.4-7.

⁴²Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* IV.14.3-4.

⁴³Shanks offers five key observations to show that Irenaeus was deeply influenced by Polycarp: (1) Irenaeus confessed that he had heard “discourses” from Polycarp rather than an individual teaching. (2) He claimed to have had access to Polycarp’s home. (3) Irenaeus confessed that he listened to Polycarp’s teachings but also assessed his character. (4) Irenaeus employed the technical term for “making notes,” which is a common term to describe the “cataloguing” of considerable amounts of material. (5) Irenaeus speaks of wide-ranging memories from spending a prolonged period of time with Polycarp. See Shanks, *Papias and the New Testament*, 74-76.

Consequently, this extended period would make Irenaeus a more than credible witness of not only Polycarp's character and orthodoxy, but also of individuals that Polycarp considered to be his "companions."⁴⁴

There is no reason to discount the credibility of the testimony of Irenaeus because of his youth.⁴⁵ Given the tight connection between the apostle John, Polycarp, and Irenaeus, it seems unlikely Irenaeus was confused about which John was the author of the fourth Gospel. John Chapman writes, "Thus any mistake which might (inconceivably) occur in St. Irenaeus's recollections about the identity of John of Ephesus, would immediately be checked by others of his contemporaries and friends. He was not isolated."⁴⁶ There is another way Irenaeus could have been confused about which John wrote the Gospel—*there were two Johns*.

Papias wrote, "And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I asked about their words: what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any of the other of the Lord's disciples, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord, were still saying."⁴⁷ The primary question is whether Papias refers to the same John twice or to two different Johns. Eusebius clearly takes Papias as referring to two different Johns, the first referring to the apostle John, and the second to John the elder, author of Revelation. Does this tradition trace back to Papias himself or was it a misreading or an invention of Eusebius? Conservative scholars have widely diverging opinions. Köstenberger and Stout conclude that Papias refers to the

⁴⁴Ibid., 78.

⁴⁵Charles Hill has argued quite extensively that the link between Polycarp and Irenaeus is stronger than typically assumed. Specifically, he claims that Polycarp is the unnamed presbyter for Irenaeus who received his teachings directly from the apostles (*Against Heresies* 4.27-32). See Charles E. Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2006). For a brief critique, see Sebastian Moll, "The Man with No Name: *Who is the Elder in Irenaeus's Adversus haereses IV?*" in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, ed. Sara Parvis & Paul Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 89-93. For a response to Moll, see Charles E. Hill, "The Man Who Needed No Introduction: *A Response to Sebastian Moll*," in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, 95-104.

⁴⁶John Chapman, *John the Presbyter and the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), 48.

⁴⁷Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4.

apostle John twice—first as an apostle and second as a living witness.⁴⁸ Carson thinks the phrase “Aristion and the presbyter John” can be best understood as *Aristion and the aforementioned John the presbyter*. Thus, the distinction is not between apostles and elders of the second generation, “but between first-generation witnesses who have died (what they *said*) and first-generation witness who are still alive” (what they *say*).⁴⁹

Not all scholars are convinced.⁵⁰ F. F. Bruce says Eusebius may have been right about two Johns. The first John was listed among the apostles, notes Bruce, but Papias would have presumably have met Aristion and the second *elder* John in Asia Minor: “The question cannot be regarded as closed.”⁵¹

While Bruce’s analysis seems correct, it does not follow that all readings of the text are equal. The key question regards what reading is most *natural* to the text. And this is where the traditional view emerges. Although some use the existence of the anaphoric article as evidence Papias referred to two different Johns, “it is promoted in the face of

⁴⁸Köstenberger and Stout, “The Disciple Jesus Loved,” 219.

⁴⁹Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 70.

⁵⁰Bauckham considers Papias’ second John to be “John the elder,” a prominent teacher in the churches in Asia and known as the beloved disciple who wrote the Gospel of John. According to Bauckham, John the son of Zebedee has nothing to do with Ephesus. Rather, second century writers were aware of the distinction between the Johns before they eventually became fused in tradition. Beasley-Murray accepts that Papias is referring to two different Johns and that a solution to the conundrum of the statements of early Christian writers regarding the activity of John in Ephesus involves recognizing the existence of *John the prophet* in Asia. It is the prophet John, not the apostle, who was banished to Patmos, composed Revelation, and was released during the reign of Trajan. Beasley-Murray concludes, “Since John the prophet is almost certainly a Palestinian, his migration to Ephesus could well have been the beginning of the confusion that attributed the move to John the Apostle” (George, R Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999], lxx). Martin Hengel believes the “elder” of 2 and 3 John is identical with the second John mentioned by Papias. According to Hengel, this John was a teacher and charismatic figure who worked during the Flavian period and founded a school in Ephesus during the reign of Trajan. Charles E. Hill believes the second John is called “elder” to distinguish him from the apostle John, who was just mentioned. Weidmann also embraces the likelihood of another John: “The influential figure about whom Polycarp spoke, with the young Irenaeus and others, might have been John the Elder” (Weidmann, *Polycarp & John*, 128). Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 17, 28, 416-25; Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989), 28-31; and Charles E. Hill, “Papias of Hierapolis,” *The Expository Times* 117 (2006): 310.

⁵¹F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John: Studies in Non-Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 136.

normal Greek grammar that dictates that such syntax be interpreted to mean the exact opposite.”⁵² Daniel Wallace writes,

The anaphoric article is the article denoting previous reference. . . . The first mention of the substantive is usually anarthrous because it is merely being introduced. But the subsequent mentions of it use the article, for the article is now pointing back to *the* substantive previously mentioned. It is the most common use of the article and the easiest usage to identify. . . . Practically speaking, labeling an article as anaphoric requires that it have been introduced at most in the same book, preferably in a context not too far removed.”⁵³

Taken at face value, the text in Papias provides minimal evidence for the existence of a second John and it provides good grammatical reason to think Papias referred to the apostle John first as an apostle and then second as a living elder.

The external evidence is also lacking for the existence of John the elder. If he played such a foundational role in the early church, why would not *any* source before Eusebius indicate his existence? This is admittedly an argument from silence, but given that John the elder is believed to hold a significant position in the early church, it is a silence with some force. John Chapman concludes, “Yet in none of the ancient literature which has come down to us is there any vestige of the existence of more than one John of Ephesus, apart from the conjectures of Dionysius and Eusebius, which have occasionally been quoted by later writers.”⁵⁴

Keener believes the tradition of two Johns stems from Eusebius, not Papias: “Eusebius’s desire to distinguish the Apostle John from the writer of the Apocalypse may serve as the entire basis for his insistence that there were two Johns.”⁵⁵ As Keener indicates, Eusebius may have had incentive for interpreting Papias as he did. Since

⁵²Shanks, *Papias and the New Testament*, 19.

⁵³Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 98. In personal conversation with Wallace, he explained that he firmly believes this grammar principle applies to the fragment of Papias and that Papias was referring twice to the same John rather than to two different Johns (Nov 20, 2013).

⁵⁴Chapman, *John the Presbyter*, 49.

⁵⁵Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:98.

Eusebius rejected millenarianism, and believed the kingdom had begun with Constantine, he had reason to separate the apostle John from authorship of Revelation.⁵⁶ In conclusion, given that the traditional reading of Papias indicates he referred to one apostle twice, the lack of early corroborating external evidence, and the apparent theological bias of Eusebius, it seems most likely that John the elder (understood as an early influential figure who may have been the beloved disciple and author of the fourth Gospel) is a fiction.⁵⁷ Thus, there is little convincing reason to conclude that Irenaeus was mistaken about which John stood behind the fourth Gospel.

Second, Irenaeus was a liar. Is it possible Irenaeus consciously imparts inaccurate information about Polycarp and John to further his own agenda? This would not imply Irenaeus was mistaken about everything, or even most things, but that he intentionally exaggerated or imparted false information about the connection of John and Polycarp to further his own end. Helmut Koester has recently suggested that identification of the apostle John with Ephesus “is due to a fiction that Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon created.”⁵⁸ As indirect support for this view, Lincoln notes that Irenaeus would have been concerned to refute heresy by tracing his teachings through Polycarp to the apostle John and may have stretched the truth to legitimize his position.⁵⁹ It is certainly human

⁵⁶Eusebius cannot simply be considered wrong on this point because he had a millenarian bias against Johannine authorship of Revelation. Bias does not *necessarily* undermine someone’s reliability. In fact, people can sometimes be driven by their bias to have deep concern for truth. But in this particular case of Eusebius, it does seem his theological bias may have tainted his reading of Papias.

⁵⁷Isbon Beckwith believes the passage in Papias (via Eusebius) is best interpreted as pointing to the existence of John the elder as distinct from the apostle John. Nevertheless, he considers it an “extraordinary fact” that there are no other traces of his existence before the fourth century. Thus, he concludes that the text of Papias, as used by Eusebius, may have contained significant errors. See Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 362-66. For a classical defense of the view that the elder John is the apostle John, see Thomas Nicol, *The Four Gospels in the Earliest Church* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1908), 187-203.

⁵⁸Helmut Koester, “Ephesos in Early Christian Literature,” in *Ephesos: Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Helmut Koester (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1995), 138.

⁵⁹Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 19.

nature to stretch the truth, but it is important to realize that in writing his *Letter to Florinus*, Irenaeus would have subjected himself to sharp criticism by Florinus if his information were fabricated, exaggerated, or incorrect in any significant way. Shanks rightly concludes, “Irenaeus’s assertions were not for personal promotion, rather they were provided as a foundation upon which he could defend orthodoxy; thus they were not made without significant risk.”⁶⁰ Thus, it seems unlikely Irenaeus lied about his connection to Polycarp, and by default, the apostle John.

Third, Irenaeus transmits a tradition he received. From the middle of the second century onward, the apostle John is portrayed as ministering in Asia Minor (although, as seen, some scholars argue that these references may *not* be to the apostle John). The *Epistle of the Apostles* (c. AD 150-175) identifies John the son of Zebedee as the author of the fourth Gospel, but it makes no mention of his sojourn to Ephesus. The *Acts of John*, on the other hand, describes the activities of the apostle John throughout Ephesus and Smyrna. It is typically dated sometime between the middle and end of the second century (c. 150-200). While the main purpose of the Acts of John lies in the mission, rather than history,⁶¹ and the book is filled with legendary accounts of the apostle John, the author may have preserved a historical core of John’s excursus to Asia Minor, just as the authors of the *Acts of Paul* and the *Acts of Peter* accurately preserve the visit of Peter and Paul to Rome. Even if there is no historical core to the *Acts of John*, it shows that the tradition of his sojourn to Asia Minor and his natural death is within two to three generations of the traditional timing of his death (c. 95).⁶² If this tradition is mistaken, critics need to provide a plausible account for how and why it developed so

⁶⁰Shanks, *Papias and the New Testament*, 76.

⁶¹János Bolyki, “Miracle Stories in the Acts of John,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1995), 34.

⁶²The Acts of John *likely* records the earliest rendition of the death of John and his sojourn to Ephesus. At an advanced age, the apostle John gathers his followers around and gives a final speech and prayer before his death. He broke bread with them, stepped into a grave they dug for him, and then “peacefully yielded up the ghost” (Acts of John 106-12).

quickly. This point is not indubitable, but does seem to weigh in favor of the traditional view of the fate of John the son of Zebedee in Ephesus. Hans-Josef Klauck concludes, “Clearly the knowledge that John had died a natural death was so firmly anchored in the tradition that it was impossible to work the story up into a more dramatic death such as martyrdom. Nevertheless, it was at this point that legends began to develop.”⁶³ Irenaeus may be passing on a tradition similar to that found in the *Acts of John*, and so those who reject this tradition would need to provide a plausible account for its origin.

Additional external support may be found in Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150-215) and Polycrates (c. AD 130-196). In *The Rich Man Who Is Saved*, Clement reports that “John the apostle” returned to Ephesus from the island of Patmos after the death of the tyrant [i.e., Trajan].⁶⁴ According to Eusebius, Clement also reports John as the author of a “spiritual Gospel.”⁶⁵ Yet it must be recognized that in seeming contradiction to this position, Clement indicates the ministry of the apostles ended during the reign of Nero, which was from AD 54-68 (*Stromata* 7.17).⁶⁶

Around AD 190, Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, indicates that the apostle John, who he identifies with the beloved disciple, died in Ephesus.⁶⁷ This testimony is significant, but questions have been raised as to the reliability of this account. First, in the same quote Polycrates seems to confuse Philip the apostle with Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8-9). If so, could it be possible Polycrates also confused the apostle John with another John (e.g. the Elder or Prophet)? Second, legitimate questions have been raised as

⁶³Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 38.

⁶⁴Clement, *The Rich Man Who Is Saved*, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.23.3.

⁶⁵Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.7.

⁶⁶F. P. Badham, “The Martyrdom of John the Apostle,” *The American Journal of Theology* 8 (1904): 540.

⁶⁷Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31.

to whether John could have become a “priest wearing the miter” as Polycrates reports.⁶⁸ Interestingly, Polycrates refers to the apostle John as a “witness” (μάρτυς), which is often translated as “martyr.” Although this could be utilized to defend the view that John died as a martyr after exile in Ephesus, it seems more likely Polycrates used the term to indicate that John personally knew Jesus and testified for his faith. It is easy to see how later writers could have confused the meaning of μάρτυς and concluded John died as a martyr.

The cumulative weight of the external evidence seems to point towards that the apostle John—who was the author of the Gospel—died a natural death at an advanced age in Ephesus. If Irenaeus was simply passing on a tradition that was handed to him, he passed on a tradition that was well preserved. Yet it must be conceded that significant qualifications and objections can be raised against each individual piece of evidence for the traditional view, which in turn undermines the strength of the overall case. C. K. Barrett finds the lack of any clear reference in an orthodox writer to the apostle John in Ephesus prior to Irenaeus surprising:

There is no evidence for his residence in Ephesus in any orthodox Christian writer earlier than Irenaeus. It cannot but appear probable that if John had been alive in Ephesus (a great center of Christian life and letters) in or near A.D. 100 some trace of the fact would have survived from the literature of the first half of the second century.⁶⁹

This absence of any clear reference to John in an orthodox writer in Ephesus before Irenaeus is why even proponents of the traditional view often concede the tentativeness of the case. For instance, even though he strongly defends the traditional view, Köstenberger admits that apostolic authorship remains a hypothesis.⁷⁰ Morris observes that no theory is without difficulty.⁷¹ Keener recognizes that the external

⁶⁸Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James and John*, 127-28.

⁶⁹Barrett, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 104.

⁷⁰Köstenberger, *John*, 6 n. 16.

⁷¹Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 24.

evidence is incomplete without the internal evidence.⁷² And Borchert concludes, “While the weight of tradition generally favors the son of Zebedee as involved in the Gospel, the reports of the early church are not always as precise or consistent as we would wish them to be.”⁷³ The weight of the evidence seems to favor the traditional account, but as seen, significant challenges can be raised against it. Additionally, many scholars believe positive evidence can be provided to demonstrate the likelihood of the martyrdom of John. Before considering the evidence that John died as a martyr, it is first necessary to consider another approach to Johannine authorship that could be consistent with an early martyrdom of John the son of Zebedee.

A Johannine School

The existence of a Johannine School can be traced to influential writers such as Strauss, Renan, and J. B. Lightfoot.⁷⁴ Many modern scholars embrace some version of the Johannine School as well.⁷⁵

The basic idea of a Johannine School is that there was a community from which the writings of John emerged. Scholarly opinion varies as to the relationship of John to the community and also varies regarding *which* John headed the school. Some posit John the apostle as the head of the school, others assume the leader was a student of the apostle, and others believe it was headed by John the elder. Others assume different members of the community wrote the various Johannine books. Differences are vast. Yet Culpepper notes that the existence of some type of Johannine School is generally

⁷²Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:92.

⁷³Borchert, *John 1-11*, 82.

⁷⁴For a history of the Johannine school hypothesis, see R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 26 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975), 1-34.

⁷⁵Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 132-34; Beasley-Murray, *John*, lxxiv; Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1979), 22-24.

accepted, although a consensus has not been reached.⁷⁶ Keener observes that one could still accept John the son of Zebedee as the “author” for the fourth Gospel, yet believe his traditions were later redacted by others before reaching its final form. He considers this a “workable compromise” that is “tenable but probably not necessary.”⁷⁷ If some version of the Johannine School is correct, then John could have faced an early martyrdom and yet technically still have been the “author” of the fourth Gospel.

Supporters of the Johannine School. Culpepper is one of the leading protagonists for the Johannine School. In his influential monograph, Culpepper identified nine common features found in various ancient “schools,” such as the Pythagorean School, the Academy of Plato, and the school at Qumran. He concludes that the Johannine School shared these commitments and thus qualifies as an ancient school.⁷⁸

F. F. Bruce embraced the idea of a “Johannine circle,” which he says likely included the anonymous writers who ascribed authorship of the fourth Gospel to the beloved disciple (John 21:24). Additionally, Bruce writes, “We may think of recipients of 1 John whom the writer calls his ‘little children,’ of the elect ladies and their children mentioned in 2 John, and of Gaius, Demetrius, and other friends who receive honorable mention in 3 John.”⁷⁹ He notes that the author of 2 and 3 John calls himself “the elder” and the author of 1 John refers to “little children.” Thus, according to Bruce, the reference in Papias to the elder John may be more than coincidence.

⁷⁶Culpepper, *The Johannine School*, 34.

⁷⁷Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:100.

⁷⁸Culpepper identifies nine characteristics of the Johannine School, although he admits they have varying degrees of evidential support: (1) It was characterized by fellowship among disciples. (2) The community traced its roots to a founder—the beloved disciple. (3) The community valued the teachings and traditions of its founder. (4) Each member of the community was a disciple of the founder. (5) Members of the community regularly taught, studied, and wrote. (6) Members observed a communal meal. (7) The community had rules for membership. (8) The community distanced itself from the rest of society. (9) The community developed structural means to ensure its survival. *Ibid.*, 287-89.

⁷⁹Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John*, 143.

In *The Johannine Question*, Martin Hengel considers the Gospel of John, the epistles, and Revelation all the result of a Johannine School that was headed by John the elder, an enigmatic figure not part of the twelve, but honored with the title “the disciple of the Lord” as he lived to an advanced age. Hengel assumes the Gospel was written down over an extended period of time, in an unknown number of stages, based on the oral Christological teachings of John the elder. Although he thinks there are significant problems with identifying John the son of Zebedee as the author of the Gospel, he concedes his interpretation is hypothetical.⁸⁰

Although he admits that there is no direct source for a Johannine circle, and that the evidence is inferential, Oscar Cullmann concludes that “the existence of this circle can hardly be challenged.”⁸¹ He concludes that the author, who was *not* John the son of Zebedee, was a strong literary and theological personality who played the primary role in authoring the Gospel, although there was redaction by the community.

Much more could be said regarding the possibility and nature of a Johannine School. But three points stand out as significant from analyzing the evidence behind it. First, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that evidence for the existence of the School is speculative, at least to a degree. There is simply no direct evidence for the existence of a formal Johannine community responsible for compiling and composing the fourth Gospel (or other Johannine books). Even Cullmann has noted that all the evidence is *inferential*. Carson seems correct that the evidence is based on possible inferences that are not particularly plausible.⁸² And the evidence from the church fathers is minimal.⁸³

⁸⁰Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, 108.

⁸¹Oscar Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), ix.

⁸²Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 80.

⁸³Andreas Köstenberger, “Apologetics Commentary on the Gospel of John,” *The Holman Apologetics Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Jeremy Royal Howard (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 500.

Second, one of the primary texts used to defend the existence of the Johannine School is John 21:24: “This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.” Many scholars consider this proof that the beloved disciple is not the author of the whole work, but is accompanied by wider circle of disciples who corporately testify to the truth of the Gospel witness.⁸⁴ This may be the case, but Bauckham has provided a more plausible interpretation, namely, that this passage contains the “we” of authoritative testimony, which has nothing to do with a numerical plural.⁸⁵ If Bauckham is right, then the author of the Gospel is not indicating the existence of a Johannine community, but using the plural “we” to highlight the trustworthiness of the testimony of the beloved disciple.

Third, Michael Kruger notes that for a document to have apostolic authority, it needs to meet two criteria.⁸⁶ First, an apostle or someone who directly got information from an apostle wrote it. Thus, there must be some *historical* connection to an apostle. He cites the book of Hebrews as an example. While it was not written by an apostle, the author does say, “It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard” (2:3). This criterion raises no problem for any variety of the Johannine School hypothesis. Second, and potentially problematic, it was written while the apostles were still alive so they could oversee the transmission of the tradition. Kruger makes it clear that the early church only accepted books if they were composed while an apostle was alive to affirm it.⁸⁷ And yet if a Johannine School composed the Gospel of John *after* his death, then it would seemingly violate this early church perception of the role of

⁸⁴For instance, see Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle*, 2; Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, 84.

⁸⁵Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 370-83.

⁸⁶Michael J. Kruger, *The Canon Revisited* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 182-83.

⁸⁷Kruger cites two examples. First, the author(s) of the Muratorian Canon rejected *The Shepherd of Hermas* as apostolic because it was written “very recently, in our own times” (line 74). Second, according to Eusebius, the apostle John welcomed the first three Gospels and “testified to their truth,” designating some form of apostolic approval to the transmission of the tradition into written form. See *Ecclesiastical History* III.24.7.

apostles. Perhaps the link to John was so well known in the early church that an exception was made. Perhaps John wrote most of it and the community simply redacted it before final form. Countless possibilities can be imagined. Certainty is elusive. But this final point does raise challenges for the existence of a Johannine School that claims the Gospel was written from John's reminiscences after he was gone.

The point of this brief survey is to highlight the substantive debate *within* conservative scholarly circles in regard to the source for the Gospel of John (and the rest of the Johannine texts). While the existence of a Johannine circle is largely speculative, it is a live option that cannot simply be dismissed out of hand. If proponents of the Johannine School hypothesis are correct, then an early martyrdom of John becomes a live possibility. Even if John the apostle is the source behind the Gospel that was later compiled, a position Keener considers "tenable," then the apostle could have experienced early martyrdom. The goal here has not been to settle the issue of the existence of the Johannine School, or the identity of the author behind the tradition. Barring new discoveries or fresh arguments, the debate will likely continue for some time. The important point is that there are a variety of options for the authorship of the Gospel of John (and the other Johannine writings), with differing degrees of probability, some of which are quite compatible with his early martyrdom.

Evidence for the Martyrdom of John

Both internal and external evidence are often cited as support for the martyrdom of John.

Internal Evidence

The Cup of Christ. Perhaps the most important passage for the martyrdom of John is found in Mark 10:35-40:

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not

know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

This is the third passion prediction in Mark (8:34-9:1; 9:33-37) in which it is made clear the disciples do not understand the price of following Jesus, even though in this passage James and John express an element of faith. All three of these predictions were given on the road to Golgotha, at Jerusalem, which indicates that the gospel is about the way of the cross.⁸⁸ Given the embarrassment this passage would bring to the closest followers of Jesus, it is likely authentic. Boismard has argued that this prophecy would not have been retained in Matthew and Mark if it had only been half fulfilled (if only James, but not John, died as a martyr).⁸⁹

In the passage, James and John (or in Matthew, their mother) desire to be in a place of honor when Jesus comes in his “glory.” In response, Jesus asks them a simple question—*can they drink the cup he is about to drink?* The key question of this passage is what Jesus meant when he said that James and John would “drink the cup” and experience his “baptism.” There are two main interpretations for the significance of the cup and baptism.⁹⁰ First, the Zebedee brothers must experience the sufferings of Jesus and be willing to face martyrdom. Quite a few scholars adopt this view.⁹¹ Second, like Jesus,

⁸⁸Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 286.

⁸⁹Boismard, *Le Martyre de Jean l'apôtre*, 9-10.

⁹⁰There was likely also a sacramental sense of these words relating to communion and baptism. But this passage cannot be reduced simply to the sacraments for such an interpretation does not fully capture the gravity of the words of Jesus and the extent of the price they would have to pay to reign with Jesus.

⁹¹Kent Brower, *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2012), 283; R. A. Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 2:247; A. Y. Collins and H. W. Attridge, *Mark: A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 496; Culpepper, *John*, 44-45; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 323; Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 34B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 113-17; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 416; W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 411; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, Black's New Testament

they will actually experience martyrdom. Some scholars adopt this second position, seeing it as evidence both James and John died early deaths as martyrs.⁹²

The “cup” is often considered a metaphor for one’s lot in life; what one has been given to “drink.”⁹³ According to William Lane, “To share someone’s cup was a recognized expression for sharing his fate.”⁹⁴ In the Old Testament, the cup metaphor can refer to receiving a blessing (Pss 16:5; 23:5; 116:13), or to the bitter taste of God’s wrath (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17, 22; Jer 25:15-29; Lam 4:21; Ezek 23:31-32; Hab 2:15; cf. Rev 14:10).

While these broad insights are helpful, the key to interpreting this particular passage is to look at the narrower context within the Gospel of Mark. Mark 14:22-23 says, “And as they were eating, he [Jesus] took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it.” The red wine clearly represents the blood that Jesus shed to establish the new covenant (cf. Exod 24:6-8; Jer 31:31-34). In this context, the cup was not a reference to his suffering but specifically to his death. The second Markan reference to the cup is found in 14:36, “And he said, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what

Commentary (London: A & C Black, 1981; repr., New York: Continuum, 1991), 246; Brooks A. James, *Mark*, The New American Commentary, vol. 23 (Nashville: Holman, 1992), 168; Ronald J. Kernaghan, *Mark*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 204-05. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 378-81; W. W. Wessel, *Mark*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. J. D. Douglas and Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 720.

⁹²F. P. Badham, “The Martyrdom of St. John,” *The American Journal of Theology* 4 (1899): 731; Boismard, *Le Martyre de Jean L’apôtre*, 9-10; Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans*, 347-48; Gilles Quispel, “The Fourth Gospel and the Judaic Gospel Tradition,” in *Gnostica, Judaica, Catholica. Collected Essays by Gilles Quispel*, ed. Johannes Van Oort (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 475-80; Johannes Weiss, *A History of the Period A.D. 30-150*, trans. Frederick C. Grant (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 2:709-10; and Ben Witherington III, “The Martyrdom of the Zebedee Brothers,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 33 (May/June 2007): 26.

⁹³Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 747.

⁹⁴Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 379-80.

you will.” Jesus prayed this prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane right before his arrest. In this context, the cup refers to his suffering, death, *and* the wrath he would experience from the Father while completing his mission. Of course, the death of Jesus was uniquely vicarious for sin (Mark 10:45; cf. Ps 49:7). Nevertheless, the cup Jesus spoke of cannot be separated from his death, for that is the manner in which the debt was paid. To say that James and John would drink the cup meant that they would share his fate. Their deaths would have a different effect, but they would be martyred nonetheless.

Close readers of Mark realize that the request of James and John ironically foreshadows the crucifixion scene: “And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left” (15:27). When James and John requested to reign with Jesus in his glory, they did not realize this would involve sharing the fate of both Jesus and the two robbers who died by his side. Although many scholars disagree with this interpretation, it appears to be the most natural reading of the passage. It finds general support in the early church’s understanding that the nature of the apostolic calling was to suffer and die like Jesus.⁹⁵ According to Frederick Weidmann, “A clear statement of the understanding that each apostle must or would endure martyrdom is traceable (through Aquila) to at least the first half of the second century.”⁹⁶

Specifically, drinking the “cup” of Mark 10:39 has sometimes been taken throughout the early church to indicate martyrdom. Before his death, Polycarp cried out, “I give Thee thanks that Thou hast counted me worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by

⁹⁵Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, *Apostolate and Ministry: The New Testament Doctrine of the Office of the Ministry*, Concordia Heritage Series, trans. Paul D. Pahl (St. Louis: Concordia, 1969), 41.

⁹⁶Weidmann, *Polycarp & John*, 133. He cites the partially preserved writings from Eusebius found in his *Commentary on the Psalms*. Concerning the twelve apostles, Eusebius says that “Aquila was saying, ‘Their blood will be honored . . .’” and according to Symmachus, “[t]heir [twelve apostles] blood will be an honor.” And then later Eusebius writes that “each one endured variously the goal of martyrdom.” Ibid.

the Holy Ghost.”⁹⁷ In reference to this passage, John Chrysostom said, “His meaning is, ye shall be counted worthy of martyrdom, and shall suffer these things which I suffer; ye shall close your life by a violent death, and in these things ye shall be partakers with me.”⁹⁸ After mentioning that John lived in Ephesus, wrote a Gospel, and was “honored with martyrdom,” George the Sinner wrote, “For when the Lord said to them, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” and they eagerly assented and agreed, he said, “You will drink my cup and will be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.” And this is to be expected, for it is impossible for God to lie.”⁹⁹

By the end of the second century, church fathers began trying to compensate for the lack of a martyrdom tradition for John. How could John, one of the closest disciples of Jesus who was told he would drink the cup of Christ, not have faced martyrdom? Tertullian wrote about Rome: “How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! Where Peter endures a passion like his Lord’s! Where Paul wins his crown in a death like John’s [the Baptist]! Where the Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and thence remitted to his island-exile.”¹⁰⁰ This passage may have been invented to show that John was put through the act of martyrdom, and thus qualifies as a functional martyr, even though he survived. Thus, according to Tertullian, John was *willing* to die for his faith and was put to death as a martyr, but God supernaturally spared him. For Origen, the exile of John accounts for his

⁹⁷*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.2, as cited in *The Apostolic Fathers—Justin Martyr—Irenaeus, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 42.

⁹⁸John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 14.2, as cited in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 10 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 399.

⁹⁹Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 745.

¹⁰⁰Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 36.3, as cited in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 3 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 261

“martyrdom.”¹⁰¹ The legendary story that John survived poisoning,¹⁰² along with the account by Augustine of Hippo that the ground above his grave seems to live and breathe upon the interred corpse,¹⁰³ may have been developed as a result of this same concern.

A similar approach is often taken today. For instance, William Hendriksen sees predictions of the martyrdom of James and the banishment of John to Patmos as foretold in Mark 10:39.¹⁰⁴ Thus, according to Hendriksen, the cup John drank was banishment to Patmos, not martyrdom. This is certainly a plausible interpretation. But it would be interesting to know how much belief in the traditional view that John was exiled to Patmos shapes how modern scholars interpret this passage. If there were a stronger tradition for the martyrdom of John, or even if there were no tradition either way, would scholars understand “the cup” as referring uniquely to martyrdom? It seems likely many would.

Although the natural reading of this passage is that Jesus was predicting the martyrdom of the Zebedee brothers, it is not implausible that Jesus meant they would suffer for following him and must be willing to face martyrdom. This interpretation cannot be completely ruled out. Nevertheless, while there is disagreement whether or not Jesus specifically predicted their deaths in Mark 10:39, there is no debate that he at least predicted they would suffer for their faith. Even though the Zebedee brothers misunderstood the prediction at the time, they inevitably would have reflected back upon this experience after the resurrection of Jesus, and understood that they must suffer and be willing to die for their allegiance to him. While the martyrdom of John the apostle is debatable, his willingness to suffer and die for his faith is not.

¹⁰¹Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 16.6.

¹⁰²This legend is contained in the *Acts of John* 19-21.

¹⁰³Saint Augustine, *Tractates on John: Tractate* 124.3.

¹⁰⁴Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, 412.

The disappearance of John. Another reason to conclude John may have been martyred early is his sudden disappearance from Acts. John is a central figure in the opening chapters of Acts. He preaches alongside Peter (3:1-11; 4:13-19) and then goes with Peter to Samaria to examine the claims they had received the Holy Spirit (8:14). After preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans, John and Peter return to Jerusalem (8:25). And then John completely drops out of Luke's narrative. Even though he was one of the inner three disciples of Jesus, he is not even mentioned at the Jerusalem council (c. AD 50), which even Peter returned for (15:6-11). Additionally, he is not listed among the apostles of 1 Corinthians 9. Why would Luke not tell more about John, one of the pillars of the faith? Ben Witherington concludes, "What happened to John? I believe he was probably martyred before the Jerusalem council described in Acts 15."¹⁰⁵

Although the disappearance of John is consistent with his early martyrdom, it hardly provides *positive* evidence for it. As seen, Luke could have a variety of reasons for not mentioning John again in Acts. The most reasonable explanation is that John served no further purpose in advancing the larger narrative Luke was telling about the expansion of the Gospel (Acts 1:8). As demonstrated earlier, Luke frequently drops important characters after they have served their purpose within the larger narrative (e.g., Philip, Peter, John Mark). Given the way Luke suddenly drops other key characters from the narrative when they no longer serve his wider purpose, it should come as no surprise that John disappears as well. Furthermore, even if John did disappear from the narrative because of his early demise, it does not follow that he was necessarily killed for his faith. The disappearance of John provides minimal evidence for his early martyrdom.

External Evidence

Philip of Side (AD fifth c.). Philip of Side offers the most intriguing external evidence for the martyrdom of John. In a comment regarding a fragment from Papias,

¹⁰⁵Witherington, "The Martyrdom of the Zebedee Brothers," 26.

Philip said, “Papias says in his second book that John the Theologian and James his brother were killed by Jews.”¹⁰⁶ Critics often summarily dismiss this statement. Yet four factors lend to its authenticity. First, Philip transmits other sources. Thus, according to Boismard, he likely reproduces the original meaning of Papias accurately in this instance.¹⁰⁷ Second, the fact that it is stated incidentally without any apparent theological agenda or development gives it the ring of authenticity. The statement is part of a larger section about Papias being in error regarding the millennium and the claim that Barsabbas (Justus) survived drinking poison when put to the test. Philip includes it as if his readers know it is true and will agree with him. Third, Philip was not dependent upon the fragments in Eusebius but had likely read sections of Papias’s *Expositions of the Sayings of the Lord* for himself. This is supported by Philip’s inclusion of material from Papias that is not known from any other ancient source. Nevertheless, only fragments remain from his extensive work titled *Church History* (AD 434-439), so it is not possible to meaningfully assess his accuracy as a historian. Fourth, even though it appears in only one manuscript, and may have been interpolated from Philip of Side,¹⁰⁸ George the Sinner (c. AD 840) gave a similar report of the death of John the hands of the Jews:

At that time he [the apostle John] was the sole survivor of the twelve disciples, and after writing the gospel that bears his name was honored with martyrdom. For Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis, who had seen him with his own eyes, claim in the second book of the *Sayings of the Lord* that John was killed by Jews, thus clearly fulfilling, together with his brother, Christ’s prophecy concerning them and their own confession and agreement about this.¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, most scholars consider Philip of Side an unreliable historian.¹¹⁰ It bears comment that Philip does not directly quote Papias, but provides a summary of

¹⁰⁶Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 743.

¹⁰⁷Boismard, *Le Martyre de Jean l’apôtre*, 57.

¹⁰⁸Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John*, 137. F

¹⁰⁹Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 745.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 172. Two notable exceptions are Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, 21; James H. Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 240-41

what he believes Papias wrote. And it is not uncommon to find ancient writers quoted for claims they never made.¹¹¹ Philip also does not indicate *when* or *where* John was killed. The statement itself is consistent with an early martyrdom (presumably Jerusalem) or a late martyrdom (presumably Ephesus).

The natural reading seems to indicate that the Jews killed him early in Jerusalem along with his brother James (Acts 12:2). There are two reasons, however, that rule out an early martyrdom. First, Philip had previously declared that Papias was a disciple of John. But this would be virtually impossible if John faced an early martyrdom in the AD 40s or 50s. Papias was not born until around AD 70.¹¹² Second, Eusebius would have had motivation to utilize evidence for an early martyrdom of John. Philip was aware of the *Ecclesiastical History*, and thus likely Eusebius' views that John lived a long life. Given Eusebius' desire to separate the apostle John from authorship of Revelation (because of his distaste for chiliasm), if there were evidence in Papias for an early martyrdom of John, Eusebius likely would have utilized it. The aforementioned quote by Eusebius in his *Commentary on the Psalms* indicates his belief that each of the twelve apostles would suffer and die like Jesus. Contra Hengel, it seems Eusebius would have had more motivation to include it than dropping the report.¹¹³ Culpepper seems correct, "The latter [that Eusebius intentionally suppressed the martyrdom account] is difficult to accept since Eusebius assumes the five books of Papias are still available."¹¹⁴ This scenario raises considerable doubt whether the alleged quote by Papias was in the original.

¹¹¹Chapman, *John the Presbyter*, 78.

¹¹²Hill, "Papias of Hierapolis," 309.

¹¹³Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, 21.

¹¹⁴Culpepper, *John*, 155.

Another possibility is that Eusebius missed some important information related to the death of John when he first wrote his history of the church. This seems very unlikely, though. Shanks observes,

Remembering, however, that the time between the first and last release of *Ecclesiastical History* was well over a decade, it seems reasonable to conclude that during the intervening years someone would have pointed out this glaring omission to Eusebius if Papias had clearly described the Jewish responsibility or participation in the apostle John's martyrdom.¹¹⁵

A further intriguing possibility is that Philip of Side misread the statement in Papias. J. H. Bernard notes that the statement in Papias (according to Philip) is technically not true of James the son of Zebedee. He was not "killed by the Jews" but by Herod (Acts 12:2), which "pleased the Jews." On the other hand, *the Jews* did kill James the brother of the Lord. After closely examining the Greek, Bernard supposes that Eusebius confused James the brother of Jesus with James the son of Zebedee. According to Bernard, the name "John" came into the text because Eusebius thought "the brother of the Lord, James" referred to John the brother of James, rather than as a title to designate James as the brother of Jesus. Thus, according to Bernard, Eusebius misread Papias into claiming that the Jews killed both sons of Zebedee. J. H. Bernard concludes,

I submit, therefore, that the idea that Papias is an authority for the 'red martyrdom' of John the son of Zebedee must be dismissed. In the light of the universal belief of the Church, it would be very difficult to suppose that Papias gave currency to any such idea. And the only quotation from him which has been supposed to support it may quite naturally be explained as a misreading of a passage in which he had spoken of the martyrdom of James the Just, but had made no mention of John at all.¹¹⁶

While this particular hypothesis by Bernard is little more than educated guesswork, the most reasonable supposition is that Philip misread Papias *in some manner*, which raises a critical question: Given the unanswered questions about the quote by Philip, is it more likely that Philip preserved a reliable tradition unknown (or ignored) by Eusebius or any

¹¹⁵Shanks, *Papias and the New Testament*, 223.

¹¹⁶John Henry Bernard, *Studia Sacra* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1917), 274-75.

other early church father,¹¹⁷ or that he either intentionally or unintentionally misstated Papias? The latter is clearly more probable.

Church calendars. Additional evidence for the early martyrdom of John can be found in a variety of church calendars, martyrologies, and homilies. Boismard finds the liturgical and patristic evidence particularly convincing, “Nous verrons qu’ils confirment les arguments classiques mentionnés au début de cette étude de façon tellement probante qu’à notre avis il devient impossible de douter que l’apôtre Jean ait été effectivement martyrisé”¹¹⁸

The Calendar of Carthage (c. AD 505) celebrates the feast of John the apostle and the apostle James, who was killed by Herod. Even though the calendar refers to John as “the Baptist,” there was likely confusion by the author since John the Baptist was also celebrated later on June 24. The author may also have conflated John the Baptist and the apostle since both were beheaded (Acts 12:2). In a Syriac martyrology in the East (AD 411), a celebration of James and John (December 27) is sandwiched right between the martyrdom of Stephen (December 26) and the apostle Paul (December 28). There is a Gallic tradition, possibly as early as the fifth century, that celebrates the martyr-death of James and John on December 27.¹¹⁹ A similar commemoration can be found in the writings of Aphrahat (AD 344): “And James and John walked in the footsteps of their Master Christ”¹²⁰ Interestingly, Aphrahat had previously referred to the stoning of Stephen, the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, and yet he identifies James and John *not* as

¹¹⁷Papias is known to have influenced many Christian writers and apologists such as Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Apollinaris. See Shanks, *Papias and the New Testament*, 255.

¹¹⁸“We will see that they [the sources Boismard will cite] confirm the classic arguments mentioned above at the beginning of this study in such a convincing way that in our view it will become impossible to doubt that the apostle John was indeed martyred” (Boismard, *Le Martyre de Jean l’apôtre*, 13).

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 15-16, 33-34.

¹²⁰Aphrahat *Demonstration XXI: Of Persecution* (§ 23), as cited in *Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 13 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1989), 401.

martyrs but as walking in “the footsteps of their Master Christ.” Why the difference? Did he still mean martyrdom?

This quote by Aphrahat raises an important distinction in how James and John have been remembered in comparison with the other apostles. Bernard concludes, “It is clear from these various witnesses, both Eastern and Western, that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were commemorated together shortly after Christmas. But it is not clear without proof that they were thus honored because they had suffered ‘red martyrdom’ and for this reason alone.”¹²¹ In fact, Bernard argues that the tradition of their mutual commemoration began with Gregory of Nyssa (c. AD 335-c. 395), who was careful to distinguish between commemorations of martyrs from apostles. Gregory recorded the crucifixion of Peter, the beheading of James, and yet with John he tells the story of the boiling oil and his willingness to suffer as his witness for Christ.¹²² Bernard writes, “They [James and John] were honoured as the leaders of the Apostles, and not as ‘martyrs’ (of whom there were many, but who had a lower rank than that of apostles), although in their several ways they witnessed for their Master, James by “red martyrdom,” but John by ‘white.’”¹²³ The lack of any earlier evidence for the “red martyrdom” of John counts significantly in favor of this latter interpretation.

Even if these passages do refer to the “red martyrdom” of the apostle John, as Boismard surmises, questions still remain as to the historical value of these accounts. There is little evidence these calendars and festivals date before the end of the fourth century (c. AD 400).¹²⁴ At best, these liturgies demonstrate that the death of John was *celebrated* at this time. Given that the tradition arises in the late fourth century, a time

¹²¹Bernard, *Studia Sacra*, 280.

¹²²Ibid., 281-82.

¹²³Ibid., 283.

¹²⁴Arthur John Maclean, *The Ancient Church Orders* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004), 128-31.

when tradition was often untethered to history,¹²⁵ it is questionable how much historical value it provides for the martyrdom of John.

Given the scattered, inconsistent, and late evidence, it is difficult to conclude with much confidence that the evidence points to an early martyrdom of the apostle John. As convenient as it may be to overstate the case for the martyrdom of John, the current evidence simply does not support such a conclusion. Culpepper provides an apt summary of the evidence: “The cumulative weight of the references just considered has been enough to keep alive the possibility of the early martyrdom of John but not sufficient to override the tradition of his long residence in Ephesus.”¹²⁶

This close examination of the evidence indicates that the following two points can be regarded to have varying degrees of confidence from the early tradition regarding the apostle John:

1. John ministered in Ephesus—*very probably true* (*Acts of John* 18, 62; Polycrates, Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31; Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 81; Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1; Clement of Alexandria *The Rich Man Who Is Saved*, Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.23; Pseudo-Hippolytus *Hippolytus on the Twelve Apostles* 3; Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1).
2. John experienced martyrdom—*improbable* (Mark 10:35-45; disappearance of John from Acts; Philip of Side citation; church calendars and martyrologies).

¹²⁵Ralph Martin Novak, Jr., *Christianity and the Roman Empire* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001), 27.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

CHAPTER 10

THE MARTYRDOM OF THOMAS

The Synoptic Gospels provide no details about Thomas except his name, which means “twin.”¹ He appears only in the lists of disciples (Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13). Yet in the Gospel of John, Thomas emerges as an important figure in three passages.

Thomas first appears as a bold disciple, willing to go to his death for Jesus (John 11:16). Jesus had just gotten word that his beloved friend Lazarus was ill (11:3). When Jesus announced to his disciples that he was going to Judea, they tried to stop him: “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” (11:8).² But Thomas is not dissuaded. He boldly proclaims, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (11:16). These actions paint a different picture of Thomas than the typical “doubting” motif. Rather than wavering in his commitment, Thomas was willing to face death for his master. Thomas certainly doubted the resurrection appearance of Jesus (20:25), but in this earlier passage, he shows greater devotion to Jesus than the rest of the disciples. Herbert Lockyer contrasts this with the similar proclamation by Peter: “But those were mere words, which were not followed up by the deed. With Thomas it was a declaration backed by deed for he crossed Jordan with Jesus, and went up to Judea, where he expected only death for himself and the rest.”³ Thomas also appears as the spokesman

¹“Thomas” is Hebrew for *twin* and “Didymus” means the same in Greek. Some scholars believe Matthew was a twin to Thomas, since they appear next to each other in the Synoptic lists of the disciples. Others argue that he was a twin to Jesus, since that is how he appears in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*. In reality, the identity of the twin is unknown.

²There were several attempts on the life of Jesus during his previous visits to Judea (John 7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40, 59; 10:31, 39).

³Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 177

for the disciples in this passage; a role typically reserved for Peter in the Synoptic Gospels.⁴

Thomas appears again in the Gospel of John in the upper room. Jesus addressed his disciples:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going. (John 14:1-4)

Immediately Thomas said to Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5). And Jesus answers, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (14:6-7). Thomas interprets the words of Jesus in the most literalistic manner. Even though Jesus had just said that the disciples know the way to where he was going (14:4), Thomas still seemed lost. Clearly he does not understand the spiritual point Jesus was making. Rather than complying, Jesus responds that he *is* the only way to get eternal life (11:6). Glenn Most captures the significance of these first two passages involving Thomas: "Thomas's wish to die together with Jesus expresses not only the depth of his love and dedication for Jesus but also his total misunderstanding of Jesus' message. . . . He is deeply loyal to Jesus, he wants desperately to believe Jesus' message, but quite simply he just does not manage to understand it—until the very end."⁵

The third time Thomas is mentioned in the Gospel of John involves his absence at the appearance of Jesus to his disciples (20:24-25). While no explicit reason is given for why he is not present, some scholars believe John intends the reader to understand the disciples as chiding Thomas for what he missed.⁶ Nevertheless, the text

⁴Aloysius Xavier, "Thomas in the Fourth Gospel," *Indian Theological Studies* 30 (1993): 24.

⁵Glenn W. Most, *Doubting Thomas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 64.

⁶Most claims, "Hence it is certainly plausible, and may even be preferable, to understand the disciples' words as an implicit reproach, almost as though they were gloating over the miracle that had

simply says, “Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came” (20:24). And when they tell Thomas, he replies, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (20:25). This passage is the reason Thomas is forever dubbed “the doubter.” And despite what many critics claim, Jesus was not repudiating evidence-based faith.⁷

After eight days, when all the disciples were together, this time including Thomas, Jesus appeared amongst them: “Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (20:27-28).⁸ Even though Jesus invited Thomas to examine the evidence through touching him, the impression given by the text is that Thomas was convinced solely by sight. Not only was Jesus alive again, he could now be addressed as deity. Beasley-Murray concludes,

So it comes about that the most outrageous doubter of the resurrection of Jesus utters the greatest confession of the Lord who rose from the dead. His utterance does not simply acknowledge the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, but expresses its ultimate meaning, i.e., as revelation of who Jesus is. Yet it is not an abstract theological definition concerning the person of Christ. The personal pronoun is of vital importance “*my* Lord, and *my* God.” He confesses *to* the risen Jesus that he

been available to them but denied to Thomas. ‘Why weren’t you here with us?’ they seem to be chiding him. ‘See what you missed?’” Ibid., 45.

⁷For instance, Richard Dawkins claims, “Thomas demanded evidence. . . . The other apostles, whose faith was so strong that they did not need evidence, are held up to us as worthy of imitation” (Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976], 198). There are several problems with this approach. First, Jesus predicted his resurrection on multiple occasions in the presence of the disciples. Thomas should not have been surprised at the return of Jesus. Second, Thomas heard eyewitness testimony (evidence) from the rest of the disciples and yet still refused to believe. Third, Jesus did many miracles during his ministry as proof of his identity. In fact, right after the story of Jesus scolding Thomas, John said the miracles of Jesus were recorded “so that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name” (20:31). The problem was not that Thomas demanded evidence but that he rejected the evidence he was given.

⁸This passage has come under considerable fire by critics. And yet Carson rightly observes, “Are we to think that the church made up a story that pictures one of the Twelve as incredulous to the point of unreasonable obstinacy (v. 25), and that reports the Lord’s public reproof of that apostle (vv. 27, 29)? Even if the narrative has an apologetic purpose, that is scant reason for assessing it as unhistorical: it is surely as justifiable to conclude that the account was chosen precisely because it was so suitable” (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 657-58).

belongs to him as his willing subject; he adores him and henceforth will serve him as he deserves.⁹

Thomas had always been a devoted follower of Christ. But now his devotion would be grounded in an accurate understanding of who Jesus really was (and is). The Gospel of John makes it clear that Thomas *personally* saw Jesus after his death and believed that he was the Lord. Jesus appeared a second time to the disciples as they gathered indoors for the sole purpose of persuading Thomas. There is no other instance in the Gospels where Jesus appears for the sake of convincing one person. Thus, Thomas not only has a special place in the Gospel of John, but also seemingly in relationship to Jesus.

This passage reveals another critical point—Thomas' convictions were not developed secondhand, but through coming face to face with the risen Jesus. Like the rest of the apostles, he was willing to suffer and face death for this belief. He was thrown in jail for preaching publicly about Jesus (Acts 5:17-25). And when threatened by the religious authorities, Thomas refused to stop preaching because he was a *witness* of the risen Christ (Acts 5:29-32).

Along with playing a significant role in the Gospel of John, Thomas went on to become a prominent figure in the Gnostic and apocryphal texts of the early church. Thomas is the central figure in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (c. AD 140-170), the *Gospel of Thomas* (c. AD 150), the *Book of Thomas the Contender* (c. AD 150-225), the *Acts of Thomas* (c. AD 200-220), and the *Apocalypse of Thomas* (c. sixth century). The fact that Thomas appears so prominently in the apocryphal tradition is noteworthy. Most observes, “No other character figures as the protagonist or putative author mentioned in them by name as frequently as Thomas is, with the sole exceptions of Jesus himself and the disciples Peter and John.”¹⁰ Thomas was such a significant figure in the early church

⁹George, R Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 385-86

¹⁰Most, *Doubting Thomas*, 90.

that some have suggested there was a Thomas School, with some degree of organization, that may have produced some of the early Gnostic texts that feature Thomas.¹¹

The Historical Challenge

While Peter and Paul are believed by the Western Church to have evangelized and died in Rome, the Eastern Church has consistently held that Thomas founded the church in India before his martyrdom. Alphonse Mingana explains,

It is the constant tradition of the Eastern Church that the Apostle Thomas evangelised India, and there is no historian, no poet, no breviary, no liturgy, and no writer of any kind who, having the opportunity of speaking of Thomas, does not associate his name with India. Some writers mention also Parthia and Persia among the lands evangelised by him, but all of them are unanimous in the matter of India. The name of Thomas can never be dissociated from that of India.¹²

The key question is whether or not this tradition is reliable. Did Thomas really travel to India, minister to the local people, and then face martyrdom? While scholars hold widely divergent views on the historicity of this question, there seems to be agreement that the evidence is not demonstrative either way. Justo Gonzalez says the tradition of Thomas in India leaves historians “somewhat baffled.”¹³ Eric Frykenberg says questions of the historicity of the Thomas tradition “are not easy to answer.”¹⁴ L. W. Brown believes that the evidence is “unsatisfactory,” and yet he holds that the evidence “may for some incline the balance to belief that the truth of the tradition is a reasonable probability.”¹⁵

According to Julius Richter, “It may therefore be inferred with certainty from the

¹¹For an analysis and critique of the idea of a Thomas School, see Philip Sellev, “Thomas Christianity: Scholars in Quest of a Community,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven, Netherlands: 2001), 11-35.

¹²Alphonse Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1926), 15-16.

¹³Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity—Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, rev and updated ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 38.

¹⁴Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91.

¹⁵L. W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 11, 59.

apocryphal narrative that in these border lands of North-West India Christian communities were already in existence at the time of the composition of these apocryphal writings, and that such communities traced their origin to the Apostle Thomas.”¹⁶ On the critical side, van den Bosch concludes that “there is insufficient evidence to corroborate the hypothesis that the apostle actually went to India.”¹⁷ It is important to remember that historical questions involve varying degrees of probability, not certainty. This is especially true for an investigation concerning the possible journey of the apostle Thomas to India.

One difficulty in assessing the Thomas tradition is that the historical record of India is unconventional (from Western standards). There was not a written history of India until the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century.¹⁸ Thus, it has often been claimed that since India lacked historical writing it also lacked a sense of history. Only recently has this assumption been challenged. While early India may have lacked extensive historical writings, it does not follow that it also lacked a historical consciousness.¹⁹ History was simply preserved in a manner different than in the West. Frykenberg explains,

Each community, from out of its own store of cultural and material resources, sought to preserve its own oral tradition, its own epic historical narratives (*itihasa-puranas*), and its own narrative genealogies or lineages (*vamshāvalis*). Family members told and retold their own stories—about how their own family and their own community first came into being; how much adversity they suffered or how great the good fortune that came to them or brought them honour and status; how their own people first settled onto special lands or gained special distinction; and, among other things, how they first developed their own unique institutions. From

¹⁶Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, trans. Sydney H. Moore (New York: Revell, 1908), 28.

¹⁷Lourens P. van den Bosch, “India and the Apostolate of St. Thomas,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, 136.

¹⁸Nectarias McLees, “Witness for an Apostle: The Evidence for St. Thomas in India,” *Road to Emmaus* 6 (2005): 60.

¹⁹Romila Thapar, “Historical Traditions in Early India: c. 1000 B.C. to c. AD 600,” *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, ed., Andrew Feldherr and Grant Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 553-58.

generation to generation, children listened: during evenings after the sun went down and in times before lights were abundant, enthralled by stories that told about their own ancestral origins. Embedded in what was heard, in the form of bardic songs and oral traditions—and in what eyes beheld, in epigraphic copper and stone inscriptions, as well as on palm-leaf manuscripts—were hallowed sources of narratives that were ritually celebrated, danced, and sung.²⁰

The Thomas Christians, for instance, still strongly hold to oral traditions that claim they were founded by the apostle Thomas. In place of written documentation are songs and poems, such as the *Thomma Parvam*, which was not written down until the early seventeenth century. Does this mean it lacks historical value? Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit conclude, “The fact that such songs did not exist in written form before the 17th and 18th centuries is no ground upon which to dismiss their antiquity. Nor can we disregard lightly the claim of some families which trace their involvement in the priesthood of the Church in South India over 40, 48, and even 80 generations.”²¹ In fact, they note that there is often a double standard among Western scholars who dismiss apostolic roots in India, because the tradition is deemed too late and legend-filled, and yet are ready to overlook the fact that the earliest record of Patrick of Ireland comes from the late eighth century, roughly three centuries after his death.²²

Undoubtedly the tradition of Thomas in India is filled with legend and myth, and may not meet critical historical standards. Is this a second reason it can be dismissed as lacking any historical value? Indian scholars tend to approach the intersection of tradition and truth quite differently. For instance, in India, tradition is a significant source for preserving historical truth. F. E. Pargiter writes,

Tradition therefore becomes all-important. It is the only resource, since historical works are wanting, and is not an untrustworthy guide. In ancient times men knew perfectly well the difference between truth and falsehood, as abundant proverbs and sayings show. It was natural therefore that they should discriminate what was true and preserve it; and historical tradition must be considered in this light.²³

²⁰Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 92.

²¹Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 163-64.

²²*Ibid.*, 166.

²³F. E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922),

While it is uncritical to simply accept tradition, it is overly critical to glibly dismiss it. Indian scholar James Kurikilamkatt reminds that “legends are born in history and that they are part of history.”²⁴ The key is to separate fact from fiction, remembering that myths and legends do not arise in a vacuum. The place to begin is to consider the practicability of Thomas travelling to India and ministering during the first century AD. Was such a trip even possible?

Travel to India in the First Century AD

There is no doubt an apostolic mission from Jerusalem to India in the first century was entirely possible from a physical standpoint. India may have been more open to direct communication with the West during the first two hundred years of the Common Era than any other period before the coming of the Portuguese in the seventeenth century.²⁵ Trade relations were just as close with southern India as with the north. And while this period experienced a boom in trade and communication, there had already been extensive contact between the Mediterranean world and India for a long time.²⁶

Trade between Rome and India was in a flourishing state in the first and second centuries, at least from the time of Claudius (c. AD 45) to the time of Hadrian (d. AD 138). Significant routes and gaps through the mountainous terrain were found which could be traversed quite efficiently.²⁷ Romans had an insatiable desire for pearls, spices, pepper, silk, ivory, and cotton goods from various parts of India. The Indians imported tin, lead, gold, silver coins, wine, coral, beryl, and glass from the West. Many Roman

3.

²⁴James Kurikilamkatt, *First Voyage of the Apostle Thomas to India* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005), 5.

²⁵Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 31.

²⁶For a detailed description of the ancient evidence for relations between India and the West, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1:479-99

²⁷Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 59-60.

coins dating from the time of Tiberius (AD 14-37) to Nero (AD 54-68) have been found in southern India, proving that Rome trade relations were as common in southern India as in the north.²⁸ In addition, archaeological evidence bolsters the case for trade relations in the first century. Most notably, many Roman artifacts were found at the “Indo-Roman trading station” at Arikamedu near Pondichéry. Based on the nature of the artifacts, including pottery, beads, glass, and terracotta, it seems likely the Romans were using Arikamedu between the first century BC and the early second century AD.²⁹

Perhaps the most intriguing evidence for trade between India and Rome comes from a surviving first-century document, a mariner’s manual, written by an unknown merchant, called *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. The subtitle is, “Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century.” The *Periplus* is the first record of organized trading between Rome, Parthia, India, China, and many other smaller nations of the time, written roughly around the time of Thomas’s mission and the first great missionary expansion of the Christian church. The report contains details about various ports, cities, articles of trade, as well as navigational and commercial details on the Indian Ocean, many of which have been confirmed to be accurate.³⁰ Strabo’s *Geography* along with the writings of Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*) and Ptolemy (*Geography*) confirm that a journey from Rome to India would not have been unusual in the first century.³¹ These works also contain fairly detailed references to India.³² Thus, independent of the destination and fate of the apostle Thomas, it seems likely Middle Eastern Christians followed Roman trade routes to northern and southern India in the first

²⁸Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 157.

²⁹Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (New York: Penguin, 1966), 1:115.

³⁰John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2000), 121.

³¹Klaus Karttunen, “On the Contacts of South India with the Western World in Ancient Times, and the Mission of the Apostle Thomas,” *South Asian Religion and Society*, ed. Asko Parpola and Bent Smidt Hansen (London: Riverdale, 1986), 189-91.

³²See *Natural History* 5.9.47; 6.21.56-26.106; Ptolemy’s *Geography* 7.1

century, and certainly by the second, with the desire to be obedient to the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).³³

Given the textual, archaeological, and geographical evidence for trade and communication between India and the Roman Empire in the first century, there is no reason to doubt that a trip by the apostle Thomas to India was possible. Frykenberg provides a fitting synopsis of the preceding evidence,

Thus, whatever historicity the story and tradition of Thomas may or may not possess, historical evidence confirms that comparable events did happen during the time of Thomas and that these occurred at the same times and in the same places. Thus, it is entirely plausible to conclude that such events might have involved the Apostle Thomas himself.³⁴

Thomas in India

While it is undoubtedly possible that Thomas could have gone to India. The question still remains—*is it probable?* An important line of evidence in examining this question is to consider the witness of the early church fathers. Outside the New Testament, there are no known references to Thomas in the first century. The various “Thomas” books of the second century focus on the life and ministry of Jesus rather than Thomas’ ministry endeavors. While the record of the sojourn for Thomas is not as early as the corresponding records for some of the other apostles (e.g., Peter and Paul), there is a substantial testimony that he was the apostle to the East. Early church writings consistently link Thomas to ministry in India and Parthia.

1. *Acts of Thomas* 1 (c. AD 200-220): “At that time we apostles were all in Jerusalem. . . . By lot India fell to Judas Thomas, also called Didymus.”³⁵
2. *Teachings of the Apostles* 3, (3rd century): “India, and all the countries belonging to it and *round* about it, even to the farthest sea, received the apostles’ ordination to the

³³Philip Jenkins, “India’s Original Christians,” *Christian Century* 129 (November 2012): 45.

³⁴Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 103.

³⁵In regard to Christians living in India in the early third century, Eugene Tisserant observes, “In the Christian community of the south there was no doubt a good proportion of indigenous Christians, because the author of the *Acts of Judas-Thomas* could not have written in Mesopotamia something which, to contemporaries sufficiently aware of the situation in India, would have seemed unlikely” (Eugene Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India* [Calcutta, India: Orient Longmans, 1957], 6).

priesthood from Judas Thomas, who was guide and ruler in the church which he had built there, in which he also ministered there.”³⁶

3. *Hippolytus on the Twelve* (c. 3rd cent.): “And Thomas preached to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Hyrcanians, Bactrians, and Margians, and was thrust through in the four members of his body with a pine spear at Calamene, the city of India, and was buried there.”
4. Origen, *Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 3 (d. c. 254): “Thomas, according to tradition, was allotted Parthia . . .”³⁷
5. *Clementine Recognitions* 9.29 (c AD 350): “In short, among the Parthians—as Thomas, who is preaching the Gospel amongst them.”³⁸
6. St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oration* 33.11 (c. AD 325-390): “. . . Thomas with India . . .”³⁹

Many later writings continue the tradition of connecting Thomas with Parthia and India.⁴⁰

Farquhar notes that there are two distinct lines of tradition for the apostle Thomas, linking him to both Parthia and to India. How can these two be reconciled? According to Farquhar, “During the period before the Council of Nicaea [sic], no leader of the Church of the West says that Thomas went to India.”⁴¹ He cites the examples of Origen and Eusebius. But after Nicaea, he says, every ancient writer (except two) cites that Thomas went to India. What happened? Farquhar believes that the topic came up at Nicaea by Bishops from the East who were able to convince their counterparts in the West: “As we have seen, the whole Church from Edessa eastward, long before Nicaea [sic], believed and taught with the utmost consistency that Thomas had labored in India and had died as a martyr there; and, after Nicaea [sic] the Western Church held the same tradition.”⁴²

³⁶*The Teaching of the Apostles*, 8:671.

³⁷Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.

³⁸*Clementine Recognitions* 9.29, 8:189.

³⁹St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oration 33, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, 332.

⁴⁰Some of these later writers include St. Ephrem (c. AD 373), Gaudentius (387), Gregory of Nyssa (389), St. Ambrose of Milan (397), and Jerome (340-420).

⁴¹John N. Farquhar, “The Apostle Thomas in South India,” in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1927), 11:41.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 43.

Farquhar provides a creative synthesis of the evidence, but it is entirely speculative. Perhaps a better approach is to recognize that the two traditions are not necessarily in contradiction. Thomas may have embarked on his missionary journey by the mid 40s (at the earliest), and the traditional dating places his death in AD 72. Clearly there was plenty of time for multiple missions in the East. Another factor recognizes the flexibility of the name “India” in the first century AD. Moffett explains, “If Gundaphar was a Parthian Suren, as seems possible, a mission to India might loosely but not incorrectly be referred to as a mission to Parthians.”⁴³ There is no good reason to discount this tradition as contradictory, especially since Parthia and India are both East of Jerusalem and proximate to one another. If Thomas really did go to the East, it may help explain why there is a silence in the first two centuries of the church regarding his ministry and fate.⁴⁴

Three points stand out from the early church fathers regarding their witness to Thomas. First, the testimony that he went to India is unanimous, consistent, and reasonably early. Second, there is no contradictory evidence stating Thomas did *not* go to India (or Parthia), or that he went elsewhere. Third, there is confirmation from fathers both in the East and in the West. Since the beginning of the third century it has become an almost undisputable tradition that Thomas ministered in India. While the case for Thomas in India is more provisional than for Peter and Paul in Rome, it does seem more probable than not.

The case may be slightly strengthened evidence for the existence of early Christians in India. Eusebius claims that Pantaenus, the great Egyptian scholar who was

⁴³Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 33.

⁴⁴McGrath says, “One could obviously propose that Thomas simply disappeared altogether, perhaps even having fallen away from the faith after crucifixion. Such an explanation, however, fails to do justice to the fact that embarrassing behavior on the part of other key disciples (Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot) apparently could not simply be ignored, and found its way into the very core of the earliest Gospel tradition” (James F. McGrath, “History and Fiction in the Acts of Thomas: The State of the Question,” *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha* 17 [2008]: x.

in charge of the Alexandrian School, was sent to preach the gospel of Christ to people in the East and went as far as India. When Pantaenus arrived in India (AD 189), “he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language,⁶ which they had preserved till that time.”⁴⁵ Jerome confirms this tradition, adding that Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, sent Pantaenus at the request of the people.⁴⁶

There should be nothing surprising about Pantaenus finding Christians in India if Thomas (and *possibly* Bartholomew) had already preached there. Mingana rejects this story, claiming that the India Eusebius referred to “is without doubt Arabia Felix.”⁴⁷ Yet according to Stephen Neill, a missionary in India who studied the expansion of Christianity in India for four decades, “When ships in hundreds were going from Egypt to South India, it is unlikely that anyone in Alexandria would be the victim of such a confusion...It must be taken as probable that South India is the India of Pantaenus.”⁴⁸

Another early missionary to India is Theophilus the Indian (AD 354-425). He was sent by Constantius, the Arian emperor, as an ambassador to the Yemen, in hopes of getting permission to build churches for locals as well as Roman travellers. It is believed that he travelled to his native island Divus, as well as many other Indian districts. While it may be impossible to know whether he made it to the actual India, he likely encountered an indigenous Indian. He discovered resident congregants, regular church services where the gospel was read in Syriac, a ministering clergy, and uniquely Indian customs, such as

⁴⁵Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.10.3, as cited in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 1:225.

⁴⁶Saint Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 36

⁴⁷Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity*, 17.

⁴⁸Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginning to AD 1707* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 40.

listening to the gospel in a sitting posture.⁴⁹ This is an unmistakably Indian form of listening that is unlikely to have come from another place.⁵⁰ Thus, Mingana concludes, “There is hardly any reasonable doubt, therefore, that the Christian community of India in about AD 354, was an indigenous community, not much in touch with the practices prevalent in the Graeco-Roman churches, and was somewhat similar to the East Syrian Church before the time of the Catholicos Pāpa.”⁵¹

Another line of support comes from the *Book of Fate* (AD 196) by Bardaisan. In one section he compares the customs of Christians with various pagan groups. While he mentions pagan customs in Parthia, he does not refer to any Christians living there. But he does mention Christians living in the midst of the Kushans, an empire that extended into Western India from the beginning of the second century to the end of the fourth.⁵² If this evidence is considered in lieu of the claim by Eusebius that Pantaenus came to India in 189, there is considerable reason to accept the presence of Christians in India in the late second century.

There is also the known existence of bishops in India at the end of the third and the early fourth centuries. The first identified bishop of India is David (Dūdi), who left Basrah by ship around AD 295. Though the location in India cannot be identified for sure, it was likely in southern India.⁵³ The second reference to a bishop is John, bishop of

⁴⁹A. E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London: Ballantyne, 1905), 197-201.

⁵⁰Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 67.

⁵¹Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity*, 27.

⁵²Edward James Rapson, *The Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 1:585.

⁵³See Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 41. Neil notes, “The region in India visited by this bishop cannot be determined with certainty, but some conjecture is possible. Before the end of the third century the Parthians and the Arabs emerged on the Red Sea; travel became dangerous, and communication between India and Egypt was much reduced. If a bishop from the Persian Gulf visited communities *in the Indus region*, the fact would not be so remarkable as to deserve special mention in a chronicle. But if the Persian churches, learning of the destitution of the churches *in South India*, decided to send an emissary to their help, this would indeed indicate a new departure, which could have great significance for the future, and which therefore might be thought worthy of record.” Ibid.

Persian and Great India (AD 325). Some have suggested this solitary bishop from the East to be an invention to emphasize the genuinely ecumenical nature of the council. But such skepticism is unwarranted. Eusebius, who was present at the council, noted that a Persian Bishop was a participant.⁵⁴ As Kurikilamkatt has noted, this may suggest that the Indian church was well established before the council of Nicea.⁵⁵

If the aforementioned evidence is combined with the literary evidence of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Acts of Thomas*, traditions such as the *Thomma Parvom*, as well the Taxila Cross that may date to the second century,⁵⁶ there is no good reason to doubt the existence of a Christian community in India by the late second century. After considering the evidence Thomas went to southern India, Aziz Atiya concludes, “Whatever the outcome of these arguments, it is clear that Christianity was planted in Malabar at a very early date, certainly before the end of the second century, as testified by Pantaenus.”⁵⁷ The next step is to consider the reliability of the earliest literary evidence that Thomas preached and died in India—the *Acts of Thomas*.

The Acts of Thomas

The *Acts of Thomas* is the earliest literary account of the preaching ministry and martyrdom of Thomas in India. It was likely composed in the early third century (c. AD 200-220), but may have originated as early as the second century.⁵⁸ The *Acts of*

⁵⁴See Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity*, 63.

⁵⁵Kurikilamkatt, *First Voyage*, 135.

⁵⁶In 1935, a small cross on black stone was found outside the city of Sirkap where the palace of king Gondophares once stood. The precise date is unknown, but it is commonly dated to the second century AD. Of course, if it is an early Christian cross it reveals nothing about a sojourn of Thomas to India. At best, it would reveal the existence of a Christian community in India in the second century. See John Rooney, *Shadows in the Dark: A History of Christianity in Pakistan Up to the 10th Century* (Rawalpindi, Pakistan: Christian Study Centre, 1984), 42-43.

⁵⁷Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 363.

⁵⁸Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 93.

Thomas is the only ancient apocryphal act that has survived in its entirety, although not in its original form.⁵⁹ It was likely written in Syriac and then translated into Greek.⁶⁰

The *Acts of Thomas* begins with the apostles in Jerusalem dividing up the world for missions. According to lot, Thomas was assigned to go to India, but he reluctantly objected, “How can I, who am a Hebrew, go and preach the truth among the Indians?” Even though Jesus appears to him at night, Thomas still resists his assignment.⁶¹ Shortly thereafter a merchant named Abban came from India looking for a carpenter to work for king Gondophares. Jesus offers to sell him Thomas as a slave, and this time Thomas replies, “I go whither thou wilt, Lord Jesus; thy will be done!” Once he arrives in the city, Gondophares assigns Thomas to build him a palace outside the city gates. Thomas agrees, but instead of using the money to build the palace, he gives it away to the poor and afflicted. Gondophares was furious when he heard how Thomas used the money and so he casts him in prison, contemplating how he would kill him. That very night the king’s brother Gad died and was taken by an angel to see the palace Thomas had built in heaven. Gad was allowed to return to life the next day and tell his brother all he had seen. As a result, both Gondophares and Gad sought the forgiveness of Thomas and decide to follow the Lord. Thomas travels to another land, and after preaching, casting out demons, and performing miracles, he is eventually thrown in prison by king Misdaeus (Mizdai). Thomas prays as he is escorted to his death by four guards who kill him with spears.

There are two general positions in regards to the *Acts of Thomas*. The position taken in regards to the historicity largely determines whether the apostolate of Thomas in

⁵⁹Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 141.

⁶⁰Jan N. Bremmer, “The Acts of Thomas and Women,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, 76.

⁶¹Rejecting a divine call was common in the Old Testament (cf. Moses, Exod 3:11; Gideon, Jdg 6:12; Jer 1:6; Jonah 1:3). See A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, rev. ed. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 19.

India is accepted or rejected. The first position is to write it off as entirely fictional. Gary Reger, for instance, says the *Acts of Thomas* does not have “any claim to ‘factual’ testimony about India. Rather, verisimilitude is created to give the fictional account the air of ‘believability.’”⁶² The second position is to recognize the legendary nature of the *Acts of Thomas* but admit that it contains a historical core. For example, James McGrath notes that while the *Acts of Thomas* is likely a fictional novel, it is embedded with confirmable historical information.⁶³ According to McGrath, it is a tendency in Western scholarship to *assume* the legendary character of the *Acts of Thomas* rather than to argue for it.

Some scholars have pointed to certain incidental details in the narrative that imply an Indian origin. For instance, Medlycott has argued that the practice of bathing or washing before meals is a uniquely Hindu custom that traces to southern India.⁶⁴ While this custom was Indian by nature, there is at least some evidence a similar custom was practiced in the Greco-Roman world, and thus it was not *uniquely* Indian. After analyzing this custom more closely, McGrath writes, “Here, as in the previous case, the features in question are *compatible with* an Indian setting, but in no way *require* it.”⁶⁵

Part of the difficulty in ascertaining the truth about the Thomas tradition is that our earliest source (*Acts of Thomas*) is roughly 130-150 years removed from the events. Historically speaking, it must be admitted that this provides a significant challenge to the evidence. Benedict Vadakkekara, who strongly defends the apostolic roots of the St. Thomas Christians, observes,

Now what needs to be explained is the lack of contemporary written documents in India itself about the origin of India’s Christianity. Obviously it fails to make sense

⁶²Gary Reger, “On the Road to India with Apollonios of Tyana and Thomas the Apostle,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 22 (2007): 257-67.

⁶³McGrath, “History and Fiction,” 297.

⁶⁴Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 277-79.

⁶⁵McGrath, “History and Fiction,” x.

that such a vital and unique event as the visit and martyrdom of an Apostle of [the] Lord Jesus, would have gone unrecorded by a Christian community. A people who have for centuries clung tenaciously to the memory of that event would have certainly maintained some records of it. Hence, the very fact that the St. Thomas Christians fail to possess contemporary written documents about the most important event in the history of their community, is seen as a clear indictment of their tradition, however ancient it might be.⁶⁶

Vadakkera proceeds to suggest various reasons for why there is not a written historical record, including the fact that for the first three thousand years of Indian history, there are many volumes on philosophy, religion, and poetry, but very few contemporary written historical accounts.⁶⁷ Vadakkera concludes, “When seen from this historical perspective, it would be anything short of a miracle, if the St. Thomas Christians were to have contemporary documents in support of their ancient history.”⁶⁸ Whether or not his reasons are adequate, the reality still remains that the earliest written documents are at least two full generations removed from his death (AD 72). What value can it provide for this investigation?

It would be premature simply to dismiss the *Acts of Thomas* as lacking any historical value simply because it was written in the early third century, at least two to three generations removed from the events. While earlier sources are certainly preferred, there are times when later sources provide valuable historical information as well. A helpful example comes from comparing the *Acts of Thomas* with the writings of Plutarch. In his *Lives*, Plutarch wrote over sixty biographies, fifty of which have survived. For several subjects in the *Lives*, Plutarch is treated as seriously as with earlier sources. He is the main source for a number of ancient figures, many of whom lived hundreds of years before he wrote about them (e.g., Pelopidas, Timoleon, Dion, Eumenes, Agis, Cleomenes). Donald Russell writes, “The *Lives*, despite the pitfalls for the historian

⁶⁶Benedict Vadakkera, *Origin of India's St. Thomas Christians: A Historiographical Critique* (Delhi, India: Media House, 1995), 327.

⁶⁷Vadakkera notes that Indians commonly wrote on palm leaves, which does not preserve well. Heavy rainfall and humid climate also dampen the preservation of written texts. He also speculates that the Europeans may have destroyed many ancient documents. *Ibid.*, 327-36.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 339.

which have sometimes led to despair about their value as source-material, have been the main source of understanding of the ancient world for many readers from the Renaissance to the present day.”⁶⁹ Later sources *can* provide valuable historical information and must not simply be dismissed. The *Acts of Thomas* must be examined on its own merits to see if it contains any discernible historical information.

One way to approach this question is to consider the genre of the *Acts of Thomas*. Christine Thomas has suggested that the various *Acts* of this period (and other similar novels) are best categorized as historical fiction.⁷⁰ The mere fact that the *Acts of Thomas* contains known historical figures such as Thomas, Gondophares, Gad (and possibly even Habban and Xanthippe,⁷¹ Mazdai,⁷² and the city of Andrapolis⁷³), indicates that it is not entirely divorced from a historical memory. Rather than inventing a narrative for the apostle, the authors of the *Acts* would elaborate upon a known historical tradition. In the romance novels of this time, focus was placed on retelling the most significant and well-known events from the public life of the individual, even though legendary material was clearly added. Christine Thomas provides a helpful comparison: “The Alexander romance provides the best generic parallel among the novelistic products of the Roman

⁶⁹Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), s.v. “Plutarch,” by Donald A. Russell.

⁷⁰Christine Thomas, *The Acts of Peter: Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 88-89.

⁷¹John N. Farquhar, “The Apostle Thomas in North India,” in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 11: 9; idem, “The Apostle Thomas in South India,” 11:46.

⁷²F. A. D’Cruz suggests that king Mazdai may be identified with *Mahadeva*, a common name among kings of south India. F. A. D’Cruz, *St. Thomas, the Apostle* (Madras: Hoe and Company., 1922), 50-51. F. A. D’Cruz, *St. Thomas, The Apostle in India: An Investigation on the latest researches in connection with the Time-honored Tradition regarding the martyrdom of St. Thomas in Southern India* (New York: Hoe and Company, 1922).

⁷³Kurikilamkatt argues that the city of Andrapolis (Syriac calls is Sandruk Mahosa) is likely the city of Barygaza. He argues that there is etymological, linguistic, geographical, and historical evidence in favor of this conclusion. He even argues there was likely a Jewish presence in the first century. See Kurikilamkatt, *First Voyage*, 44-53.

Empire. Alongside of the imaginative and improbable occurrences that form the fabric of the narrative, the romance also narrates all the best-known events of Alexander's life."⁷⁴

The content of the *Acts of Thomas* can be compared with the other four ancient *Acts*—Peter, Paul, John, and Andrew.⁷⁵ When it comes to the *Acts of Peter*, *Acts of Paul*, and the *Acts of John*, even though they contain clear embellishment, external evidence indicates that they reliably convey the travels, preaching, and fate of each apostle. If there were no external corroboration for the post-Jerusalem lives of these apostles, many scholars would likely reject them as entirely fictional. And yet external evidence indicates they retain a historical nucleus. The *Acts of Thomas* is of the same genre and time period as the other aforementioned *Acts*. Even though there is not similar early external corroboration for *Acts of Thomas*, it seems at least more probable than not that it is reliable on the core facts of the narrative, including the travels, preaching, and death of the apostle Thomas.⁷⁶ Kurikilamkatt asks an important question: “If the story did not have a historical background and if the readers of the book knew Thomas had gone to some places other than those mentioned in the *Ath* [*Acts of Thomas*], how could the author of the *Ath* believe that any credibility would be given to his story?”⁷⁷ Later tradition, as well as the lack of any competing tradition for his journeys and fate, helps confirm this conclusion.

Gondophares

The most significant find convincing many scholars of the historical core of *Acts of Thomas* was the discovery in 1834 of a collection of ancient coins in the Kabul

⁷⁴Thomas, *The Acts of Peter*, 88-89.

⁷⁵Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 4.

⁷⁶After noting the historical core of the *ATH*, C. B. Firth concludes, “It would however be risky to assume that such a tradition contained anything more than the bare facts that the apostle went to a region variously called India or Parthia, preached the Gospel, made converts and there met his death” (C. B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* [Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2012], 12).

⁷⁷Kurikilamkatt, *First Voyage*, 86.

Valley of Afghanistan. Ancient coins often provide similar information as modern coins, including the names of various rulers and kings. Among the many forgotten kings whose images christened these coins, was the name “Gondophares” in a variety of spellings including “Gundaphar,” “Gundaphara,” “Gondophernes” and “Gondapharasa.” Many other coins were soon found in different regions confirming the existence of Gondophares and his family as well.⁷⁸ Additionally, ruins have been discovered that many consider his former palace.⁷⁹ Subsequent research dated the coins to the first century AD. More specific dating became possible with the discovery of a stone tablet among the ruins of a Buddhist city near Peshawar that contained six lines of text in an Indo-Bactrian language. Moffett concludes, “Deciphered, the inscription not only named King Gundaphar, it dated him squarely in the early first century A.D., making him a contemporary of the apostle Thomas just as the maligned *Acts of Thomas* had described him.”⁸⁰

King Gondophares was not the creative imagination of an early third century Edessan Christian, but a real king who ruled the north Indian region from the early to mid-first century, right during the time it is believed Thomas travelled to India. Kurikilamkatt sums up the significance of this find: “Now we know that there existed a king named Gondophares in India and he was an Indo-Parthian, which explains his Iranian name, who had his capital at Taxila and who ruled over a vast domain from 21-51 AD.”⁸¹

⁷⁸After personally examining the coins, A. E. Medlycott came to the conclusion that “it is impossible to doubt that the Maharaya Guduphara mentioned in this record the well-known King Gondophares, whose coins are abundant in the well-known Eastern Afghanistan” (Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 14).

⁷⁹Rooney, *Shadows in the Dark*, 38.

⁸⁰Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 29.

⁸¹Kurikilamkatt, *First Voyage*, 74.

As valuable as this finding is, it does not prove that Thomas made it to India.

George Huxley observes,

Since trade between upper Mesopotamia and northwest India both overland by the way of Mesene and the Persian Gulf was frequent during the first three centuries A.D., knowledge of Gondophernes and his kingdom would have been available in Syriac-speaking communities of Mesopotamia from the mid-first century onwards. The king was specially memorable, because after his reign Pahlava power rapidly declined. Thus in dating the king correctly the author of the *Acts* does not also prove that St Thomas went beyond Parthia to India.⁸²

What this remarkable finding does, however, is demonstrate the possibility that Thomas visited the court of Gondophares. The story is not necessarily a fictional tale about distant lands.

An additional point strengthens the credibility of the account. The *Acts of Thomas* mentions Gad, the brother of Gondophares. As many scholars have observed, Gad may also match the name “Gudana” that was found on some coins alongside Gondophares. While Gondophares may have been “specially memorable” outside northwest India, as Huxley suggests, the same would not have been true for his brother Gad, of which there is no corroborative evidence beyond the *Acts of Thomas* and the coins.

Lourens van den Bosch objects to the significance of this find, proposing that the expression “Gudana” is an adjective derived from Gad. He claims that the coins marked with “Gudana” merely refer to one king, namely Gondophares. Thus, he concludes that Gad is a historical invention.⁸³ While this possibility cannot be completely ruled out, McGrath provides two helpful reasons why it is not particularly convincing.⁸⁴ First, the majority of scholars of Indian history understand “Gudana” as a proper name rather than an adjective. If Indian scholars accept Gad as a historical person, says

⁸²George Huxley, “Geography in the *Acts of Thomas*,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 24 (1983): 75.

⁸³van den Bosch, “India and the Apostolate of St. Thomas,” 134.

⁸⁴McGrath, “History and Fiction,” x.

McGrath, western scholars ought not express an inordinate amount of skepticism. Second, if this line of reasoning were pressed even further, Gondophares might also be considered an adjective, since it is an alternative pronunciation of the Persian name Vindapharna, which means “The Winner of Glory.” Additionally, what strengthens the credibility of the encounter about Thomas and Gondophares is that it is one of the few narratives in the *Acts of Thomas* that is not focused on sexual abstinence.⁸⁵

Yet if Thomas made it to Northwest India, as the *Acts of Thomas* suggest, why is there no remnant of his labors? Why does no contemporary Christian community claim descent from Thomas? Scholars have proposed various reasons for the absence of such a tradition.⁸⁶ Yet when it comes to southern India, there is an unmistakable community that claims to have apostolic roots.

St. Thomas Christians

Perhaps the most accurate rendition of the tradition surrounding Thomas in southern India is told by *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*:

According to Indian tradition, St. Thomas came by sea, and first landed at Cranganore about the year 52 A.D.; converted high caste Hindu families in Cranganore, Palayur, Quilon and some other places; visited the Coromandel coast, making conversions; crossed over to China and preached the Gospel; returned to India and organized the Christians of Malabar under some guides (priests) from among the leading families he had converted, and erected a few public places of worship. Then he moved to the Coromandel, and suffered martyrdom on or near the Little Mount. His body was brought to the town of Mylapore and was buried in a holy shrine he had built. Christians, goes the tradition, from Malabar, the Near East and even from China used to go on pilgrimage to Mylapore and venerate the tomb.⁸⁷

⁸⁵Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:883.

⁸⁶Benedict Vadakkekara suggests that the political turmoil in northwest India during the first century AD provides a sufficient explanation. Vadakkekara, *Origin of India's St. Thomas Christians*, 309. Kurikilamkatt does note that on every October 24, Christians from all throughout Pakistan gather together to celebrate St. Thomas the apostle. So there is some tradition related to Thomas. Yet, one reason for the absence may be invasions but the Kushans, the Guptas, and Muslims. Another reason may be migrations to the west and south. A final reason may be the lack of royal patronage to protect the church and help it grow. See Kurikilamkatt, *First Voyage*, 179-206.

⁸⁷George Menachery, ed., *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India* (Madras, India: BNK Press, 1982), 1:5.

Rather than being preserved in written text, the tradition of the St. Thomas Christians has been transmitted through songs, stories, legends, customs, and celebrations of the people. These various forms of oral tradition were how Indians at this time recorded their history.⁸⁸ The St. Thomas Christians are utterly convinced that their heritage traces back to the apostle Thomas himself, including introduction of the Syriac or Chaldaic (East Syriac) language.⁸⁹ The community has preserved many ancient antiquities that testify to their traditions.⁹⁰ Some of the names of the converts of Thomas have been preserved as part of this tradition and are still remembered today in Kerala.⁹¹ When the Portuguese landed in Malabar around 1500, they found an indigenous community of Christians who had already held for centuries that Thomas was their founder.⁹² Like the tradition contained in the *Acts of Thomas*, the southern tradition contains numerous legends, exaggerations, and conflicting episodes. But the core of the tradition is that Thomas travelled to southern India, preached to the people, established a community, and was martyred and buried at Mylapore.

⁸⁸Vadakkekara, *Origin of India's St. Thomas Christians*, 342-55.

⁸⁹Syriac is a form of Aramaic, with similar grammar and syntax, which developed into a literary form very early. While the tradition of Thomas introducing Syriac into Malabar is undoubtedly possible, it is difficult to demonstrate with any high degree of confidence. As noted previously, there were commercial relations between southern India and the Middle East in the first century AD, so there certainly could have been the introduction of the Aramaic into southern India apart from Thomas, such as through Jews who migrated there in the first century AD. Placid Podipara observes, "Thus it could be argued that the Apostle St. Thomas, himself a Jew who spoke Aramaic, might have performed some items of worship and also said some prayers in Aramaic (Syriac or Chaldaic as said above) . . . [this tradition] may not, therefore, be simply brushed aside as having no foundation. Any way it cannot at all be denied that the roots of the ancient Christianity of Malabar is directly Aramaic" (Syriac or Chaldaic i.e. East Syriac as said above). See Placid J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians and Their Syriac Treasures* (Alleppey, South India: Praksam, 1974), 25.

⁹⁰For a detailed study of early Christian antiquities in India, see H. Hosten, *Antiquities from San Thomé and Mylapore* (Mylapore, India: The Diocese of Mylapore, 1936).

⁹¹Placid J. Podipara, *Thomas Christians* (Bombay, India: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970), 18-20.

⁹²Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 15-16, 43.

This southern tradition is not necessarily in conflict with the northern tradition. There was political turmoil in the northern kingdom of Gondophares around 50 AD, which provides a convenient explanation for why Thomas, according to tradition, arrived in the south around AD 52. The traditions may be complementary rather than contradictory.

Indian scholar Benedict Vadakkekara provides five supporting reasons for the credibility of the tradition.⁹³ First, the mere existence of a community claiming apostolic roots speaks to the genuineness of the tradition. There must have been some significant reason, says Vadakkekara, for why the Indian Christians chose Thomas. Second, the St. Thomas Christians are unique in claiming Thomas as their founding apostle. Given the fact that Thomas was a significant apostle in the Gospel of John as well as the early church, the lack of competing traditions is a sign of the reliability of the tradition. Third, the community has passed down the tradition with consistency. Marco Polo notes (1288-1298) the pilgrimages that Christians were making to the tomb of the apostle Thomas at Mylapore.⁹⁴ Fourth, the tradition has been unanimous amongst both Christians and non-Christians sources. There have been some denominational splits among the St. Thomas Christians, but they unanimously share the conviction that their community has apostolic roots. Fifth, while there are undeniable embellishments, the tradition has retained its pristine simplicity.

⁹³Vadakkekara, *Origin of India's St. Thomas Christians*, 125-43.

⁹⁴The possibility of the existence of the tomb at Mylapore would not prove his martyrdom, since there is no debate that Thomas eventually died and must have been buried *somewhere*. But it would help support the reliability of his Indian tradition. There is no evidence the St. Thomas Christians ever venerated another site for his remains. Two points favor the tradition that St. Thomas was buried at Mylapore. First, the Mylapore tomb is located roughly twenty-five days distance from the communities at Kerala. Why would the St. Thomas Christians choose a spot so remote and alien from where they live? Second, in some manner or another, all Thomas relics trace back to Mylapore. Nevertheless, these points may show that the tradition of the tomb in Mylapore is ancient, but they do not establish that it traces all the way back to the apostle Thomas himself. For an analysis of the evidence the tomb of Mylapore offers for the Thomas tradition, see A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)* (Bangalore, India: Theological Publications in India, 1984), 49-60.

While these points are noteworthy, they are certainly not conclusive. Perhaps the most significant detail to many Indian scholars, in helping to establish the voyage and fate of Thomas in India, is that the tradition of the St. Thomas Christians shows some signs of being independent of the *Acts of Thomas*. The *Acts of Thomas* tell nothing of a south India mission, although it does indicate that he preached “the word of God in all India.” In the southern tradition there are vague hints of a northern mission, mentioning the land of Kusaya. There is not even a slight echo of the Gnostic and encratic theology of the *Acts of Thomas* in the St. Thomas tradition. And perhaps most interesting is that the *Acts of Thomas* refers to Thomas as “Judas” or “Judas Thomas, the name by which he was known in the Syriac tradition. On the other hand, the south Indian tradition knows the apostle only as Thomas. This is significant since the entire tradition rests upon the name and person of the apostle Thomas. Vadakkekara concludes, “The total extraneousness of the St Thomas Christians to this unique appellation of the East Syriac Church, posits for their tradition an origin that is independent of both the *Acta Thomae* and the Syriac Church.”⁹⁵ Although he notes that there may have been an awareness of the *Acts of Thomas* in the south Indian tradition, Kurikilamkatt highlights the differences between the two:

There is not a single story in the South Indian tradition that is borrowed from the *Ath* [*Acts of Thomas*]. Nor is there one in the *Ath* which is taken from the South. But the ones in the *Ath* are embellished with great amount of romantic descriptions and catechetical homilies. The missionary methods of the apostle also is quite differently characterised in the two traditions. No king is converted in the South, while in the *Ath* the conversion begins with royal folk. In the *Ath* the apostle is often found in the company of the royal personages. He is involved in intrigues, rivalries and festivities, all centered around royal palaces and the royalty. But, in the South, it is the Brahmins who have the leading role in the narratives.⁹⁶

⁹⁵Vadakkekara, *Origin of India's St. Thomas Christians*, 265.

⁹⁶Kurikilamkatt, *First Voyage*, 178. Podipara sees the connection somewhat differently. He notes that the first part of the written Malabar tradition bear similarity with the story of ATH. However, in other things, such as the circumstances of his death, he notes that there is no agreement. He concludes, “These details may seem to stand against the servile dependence of the Malabar tradition on the story of the *Acts*. Again, the local details found in the Malabar accounts are even today living oral traditions in many of the places mentioned therein. This also could not be easily explained if the Malabar tradition depended on our borrowed from the *Acts*” (Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, 21).

While the historical data tracing either Indian tradition all the way back to Thomas is elusive, the existence of two traditions that show signs of being independent weighs in favor of the basic details they share in common—that *Thomas was a missionary, preacher, and martyr in India.*⁹⁷

Thomas the Martyr

While the evidence is not conclusive, a few reasons seem to indicate that it is at least minimally *probable* that Thomas was martyred in India. First, there is no doubt a mission from Jerusalem to Rome was physically possible in the first century. Second, Thomas had seen the risen Jesus (John 20:26-29), was zealous in his willingness to suffer and die for him (John 11:16), had received the missionary call from Jesus (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8), and generally fits the profile of someone who would partake of such an endeavor. Third, while the earliest written record in the *Acts of Thomas* clearly contains embellishment, it likely preserves a historical core of the apostle's journey and fate. Fourth, both the written tradition (*Acts of Thomas*, early church fathers) and the oral tradition agree on the general mode of how Thomas was killed.⁹⁸ Fifth, there is no other more compelling narrative for the travels and fate of Thomas. These points are far from conclusive, but they do move the critical scholar to the following observations:

1. Thomas traveled to India—*more probable than not* (*Acts of Thomas* 1; *Didascalia Apostolorum* 24; *Hippolytus on the Twelve*; *Origen Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 3;

⁹⁷Indian scholars consistently note that the two traditions regarding Thomas are independent. Yet it must be recognized that local tradition, such as the *Thomma Parvam*, share common stories with the ATH. Thus, questions of dependency may not be as simple as Kurikilamkatt and Vadakkekara suggest. See Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 48-52.

⁹⁸The St. Thomas tradition claims that Brahmans killed Thomas with a single spear. According to the ATH, the king ordered four soldiers pierce him with spears. They differ over *whom* killed Thomas, and the number of spears that were used, but they both agree on the manner of his death. The death of Thomas by a single spear is preserved in the Edessene, Nestorian, and Monophysite traditions as well as the records of Assemani, the eighteenth century scholar from the East. There is one popular exception that seems to contradict this. When Marco Polo landed in India (AD 1293) he reported that a stray arrow meant for a peacock accidentally killed Thomas. See W. W. Hunter, *The Indian Empire* (London: Trübner & Co., 1886), 238. Nevertheless, a close inspection of his description of India reveals that Marco Polo regularly confused fact and fiction and relied heavily on hearsay. See Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 20-42; and van den Bosch, "India and the Apostolate of St. Thomas," 147.

Clementine Recognitions 9.29; St. Gregory of Nazianzen *Oration* 33.11; physical possibility of travel; lack of competing tradition; evidence for early Christians in India; St. Thomas Christians tradition).

2. Thomas experienced martyrdom—*more probable than not* (*Acts of Thomas*; early church fathers beginning in the third century; lack of competing tradition; St. Thomas Christians tradition).

CHAPTER 11

THE MARTYRDOM OF ANDREW

The apostle Andrew is probably best known as the brother of Peter (Mark 1:16). Like the Zebedee brothers, Andrew and Peter were both fishermen (Matt 4:18).¹ Both Andrew and Peter became disciples of Jesus after he said, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (4:19b). This was not necessarily their first encounter with Jesus, nor does it contradict the Johannine account.² John reports that Andrew first brought Peter to Jesus, making a remarkable Christological confession (John 1:41). This essential material regarding Andrew, that he was a fisherman in Galilee who followed the call of Jesus, seems to reflect an authentic Jesus tradition.³

The name *Andrew* is Greek for “manly.” He was originally from Bethsaida, a city about twenty-five miles east of Nazareth on the Sea of Galilee (John 1:44), but he moved to Capernaum with his family. Before becoming one of the twelve apostles, he was a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:3-42). Jesus undoubtedly made a powerful impression upon him. Andrew must have been utterly convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. While not all of John’s disciples followed Jesus (John 3:25-27), Andrew did. And he immediately brought Peter to him saying, “We have found the Messiah” (John

¹Some have suggested that Andrew and Peter must have been financially poor fisherman, unlike the Zebedee brothers, since Matthew does not mention that they own a boat. This is contradicted by Luke 5:3, and also goes against the intentions of the passage. R. T. France notes, “So to use this difference of terminology to propose a social stratification, with Simon and Andrew belonging to the poorer shore-fishermen while the Zebedee family were more affluent and owned a boat, goes well beyond any clear hint in Matthew’s wording” (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 147).

²Andreas Köstenberger, “Apologetics Commentary on the Gospel of John,” *The Holman Apologetics Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Jeremy Royal Howard (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 515.

³Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 148-50.

1:41b).⁴ Andrew likely received a similar education as his brother, but since he lived with Peter and his family at the beginning of his ministry, some have suggested he was not married.⁵

The Synoptics provide little information about Andrew. Mark reports one instance where Andrew joins Peter, James, and John in hearing Jesus' teaching on the Mount of Olives (13:3-37), where Jesus proclaims the destruction of the temple and its precincts. While most scholars conclude that Andrew was not among the inner circle, Andrew may have been on the fringes of the group. Interestingly, there is an early tradition that Andrew was a member of the inner circle, perhaps even more prominent than his brother Peter. This finds support from a quote by Papias in his *The Sayings of the Lord Interpreted*, in which he lists Andrew as the first apostle he sought to learn about the words of Jesus (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39). The *Muratorian Canon* also links Andrew to the origin of the Gospel of John. Emil Kraeling believes this may simply be “a supposition based on the attention he [Andrew] receives in the opening chapter of John.”⁶ On the contrary, Patrick believes these traditions, along with internal evidence from the Gospel of John, reveal that Andrew was in fact the closest disciple to Jesus and was the Beloved Disciple.⁷ While Patrick believes the presbyter John wrote the fourth Gospel, he credits Andrew and the rest of the Johannine circle as being the source behind the

⁴Scholars have wondered at how Andrew so quickly came to the assurance that Jesus was the Christ. It is not possible that Jesus did a special miracle for him, because John 2:11 says his first miracle was turning water to wine. Most likely it was the proclamation of John the Baptist along with the unique teachings and personality of Jesus. See Everett Falconer Harrison, “The Son of God among the Sons of Men,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 102 (April-June 1945): 170-78.

⁵C. Bernard Ruffin, *The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997), 61.

⁶Emil G. Kraeling, *The Disciples* (Skokie, IL: Rand McNally, 1966), 30.

⁷Patrick notes that while Andrew is the faithful disciple of John 1-12, he disappears in the rest of the book, which suggests he is the Beloved Disciple. He claims that “when the Gospel text is analyzed apart from the context of Synoptic influence and Irenaeus apology, the Beloved Disciple of the Johannine circle is, on the evidence of the text alone, Andrew, Peter's brother, an identification perhaps too obvious to have merited much attention, but a fact members of the Johannine circle would have assumed” (James Patrick, *Andrew of Bethsaida and the Johannine Circle* [New York: Peter Lang, 2013], 58-59).

stories.⁸ While this hypothesis has not met with widespread approval in the scholarly community, it does raise interesting questions about the role and significance of Andrew in the early church.

Andrew is mentioned three times in the Gospel of John. On two of these occasions he is mentioned along with Philip (6:8; 12:12). And the third time he is mentioned right before Philip (cf. 1:40, 1:44). Clearly there was some special connection between these two.

Every time Andrew appears in John he is bringing someone to Jesus. The first time he brings Peter to Jesus (1:41-42). In the second instance, Andrew brings a small boy to Jesus who had five small loaves of bread and two fish (6:8). The third time involved some Greeks who wanted to worship Jesus. They first approached Philip, who told Andrew about their request, and then Andrew decided the two of them should tell Jesus together (12:20-22). It may seem that Philip went to Andrew because he was closer to Jesus, but Colin Kruse suggests he approached Andrew with the request because he was the only other member of the twelve who had a Greek name.⁹ Philip may have been unsure if Jesus would accept Gentiles, so together they approached Jesus.

Some have even speculated that Andrew first brought Philip to Jesus. After admitting that it is pure speculation, William LaSor notes, “They were both from the same town (Bethsaida: John 1:44); they both had Greek names, whereas the rest of the apostles had Hebrew names; their names are often joined in the New Testament; and on two occasions Philip came to Andrew to get his help or advice on some problem.”¹⁰ If so, then Andrew would be indirectly responsible for Nathanael hearing about Jesus as well (John 1:45). Whether or not this is true, Andrew is unmistakably characterized as having a missionary mindset from the moment he meets Jesus.

⁸Ibid., 68.

⁹Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 264.

¹⁰William LaSor, *Great Personalities of the New Testament* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1952), 58.

Ronald Brownrigg captures what can seemingly be known about the character of Andrew:

Compared with his bombastic brother, Andrew emerges as a sensitive and approachable man who always had time and patience to listen to enquiries, even from children and foreigners. He was a selfless and considerate man, who did not resent the leadership of his brother. If his brother, Peter, was the skipper of the crew, Andrew was indeed the “ferry man” always willing to take people to Jesus. He was a kindly and faithful disciple, not fearful of ridicule even though he offered a picnic basket to feed five thousand. Although himself a Jew, he enabled Greeks to meet Jesus and he has been called the first “home missionary” as well as the first “foreign” missionary of the Christian church.¹¹

Beginning in the second century, Andrew became a popular figure in apocryphal writings such as the *Acts of Andrew*, the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, the *Acts of Peter and Andrew*, the *Acts of Andrew and Bartholomew*, and the *Pistis Sophia*.

As with the other disciples, Andrew was an eyewitness of the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:5; Matt 28:9-10; Luke 24:36-53; John 20:19-23) Along with Peter, Thomas, Philip, Nathanael, and the brothers of Zebedee, Andrew is one of the chief disciples mentioned in John. He witnessed the events the Gospel records, as well as many more that were not recorded (John 20:30, 21:25). He was willing to suffer for his conviction that Jesus is the messiah (Acts 5:17-42). And many ancient traditions state that Andrew was in fact persecuted for his faith.¹² Despite a substantial record of his travels and persecutions, there is no record he ever waivered in his commitment to Jesus Christ.

Missionary Endeavors of Andrew

The earliest information about the missionary travels of Andrew comes from Origen, who states that he went to Scythia, which is in southern Russia.¹³ Eucherius of

¹¹Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 46-47.

¹²There are Coptic and Arabic traditions stating Andrew was persecuted by the Anthropofagi. There are also traditions he was persecuted in Sinope, Thessalonica, and Patras. See George Alexandrou and Nun Nectaria McLees, “The Astonishing Missionary Journeys of the Apostle Andrew,” *Road to Emmaus* 4 (2010): 48.

¹³“Commentary on Genesis,” in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 3 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 1.

Lyons (d. c. 450) and *Hippolytus on the Twelve* also mention Andrew preaching in Scythia. There were Jews in the surrounding area of Scythia from the time of the first century BC, and given the easy route of access to Scythia from Jerusalem, it was a logical place for Andrew to missionize. The Scythians were a vital political and economic force during their heyday. They were a nomadic people who lived in southern Russia. According to Tamara Talbot Rice, who studied the Scythians of the first millennium BC, “The Scythians indeed played as active a part in commerce as in war and constituted so important an element in the life of their age that Herodotus found it necessary to devote to them an entire book of his great history.”¹⁴ They were polytheistic and deeply superstitious.¹⁵ Tertullian includes Scythia in his list of nations the gospel has reached by the time he writes at the end of the second century.¹⁶ Given the date of the tradition, as well as the plausibility of travel to Scythia in the first century AD, Francis Dvornik concludes that this tradition by Origen “seems to be well founded.”¹⁷

While many scholars agree Andrew travelled to Scythia, there is substantial disagreement about the remaining traditions, including his martyrdom. When considering the question of the martyrdom of Andrew, Stewart Lamont concludes, “The evidence is not at all supportive that he did [die as a martyr].”¹⁸ On the other hand, William Barclay concludes, “Even if we doubt the details, we cannot doubt that Andrew died a martyr for his Master.”¹⁹ Yet as to be seen, the truth is likely somewhere between these two perspectives.

¹⁴Tamara Rice, *The Scythians* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957), 23.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 85-86.

¹⁶Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews* VII.

¹⁷Francis Dvornik, *The Idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the Legend of the Apostle Andrew* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 199.

¹⁸Stewart Lamont, *The Life of Saint Andrew* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 41.

¹⁹William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (London: SCM, 1960), 43.

Greek scholar George Alexandrou has written a 1,000-page book on the missionary travels of Andrew called *He Raised the Cross on the Ice*.²⁰ His goal was not to critique the traditions, but to begin with the following premise, “I accept all evidence as possible, whether it is a writing of the Holy Fathers, an oral tradition from Uzbekistan, a Coptic text from Ethiopia, a simple dream, or the archaeological excavations of a Chinese scholar.”²¹ He then lined up all the traditions of Andrew to see if he could trace his missionary travels with any level of probability. Alexandrou concluded, “It was like a train, one car after another, until I had only twenty years missing from St. Andrew’s return to the Black Sea from Valaamo until he went to Sinope—and from there to Patras in Achaia, to his martyrdom.”²² Alexandrou eventually found a tradition of Andrew living in a cave in Romania for twenty years that fit the void in his timeline exactly. Perhaps the most interesting finding from his studies is how smoothly the traditions fit together when they are lined up chronologically and geographically.²³

According to Alexandrou, ancient traditions reveal four missionary journeys of Andrew that include locations such as Constantinople, Pontus, central Asia, Ethiopia, Georgia,²⁴ southern Russia, and more. Given the travel conditions of the first century,

²⁰At the time of this writing, Alexandrou had not yet published his book. He has worked with over fifty different languages to chronicle all the traditions surrounding the travels of the apostle Andrew and to see if they could plausibly fit together. He revealed some of his preliminary findings in his article. See Alexandrou and McLees, “The Astonishing Missionary Journeys,” 3-55.

²¹*Ibid.*, 13.

²²*Ibid.*

²³The one exception Alexandrou noted is the tradition that Andrew went to Scotland. While he observes that it is not physically impossible, the cult of Saint Andrew likely originated in the seventh century. See Marinell Ash and Dauvit Brown, “The Adoption of Saint Andrew as Patron Saint of Scotland,” *Medieval Art and Architecture in the Diocese of St Andrews*, ed. John Higgit (London: The British Archaeological Association, 1994), 16-24. For a dated but still insightful analysis of the traditions surrounding Andrew in Scotland, see Peter Ross, *Saint Andrew: The Disciple, the Missionary, the Patron Saint* (New York: The Scottish American, 1886).

²⁴According to tradition, Andrew visited Georgia three times. On his third journey, he was joined by Simon the Zealot and Matthias. See Giuli Alasania, “Twenty Centuries of Christianity in Georgia,” *IBSU International Refereed Multi-Disciplinary Scientific Journal* 1 (2006): 117-18.

Alexandrou concludes that there is nothing intrinsically impossible about each of these missionary journeys. Given the current state of information, it is impossible to determine the validity of every single account, yet it seems overly skeptical to dismiss them entirely as legendary.

The first tradition that Andrew was in Patrae (Greece), the traditional site of his martyrdom, is found in the *Acts of Andrew*, which is typically dated between the middle of the second century and the beginning of the third. Four other sources mention his sojourn in Greece before the dawn of the sixth century.²⁵ Thus, the tradition that Andrew ministered in Greece is consistent, widespread, and relatively early. Ursula Hall finds the tradition of Andrew visiting Greece doubtful, because it was the missionary field of other men, in particular Paul.²⁶ It is not clear, however, why it is implausible for a number of men to minister in the same region. Paul often visited cities (such as Corinth) that already had an established community of believers. Peter and Paul both went to Rome. Some claim that both Thomas and Bartholomew visited India. Whether this tradition is true or not is irrelevant. The point is that there is nothing implausible about two or more apostles ministering in the same place, as Hall suggests was the case for Andrew and Greece.

According to the Syriac *Teaching of the Apostles*,²⁷ Andrew ministered in Nicaea, Nicomedia, Bithynia, and inner Galatia. This is similar to where Peter ministered (1 Pet 1:1). Given that the disciples often went out in twos (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1), some scholars have suggested that Andrew may have ministered for a period of time with his

²⁵Besides the Acts of Andrew, four other sources mention the sojourn of Andrew in Greece before the dawn of the fourth century, including Philastrius, *de Haeresibus liber* 88; Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oration* 33.11; Jerome, *Ad Marcellum*; Evodius *de Fide contra Manichaeos*; Theodoretus, *Interpretatio in Psalmos* 116. See Peter M. Peterson, *Andrew, Brother of Simon Peter: His History and His Legends* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1958), 8-13.

²⁶Ursula Hall, *The Cross of St. Andrew* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), 13.

²⁷William Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 34.

brother Peter.²⁸ Lamont finds this tradition questionable since earlier traditions place him in the region of the Black Sea.²⁹ The simple answer is that he may have ministered in both areas. There is nothing chronologically or geographically impossible about Andrew ministering in both regions. As for the apostles, the *Teaching of the Apostles* also cites that James wrote in Jerusalem, Simon [Peter] in Rome, John from Ephesus, and Judas Thomas from India. Given that the author got these ascriptions correct (at least according to my assessment), is it not at least probable he also got the tradition correct about Andrew?

A few factors make at least *some* missionary travels of Andrew highly likely, even if one cannot currently ascertain the probability of every individual tradition. First, there is a substantial amount of traditions involving Andrew. Unlike the apostle Thomas, who was consistently considered an apostle of the East (greater India), Andrew has multiple traditions throughout Judea, Africa, central Asia, and Europe. The chances that all of them are fictional seem remote. Second, as Alexandrou observes, even though the traditions developed independently, they naturally line up chronologically and geographically. Third, the earliest accounts of Andrew, found in the Gospels, reveal Andrew as having a missionary mindset. It is within the known character of Andrew to engage in missions. Fourth, archaeological evidence has been found to support certain traditions.³⁰ When these four considerations are combined with the commission by Jesus to evangelize the world (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8), and the early textual evidence that the apostles actually carried out this commission, there is convincing reason to believe Andrew was a missionary who advanced the gospel of Christ.

²⁸Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 154.

²⁹Lamont, *The Life of Saint Andrew*, 43.

³⁰There is an ancient tradition that Andrew arrived in Samtskhe (Georgia), performed a number of miracles, converted many of the population, and left behind the icon of the Holy Virgin in Atskuri. After considering the archaeological evidence lying behind this tradition, Vakhtang Licheli concludes, “The possibility of the arrival of the Apostle Andrew to Samtskhe wholly supported archaeologically” (Vakhtang Licheli, “St. Andrew in Samtskhe—Archaeological Proof?” in *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, ed. Tamila Mgaloblishvili [New York: Curzon, 1998], 37).

Evidence of the Martyrdom of Andrew

The earliest known written source reporting the martyrdom of Andrew is the *Acts of Andrew* (c. AD 150-210). It begins with the summoning of Andrew by Maximilla, the wife of the proconsul Aegeates, to cast a demon out of a servant boy. After seeing Andrew deliver the boy, Stratocles (the brother of Aegeates) joins Maximilla in becoming a disciple of Andrew. With the encouragement of Andrew, Maximilla began to resist the sexual advances of her husband in an attempt to love God alone.³¹ Knowing he would be upset, Maximilla devised a plan to have a servant girl named Euclia sleep with Aegeates in her place. This occurred for about eight months until Aegeates discovered that Andrew was behind the change in his wife and so he had him thrown in prison, promising to have Andrew released only if Maximilla would sleep with him and bear his children. But Andrew refuses to back down, proclaiming that he would rather be killed. Aegeates has Andrew crucified, but without nails so he would experience the torment of being eaten by dogs if he were still alive at night. In perhaps the most memorably scene from the *Acts of Andrew*, Andrew speaks to the cross as he approaches the site of crucifixion and commands the executioners to carry out their orders. He preaches for four days from the cross until a large crowd demands Aegeates release him. But Andrew refuses to accept the pardon and dies by crucifixion.³² After the death of Andrew, Maximilla leaves Aegeates, and he commits suicide by leaping from a tall height. Unlike Peter, Paul, and Thomas in their respective Acts, Andrew does not appear again after his death.

There is significant debate about when to date the *Acts of Andrew*, ranging

³¹François Bovon has noted that in encouraging Maximilla to resist the sexual advances of her husband, Aegeates would reverse Eve's fault and allow Andrew to reverse Adam's sin. Thus, sex is directly tied to original sin. The ActAndr thus has the same encratic tendencies common among the Apocryphal Acts. See François Bovon, "The Words of Life in the *Acts of the Apostle Andrew*," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 142.

³²The ActAndr does not mention the "St. Andrew's cross," which is shaped as an x. That was first associated with him in the fourteenth century. See Frederick W. Norris, "Acts of Andrew," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1997), 1:11.

from the middle of the second century to the beginning of the third.³³ The *Acts of Andrew* may very well fall within the range of living memory, but one cannot be sure. There are many later written accounts of the death of Andrew, but it seems they can be traced back through the *Acts of Andrew*.³⁴ This is also likely true for ancient calendars as well as liturgical prayers such as the *Irish Palimpsest Sacramentary* and the *Missale Gothicum* (c. AD 700).³⁵

One possible independent early source is a work attributed to Hippolytus, a 3rd century bishop.³⁶ *Hippolytus on the Twelve* says, “Andrew preached to the Scythians and Thracians, and was crucified, suspended on an olive tree, at Patrae, a town of Achaia; and there too he was buried.”³⁷ This account confirms the mission to Scythia as reported by

³³Schneemelcher prefers a date closer to AD 150. Elliott says an early third century date is “probable.” See Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. and trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:115; and J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 236.

³⁴Peterson traces the Egyptian, Byzantine, Latin, and Syriac traditions of Andrew and argues they all stem from some version of the ActAndr. Before AD 500, there is also a record of the death of Andrew in the writings of Gregory of Nazianzen (d. c. AD 389) and St. Peter Chrysologus of Ravenna (c. AD 380-450) in his sermon 133: “Peter mounted a tree and Andrew a cross. In this way they who longed to suffer with Christ showed forth in themselves the kind and manner of his suffering; redeemed upon a cross, they were made perfect for their palms. Thus, even if Andrew is second in dignity, he is not inferior in regard to the reward or the suffering” (Peter M. Peterson, *The Fathers of the Church: St. Peter Chrysologus Sermons, St. Valerian Homilies*, trans. George E. Ganss [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004], 220). After AD 500, there are a significant number of sources in the West and East that attest to Andrew’s death by crucifixion in Patras. See Peterson, *Andrew, Brother of Simon Peter*, 14-23, 40-43.

³⁵The author of the *Missale Gothicum* provides specific details regarding the tradition that Andrew preached and died as a martyr in Achaia. And yet it is likely dependent upon a Latin version of the ActAndr that predates the *Book of Miracles (Miracula sancti Andreae apostoli)* by Gregory of Tours, written in the second half of the sixth century. See Els Rose, “Apocryphal Tradition in Medieval Latin Liturgy: A New Research Project Illustrated with the Case of the Apostle Andrew,” *Apocrypha* 15 (2004): 115-38.

³⁶Hippolytus is often considered one of the most important church figures of the third century, but there is substantial debate about what texts are genuinely his and which are spurious. See David Dunbar, “The Problem of Hippolytus of Rome: A Study in Historical-Critical Reconstruction,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982): 63-74. Also see Ulrich Volp, “Hippolytus,” *Expository Times* 120 (2009): 521-29.

³⁷Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Hippolytus on the Twelve*, as cited in *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325: Fathers of the Third Century, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 5 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 255.

Origen, but also the crucifixion in Patras as stated by the *Acts of Andrew*. Interestingly, it mentions Andrew was crucified “upright on an olive tree,” which may indicate it is an independent tradition.³⁸ Even if Hippolytus did not write this work, it may be early. Nevertheless, given the questions that remain about this text, the matter of the reliability of the martyrdom account of Andrew rests largely upon the trustworthiness of the tradition behind the *Acts of Andrew*.

Between the third and ninth centuries, the *Acts of Andrew* was widely read and diffused in such diverse places as Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Armenia, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, Gaul, and Spain.³⁹ It has not survived in its original form, but scholars are able to reconstruct a version that likely comes close to the earliest version.⁴⁰ Judging from the various versions of the *Acts of Andrew*, the original text consisted of the missionary travels of Andrew and his journey to Patras, where he was executed. Fernando Lanzilotta observes that “the textual witnesses for the martyrdom are more numerous and their testimony somewhat more homogeneous” when compared with the travels of Andrew.⁴¹ And yet he notes that some of the early texts contain a few quick notes about his death rather than a developed martyrdom account.⁴² Nevertheless, even though there are a variety of adaptations, the activity and death of Andrew in Patras was the goal of his

³⁸There are different traditions that report Andrew died “on an olive tree,” or “one a tree” or simply by crucifixion. There are even some later traditions that Andrew was crucified upside down.

³⁹Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:104.

⁴⁰The most reliable translation is *The Acts of Andrew and the Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of Cannibals* by Dennis MacDonald. While he is confident that his reconstruction is largely accurate, he admits it is “a conjectural reconstruction based on literary debris.” But he does provide an important qualification: “At some points the text is secure—as in the case of Andrew’s martyrdom—but most materials printed here are textual offspring, more or less resembling their parents but not to be mistaken for them” (Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Acts of Andrew and the Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of Cannibals* [Atlanta: Scholars, 1990], ix).

⁴¹Fernando Lautaro Roig Lanzilotta, “The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew: A New Approach to the Character, Thought and Meaning of the Primitive Text” (PhD. diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2004), 348.

⁴²The early texts that contain a few quick notes about the death of Andrew include the *Epitome*, *Vita*, *VitaEsc* and *VitaParis*.

voyage and likely part of the original text.⁴³ All the recensions of the *Acts of Andrew* share his conflict with pagan authorities, which leads to his death.⁴⁴

Eusebius provides the earliest reference to the *Acts of Andrew*. He suggests the *Acts of Andrew*, as well as the *Acts of John* and other apocryphal Acts should be “cast aside as and absurd and impious.”⁴⁵ It should be noted that in rejecting the *Acts of Andrew*, Eusebius was not rejecting that it had *any* claim to historicity; he rejected it *theologically*. In the same section Eusebius discusses the *Acts of Andrew*, he also rejects the Gospel of Peter as heretical. Yet he clearly believes the Gospel of Peter was correct to affirm the resurrection of Jesus as a historical fact, even though it also contained other material Eusebius rejected. The same may be true for the historical kernel in the *Acts of Andrew*. As a whole, the *Acts of Andrew* received a mixed reception in the early church—ranging from condemnation (Pope Innocent I) to adaptation and use for popular piety (Gregory of Tours).

Like the rest of the Apocryphal Acts, the *Acts of Andrew* contains clear legendary embellishment. Given that the sixth century Bishop Gregory of Tours combines the more legend-filled and fantastic *Acts of Andrew and Matthias* (AAM) with the *Acts of Andrew*, some have concluded that it was part of the original text.⁴⁶ But this seems unlikely.⁴⁷ The key question is whether or not the *Acts of Andrew* preserves a

⁴³Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 114.

⁴⁴Johannes Quasten, *Patrology: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1950), 1:138.

⁴⁵Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.6, as cited in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 157.

⁴⁶MacDonald, *The Acts of Andrew*, 22-47.

⁴⁷After noting similarities between the ActAndr and the AAM, Hilhorst and Lalleman provide eleven substantial differences between the two documents. They argue the AAM was likely written two centuries later and conclude, “Thus, there is no obstacle to come to the only possible conclusion: that the AAM was not part of the original AA” (A. Hilhorst and Pieter J. Lalleman, “The Acts of Andrew: Is It Part of the Original Acts of Andrew?” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer [Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2000], 13).

historical nucleus. Taken at its core, it reports the missionary travels of Andrew and his ministry and execution in Patras. While the *Acts of Peter, Paul, Thomas, and John* contain legendary accretion, they also preserve the most reliable destination and fate for their respective apostles (including a natural death for John). External corroboration confirms that the various Acts likely got the fate of these apostles correct. Although the writer of the various Apocryphal Acts had creative license, he (or she) was also bound by known tradition. Is it not reasonable to conclude that the same is likely true for the *Acts of Andrew*, even though it is not possible to verify the claims externally in the same way as the other Apocryphal Acts?⁴⁸

For all their diversity, the five Apocryphal Acts share at least five structural similarities.⁴⁹ First, they include the activities and travels of an apostle in a certain city. Second, the apostle proclaims Jesus as Lord and preaches repentance. Third, the apostle is the hero who teaches, works miracles, heals, and imitates Christ, but is an otherwise undeveloped character. Fourth, the end of the story contains some version of a retrospective prayer. Fifth, each Act uses the “we-form” in imitation of the canonical Acts. It could also be added that each Act builds toward and reaches its climax with the fate of the apostle. These similarities do not imply any special relationship between individual Acts, but they do show the authors followed a similar script and approach in chronicling the activities of each apostle. The authors clearly invent unbelievable stories for their respective apostles, but they are bound by a known historical tradition nonetheless.

⁴⁸It is true that the key figures in the ActAndr are unverifiable historically. But does the lack of evidence for the historicity of any of the key figures in the ActAndr imply they are entirely fictitious and that the ActAndr is without any historical merit? Key figures in ActAndr may indeed be fictitious, but it seems an overreach to affirm that the book is *entirely* indifferent to historical considerations because of the lack of verification for Aegeates, Maximilla, Stratocles, and other key figures. Skeptics dismissed the Acts of Thomas (which was likely written even later) with similar derision, but it turns out Gondophares (and possibly other figures in the narrative) really existed. The same may be true for the ActAndr.

⁴⁹Pieter J. Lalleman, “The Acts of Andrew and the Acts of John,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew*, 141.

The Apocryphal Acts were frequently grouped together because of their theology and genre. For instance, Eusebius condemns the various Apocryphal Acts together as a group and the Manichaeans lumped them together in a special corpus they used as scripture instead of the biblical book of Acts.⁵⁰ Given the similarities in structure and genre, there is no good reason to doubt that the *Acts of Andrew* (like the other four Apocryphal Acts) is a historical novel that preserved the known fate of the apostle Andrew toward the end of the second century.

Dvornik does not accept this tradition because he finds it strange that Eusebius does not report any missionary travels of Andrew beyond Scythia, including his fate in Patras: “First of all, it is, strange that Origen, or the transmitter of this old tradition to Eusebius, who knew about Andrew’s missionary activity in Scythia, knew nothing of his work in Achaia, or of his death in Patras.”⁵¹ Given that Origen had been to Achaia, Dvornik finds it more likely that Andrew never made it there and simply died in Scythia. If Dvornik is right, Andrew still may have died as a martyr in Scythia. In *The Contendings of the Apostles*, Budge records that Andrew died by crucifixion in Scythia.⁵²

Dvornik suggests the facts are not quite as straightforward. While Eusebius clearly cites Origen as the source for his information in this section about the journeys of the apostles Thomas, Andrew, John, Peter, and Paul, he does not quote Origen specifically. Since Origen’s *Commentary on Genesis* is not extant, it is not possible to determine in what manner Eusebius was utilizing his source. Eusebius could have been summarizing Origen, pulling out the information he felt necessary. He may have included all the information Origen wrote about or merely part of it. It is at least possible Origen

⁵⁰Dvornik, *The Idea of Apostolicity*, 196.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 211.

⁵²E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles: Being the Histories and the Lives and Martyrdoms and Deaths of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 181-85. There is also an Arabic version of a Coptic original stating Andrew died in the East in Lydda, Israel. While there are a few different traditions about where he died, it is interesting that there is nearly unanimous agreement that he died as a martyr by crucifixion.

included it in his *Commentary* but Eusebius left it out for some unknown reason. This may seem strange, but Eusebius does discuss other martyrs without including their deaths, so it is entirely plausible he would do the same with Andrew.⁵³

Even if Origen did not include further information about Andrew in his original *Commentary*, it does not follow, as Dvornik suggests, that he knew nothing of the tradition.⁵⁴ Maybe he wrote about it elsewhere. It is certainly fair to ask why Origen may not have included it, but it is not reasonable to assume that the lack of mention implies the account is false and that Origen was completely unaware of such a tradition. The objection of Dvornik is an argument from silence, and thus provides minimal reason to doubt the tradition of Andrew's death in Patras. Given the agnosticism concerning how Eusebius used his source, Dvornik is unwarranted in concluding definitively that the tradition regarding the martyrdom of Andrew did not exist in Achaia during the time of Origen.

Following the lead of Dvornik, Lamont finds it extremely strange that Luke, who likely wrote his Gospel in Achaia,⁵⁵ never mentions the tradition that Andrew died in

⁵³My thanks to Paul Maier for drawing this to my attention in a personal email on January 22, 2014. As an example, Eusebius mentions Hippolytus of Rome (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.20, 22, 39) without mentioning the traditions of his martyrdom. Hippolytus was probably a disciple of Irenaeus, and thus may have been linked back to the apostles through Polycarp and John. Justin Martyr is an interesting example as well. He was executed during the reign of Antoninus Pius. While Eusebius recognizes Justin as a martyr he gives no details of his death in the *Ecclesiastical History*.

⁵⁴Although speculative, it is certainly possible Origen heard of the tradition regarding Andrew from Hippolytus (d. AD 235). Origen heard Hippolytus preach on at least one occasion during his visit to Rome in AD 212. *Hippolytus on the Twelve*, a work that is attributed to Hippolytus, although many consider it spurious, says, "Andrew preached to the Scythians and Thracians, and was crucified, suspended on an olive tree, at Patrae, a town of Achaia; and there too he was buried" Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Hippolytus on the Twelve*, as cited in *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325: Fathers of the Third Century, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 5 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 255. Interestingly, Hippolytus also mentions that Peter was crucified upside down by Nero (1). Origen is typically considered the first theologian who mentions this as a historical fact (outside the Acts of Peter). This may indicate some early connection between Hippolytus and Origen regarding the fate of the apostles.

⁵⁵The evidence Lamont provides to support his claim that Luke wrote his Gospel in Achaia is the ancient Lukan prologue, which claims the gospel was written in the regions of Achaia.

Patras. He concludes along with Dvornik that Andrew likely never visited there.⁵⁶ However, this is also an argument from silence. As already seen, Luke leaves out seemingly important details such as the fate of Peter, Paul and James, the brother of Jesus. This is because he had a different purpose for his writings than merely tracing the lives of the individual apostles. As interesting and important as the question of the fate of Andrew is to this investigation, it was not the primary (or even secondary) matter for Luke. It is not surprising that Luke would ignore the fate of Andrew in Achaia.

A final consideration is the matter of the persecution of Christians in Greece during the time Andrew was traditionally put to death (c. AD 65-69). There is no record of formal state-directed persecution against Christians in Greece during this time. Yet the date falls directly during the time of the Neronian persecution in Rome. As noted previously, Christians were specifically targeted as scapegoats, starting with the fire in Rome in AD 64. Given the precedent set by Caesar at the capital of Rome, it is entirely plausible that a local governor used Christians as a scapegoat for some political reason as well. Or, if there was some local religious disturbance, such as the kind that led to the persecution of Paul or the death of Jesus, a provincial governor may have put Andrew to death.

Determining the likelihood of the fate of Andrew is a difficult task. The evidence is clearly not as demonstrative as for Peter, Paul, and James. Ursula Hall says, “We may conclude that, while it is not impossible that our St Andrew was put to death by the Roman authorities at Patras, there is not much of a context in which to set this event, and no positive evidence to support it.”⁵⁷ Her conclusion is understandable and is certainly a reasonable inference from the evidence. Yet where I disagree is over her conclusion that there is “no positive evidence to support it.” The evidence is admittedly weaker than for other apostles, but there is at least *some* evidence that cannot be simply

⁵⁶Lamont, *The Life of Saint Andrew*, 42.

⁵⁷Hall, *The Cross of Saint Andrew*, 14.

dismissed. I cannot get myself to believe that the earliest traditions of the works and fate of the apostle Andrew, an important and well-known figure in the first and second centuries, were entirely fabricated and not linked to a reliable tradition.

The consistent and relatively early account of his fate by crucifixion cannot simply be dismissed. Some accounts differ as to where he was crucified, but there is general agreement that he died in this manner.⁵⁸ There is no early contrary tradition claiming a natural death, which for an apostle as prominent as Andrew, is not insignificant. Minimally, it must be deemed at least plausible that Andrew died as a martyr. While some scholars may be inclined to take a more critical view, the evidence seems to point ever so slightly towards the following conclusions:

1. Andrew engaged in missions—*very probably true* (*Acts of Andrew*; Origen *Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 3 in Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist* 3.1; *Teachings of the Apostles*; Andrew had a missionary mindset (John 1:41, 6:8-9, 12:22); geographical and chronological fit of various traditions; archaeological support; evidence the apostles generally engaged in missions).
2. Andrew went to Greece—*more probable than not* (*Acts of Andrew*; Philastrius, *de Haeresibus liber* 88; Gregory of Nazianzen *Oration* 33.11; Jerome *Ad Marcellum*; Evodius *de Fide contra Manichaeos*; Theodoretus *Commentary on Psalm 116*)
3. Andrew experienced martyrdom—*more probable than not* (*Acts of Andrew*; Hippolytus *on the Twelve Apostles* 2; Peter Chrysologus of Ravenna, Sermon 133: “Saint Andrew the Apostle”; lack of competing narrative; acceptance of tradition in the east and west).

⁵⁸It is difficult to assess the merits of Andrew’s death specifically by crucifixion. In one sense, it could have been invented so as to make his fate similar to both Jesus and his brother Andrew. There was certainly a tendency in the third and fourth centuries to give the apostles “fitting” deaths. On the other hand, there are multiple accounts of his crucifixion, even if they differ as to the location and of whether or not he was executed on a cross or a tree. Death by crucifixion shows up in the earliest account, the ActAndr. Crucifixion was a common penalty for criminals and other enemies of the state and so it is entirely believable Andrew was crucified for either creating disturbances or upsetting the proconsul, as the ActAndr reports. Yet the tradition Andrew was crucified on a X-shaped cross is almost certainly false. It plays no role in the ActAndr. There is no evidence the Romans crucified with such a cross, and the earliest record of the X-shaped cross being used for his death comes from the twelfth century. Ibid., 31, 73, 101.

CHAPTER 12

MARTYRDOM OF JAMES, SON OF ZEBEDEE

James the son of Zebedee was one of the first disciples called by Jesus. His name is among the first three in each list of the apostles. In Mark, James is mentioned second after Peter (Mark 3:17) and in Matthew, Luke, and Acts he comes third (Matt 10:2; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). Since James is most often listed before John, and John is almost consistently referred to as “the brother of James,” many scholars believe James was the elder brother.¹ James and John both left their fishing business and followed Jesus when he personally called them (Matt 4:21-22; Luke 5:10), although their quick response suggests possible earlier contact. He is often called James the Great to differentiate him from James the Less (Mark 15:40), James, the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18), and James, the brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19).

Along with Peter and his brother John, James was among the privileged circle of the apostles. He was present at the Mount of Olives (Mark 13:3). Along with Peter and John, James uniquely witnessed the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:37-42), the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13; Matt 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36), and joined Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42). As noted in the section on the apostle John, it is interesting that these three instances each relate to death—*preparing* for death (Jesus in Gethsemane), *rising* from the dead (Jairus’ daughter), and *appearing* after death (Jesus, Moses, and Elijah). Considering that James saw the risen Jesus (John 21:1-2) as well, it is clear that he would have had tremendous confidence and firsthand convictions to face death as a follower of Jesus.

¹David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “James,” by Donald A. Hagner.

Given how prominent James was among the apostles, it is remarkable there is not more information about him. While the New Testament provides some material on James, there are many stories and legends about him that develop in the ensuing centuries. For instance, in book 7 of his *Outlines*, Clement tells the story of a man brought into court with James who was so moved by his testimony that he also confessed Christ: “They were both therefore, he says, led away together; and on the way he begged James to forgive him. And he, after considering a little, said, ‘Peace be with thee,’ and kissed him. And thus they were both beheaded at the same time.”² Keener concludes, “Since it is doubtful that Luke would have known such a story and not reported it or that it was known in his day but not reported to Luke with the rest of the account, it appears improbable enough that we may ascribe the story to legendary embellishment.”³ Nevertheless, it is interesting that Clement does confirm the death of James by beheading as reported by Luke, even if he adds this additional tale. The tradition of his death was firm by this time and taken for granted.

Other legendary accounts of the apostle James begin to crop up in the ensuing centuries. *The Apostolic History of Abdias* (6/7 cent.) tells a story of James and his interaction with two pagan magicians who eventually confess Christ. *The Acts of Saint James in India* reports a tradition that James went to India along with Peter.⁴ Given the late date of composition, and the lack of any local accounts of their visit, Eastern and Western scholars are united in dismissing this latter account as legendary. James has also become the patron saint of Spain. According to the tradition, James preached in Spain

²Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.9.3, as cited in as cited in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 111.

³Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 2:1871 n. 44.

⁴E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles: Being the Histories and the Lives and Martyrdoms and Deaths of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 246-52.

and then returned to Judea shortly before his death. Given the short timespan between Pentecost and James' martyrdom, the trip to Spain seems unlikely. Since the earliest written record of James' visit to Spain is in the seventh century,⁵ most scholars dismiss it as legendary. The most likely reason apocryphal accounts are rare for James was because his martyrdom in Judea (AD 44) was so firmly entrenched in the early church and limited the trajectory of such stories.

While these missionary accounts are likely fictional, there is good reason to believe the death of James occurred while the apostles were on the brink of world missions. When Judas died, the apostles immediately appointed Matthias as successor (Acts 1:15-26), yet there is no reconstitution of the twelve after the execution of James (Acts 12:2). In fact, the death of James serves more as a backdrop for the protection of Peter and his departure to another place (12:6-17),⁶ which began the expansion of the gospel to the "ends of the earth" (1:8). Riesner observes,

When Peter, as the leader among the twelve, now left the holy city and the holy land itself, now completely under the rule of Agrippa I, this marked a clear cut in the activity on behalf of Israel itself. This absence of any reestablishment of the circle of twelve to it entirety betrays a consciousness of living in a new age, one in which missionary efforts on behalf of the older people of God in Jerusalem and in the holy land no longer constituted the only task.⁷

Even though Jesus had earlier commanded the apostles to spread out and reach the world (1:8), the tipping point seemed to come at the death of James. Persecution against the Christians first began when the religious leaders in Jerusalem arrested the apostles for

⁵The oldest reference to the Spanish mission of James is in the seventh century (c. AD 600) in the *Breviarum Apostolorum*, an originally Greek text that was translated into Latin. This tradition only became important to the Spanish church in the eighth century. While the Spanish mission of James is questionable, the *Breviarum* does include the martyrdom of James, showing that it was well established by this time. See John Williams and Alison Stones, eds., *The Codex Calixtinus and the Shrine of St. James* (Tubingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992), 41-42.

⁶Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Krabel, and Donald H. Juel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 93.

⁷Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission, Strategy, Theology*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 121.

preaching about Jesus (Acts 4:3; 5:18). The apostles were beaten and told not to speak in the name of Jesus (5:40). Eventually Stephen was killed for his faith (6:8-7:60) and Saul began to ravage the church. Persecution broke out against the church and so believers had to spread out to Judea and Samaria, except for the apostles who remained in Jerusalem (8:1-3). After his conversion, Paul received threats on his life, but he was allowed to move freely in Jerusalem. With the death of James, however, persecution was no longer propagated by the religious leaders of the Jews, but by an official of the state, Herod Agrippa I.⁸ The apostles were forced to leave Jerusalem and begin reaching out to the “ends of the earth.”

Jesus had predicted that James would suffer and die for his faith. In Mark 10:35-45, James and John approach Jesus requesting that he give them what they ask for. After they request to reign with him, he tells them they must drink his “cup” (10:39). Scholars are split over whether this refers to suffering or death, but the most natural way to take the passage is that Jesus is indicating they would both die for their faith. Questions remain about the fate of John, but the earliest evidence indicates Herod Agrippa had James put to death (Acts 12:2).

Evidence for the Martyrdom of James, Son of Zebedee

One of the most unexpected elements in the book of Acts is the brief mention of the death of James by King Agrippa: “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword” (Acts 12:1-2). The brevity of this account is what makes it so unexpected. This is only the second reference to James in the entire book of Acts, apart from his mention in the list of the Twelve (1:13). Why did Luke mention him so briefly, especially since he

⁸Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 432.

was in the inner circle of Jesus? Given the amount of space dedicated to the martyrdom of Stephen (6:8-7:58), one would expect Luke to provide more data on the fate of James.

One possibility is that Luke simply did not know any more than he reports. But this seems unlikely. James Dunn asks some pertinent questions, “But such a solution simply raises the further question, Why so? Why did the Jerusalem church retain no such reminiscence or tradition, particularly of James’s death? Was James not such a prominent figure after all, or possible a more controversial figure?”⁹ Controversial questions in the book of Acts typically deal with issues that one would expect Luke to have less information about, such as private conversations or events that were distant geographically or chronologically.¹⁰ But the death of James is an area in which Luke would be expected to have reliable information. The death of James would have been public knowledge.

It is important to remember that Acts is not strictly a book about the apostles per se, but about the spread of the gospel to the “ends of the earth” (1:8). The title “Acts of the Apostles” is technically a misnomer. The apostles are only included in the narrative insofar as they advance the gospel worldwide, in fulfillment of the theme of Acts. It may also be surprising that Acts does not report the deaths of Peter and Paul, but as demonstrated earlier, such reports were not integral to Luke’s wider purpose. It may be puzzling why Luke does not include more about the fate of James. But the brief report indicates why Peter was arrested, which in turn shows his departure to another place and the shift in the narrative to the focus on the missions of Saul (13). The brief account of the death of James fits the pattern of Luke focusing on details necessary to advance his larger goal.

⁹James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:406.

¹⁰Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:102.

The brevity of the account may be unexpected, but it does serve to strengthen its reliability. It has the ring of authenticity and lacks details of legendary development. This is clear when the narrative is compared with the execution of Stephen. Shelly Matthews suggests that the parallels in the Stephen episode are the result of the motif of *imitatio Christi* rather than genuine historical concern.¹¹ These parallels include working signs and wonders (6:8), powerful preaching (6:10), the charge of blasphemy (6:11), setting up false witnesses (6:13), critiquing the religious leaders (7:51-53), execution (7:54-58), and the call to not hold the sin against his accusers (7:60). Matthews writes,

According to the ground rules of historical criticism, it is as reasonable to argue that Luke is constructing a symbolic character as to suggest that he preserves within his narrative a reliable record of the actual event of the violent death of a Jesus believer named Stephen.¹²

While the historicity of Stephen is a separate matter from this inquiry, it is important to recognize that this critique would not apply to the death of James. No parallels are drawn between his death and Jesus. No legendary details creep into the narrative. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The account reads like an official execution.¹³ Keener concludes, “Luke’s report of James’s death in 12:2 appears incidental to his focus on Peter’s story and is historically likely.”¹⁴

Why Was James Killed?

King Herod Agrippa was responsible for the execution of James. He ruled in Judea from 41-44 AD and was the grandson of King Herod the Great. After thirty-five years of direct Roman control through procurators, many Jews welcomed a Herodian

¹¹Shelly Matthew, *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15-20.

¹²Ibid., 15.

¹³See Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 2:209.

¹⁴Keener, *Acts*, 1:209.

ruler. Some of his admirers may have even considered him a potential Messiah.¹⁵

Josephus records the fondness by which many remembered Agrippa I:

Now, this king was by nature very beneficent, and liberal in his gifts, and very ambitious to oblige people with such large donations; and he made himself very illustrious by the many chargeable presents he made them. He took delight in giving, and rejoiced in living with good reputation. He was not at all like that Herod who reigned before him; for that Herod was ill-natured, and severe in his punishments, and had no mercy on them that he hated; and everyone perceived that he was more friendly to the Greeks than to the Jews; for he adorned foreign cities with large presents in money; with building them baths and theatres besides: nay, in some of those places, he erected temples, and porticoes in others; but he did not vouchsafe to raise one of the least edifices in any Jewish city, or make them any donation that was worth mentioning. But Agrippa's temper was mild, and equally liberal to all men. He was humane to foreigners, and made them sensible of his liberality. He was in like manner rather of a gentle and compassionate temper. Accordingly, he loved to live continually at Jerusalem, and was exactly careful in the observance of the laws of his country. He therefore kept himself entirely pure: nor did any day pass over his head without its appointed sacrifice.¹⁶

His popularity among the Jewish religious leaders may explain why he specifically targeted Christians for persecution. Although he had seemingly tolerated Christians at the beginning of his reign, at some point “he laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church” (*tas cheiras kakōsai*) with the specific intent of doing evil to them.¹⁷

King Herod Agrippa had James put to death with the sword, with the likely intent of snuffing out the movement from the top down. It may seem unlikely Agrippa would utilize death by sword rather than a more brutal method such as burning, impaling, or crucifixion, but Keener notes,

That Agrippa would prefer the more merciful method of execution is not implausible; Josephus claims that on other occasions Agrippa showed mercy even to his enemies. When an interpreter of the law named Simon denounced Agrippa (Jos. *Ant.* 19.332), the latter confronted him privately (19.333), and when Simon apologized, Agrippa pardoned him and sent him away with gifts (19.334). This may have been a politically astute way to defuse enmity, but it certainly would appear

¹⁵Wolf Wirgin, *Herod Agrippa I: King of the Jews*, Monograph Series 10 (A) (Leeds, England: Leeds University Oriental Society, 1968), 79.

¹⁶*The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 522.

¹⁷Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 424.

merciful. On the other hand, Agrippa did not simply pardon everyone; even in his younger days, before Caligula's accession, he was severe in demanding punishments (18.183).¹⁸

According to Jewish law, execution by sword was the punishment for murder or apostasy (*m. Sanhedrin* 9:1; Deut 13:6-18).¹⁹ Herod lived as a faithful Jew, so he would naturally have been concerned to stop the growth of any heretical sect.²⁰ According to Deuteronomy 13:6-18, if an individual entices the Jews to "go and serve other gods," then that person is to be stoned to death. But if that person entices the entire city to follow other gods then that person is to be killed with the sword. Kistemaker concludes, "In the eyes of Herod Agrippa, James had led the city of Jerusalem astray."²¹ Agrippa seemingly had both political and religious reasons for having James killed with the sword.

Brownrigg may be overstating the case when he concludes that the martyrdom account of James is "absolutely reliable,"²² but he is right to emphasize that the tradition is early and consistent and has a very high historical probability of being true. Not only is the tradition of the martyrdom of James emphasized in the biblical record (Acts 12:2; Mark 10:39), but it is also consistently affirmed by later church fathers from the second century onwards:

1. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215): "They were both therefore, he says, led away together; and on the way he begged James to forgive him. And he, after considering a little, said, 'Peace be with thee,' and kissed him. And thus they were both beheaded at the same time."²³

¹⁸Keener, *Acts*, 2:1872.

¹⁹William J. Larkin, *Acts*, The IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 182.

²⁰David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 361.

²¹Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, 433.

²²Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 94.

²³Clement of Alexandria, *Outlines Book 7* as quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.9.3 as cited in Eusebius: *Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 111.

2. Eusebius (c. AD 260-339): “Now about that time (it is clear that he means the time of Claudius) Herod the King stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the Church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” [Acts 12:1-2].²⁴
3. Chrysostom (c AD 347-407): “At that time,” it says, “Herod the king stretched forth his hands to afflict certain of the Church (v. 1). Like a wild beast, he attacked all indiscriminately and without consideration. This is what Christ said, “My cup indeed ye shall drink, and with the baptism wherewith I am baptized, shall ye be baptized” (Mark 10:39). “And he killed James the brother of John.” (*Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 26).²⁵
4. Gregory of Nyssa (c. AD 335-394): “James, under pressure to cut off Christ, his true head, was [physically] decapitated, yet the [true] head of every person is Christ according to the apostle and at the same time the head of the entire church” (*Homily 2 On Stephen*).²⁶
5. Philip of Side (c. AD 5th cent.): “Papias says in his second book that John the Theologian and James his brother were killed by Jews.”²⁷
6. *The Apostolic Acts of Abdias* (Latin text, 6th/7th cent.): James encounters two sorcerers who oppose his ministry (Hermogenes and Philetus). James is taken away by two Pharisees but defends the messianic status of Jesus by citing Old Testament passages. The high priest Abiathar loses patience and has James sent to the king where he is beheaded.

Does Acts Record History?

Richard Pervo has challenged the idea that the genre of Acts is apologetic history. He believes the writing of Acts has more in common with ancient fiction than historiography. Pervo concludes, “Luke’s achievement as a historian lies more in his success at creating history than in recording it.”²⁸ Basically, he sees Acts as one kind of historical novel that contains much more fiction than history. There would be little reason

²⁴Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.9.1, as cited in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 111.

²⁵Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 26, as cited in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1888), 11:169-70.

²⁶Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily 2: On Stephen*, as quoted in Francis Martin, ed., *Acts*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 152.

²⁷Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 743.

²⁸Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary on the Book of Acts*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 18.

to take the report of the death of James as historical, claims Pervo, since Luke was more interested in advancing the early movement evangelistically than in reporting sober truth.

Pervo notes a number of the techniques that Acts shares with ancient fiction.²⁹

While these parallels are literarily insightful, his approach ignores the many features of ancient romances that are absent from Acts as well. Ben Witherington concludes,

The essential problem for Pervo is that he must define the ancient novel much too widely in order to include Acts within its compass, and he must strain to show that Acts has features that are *distinctive* of, not merely characteristic of, ancient novels.³⁰

Witherington concedes that viewing Acts as a novel reveals some fruitful literary insights. Yet he says, “It must also be said that there are clearly some indisputable historical traditions being used in this section involving the death of James and Agrippa.”³¹ Even if Pervo were right about the genre of Acts, it would still likely follow that Acts 12:1-2 contains genuine historical tradition regarding the fate of James.

There is good reason to believe the genre of Acts is apologetic historiography.³² And there is ample evidence Acts is a generally reliable historical document.³³ Bart Ehrman argues that the narrative structure of Acts, which focuses on chronicling the historical development of the Christian church, is closely related to other histories produced in antiquity.³⁴ While this does not definitively prove the account in

²⁹Ibid., 17.

³⁰Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 378, emphasis in original.

³¹Ibid., 381.

³²Keener, *Acts*, 1:51-165.

³³For instance, see C. K. Barrett, “The Historicity of Acts,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1999): 515-34; Darrell Bock, “Apologetics Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Holman Apologetics Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Jeremy Royal Howard (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 635-48; Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990); Keener, *Acts*, 1:166-220.

³⁴Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 166.

Acts 12:1-2 is historical, it does mean it should get the benefit of doubt. Keener argues, “If evidence allows us to accept Luke’s accuracy in at least most cases, this is sufficient to keep the burden of proof where it belongs: except where one has compelling reason to believe otherwise in particular instances, Luke’s reports about events should normally be respected.”³⁵ If Luke can be confirmed as accurate on the accounts that can be investigated, it gives reason to trust his accounts when it cannot. The burden of proof is thus on those who doubt the early, consistent, and reliable tradition that James, the son of Zebedee was the first apostolic martyr.

1. James experienced martyrdom in Jerusalem under Herod Agrippa I—*Highest possible probability* (Acts 12:1-2; Mark 10:39; Clement of Alexandria Book 7, *Outlines* (Eusebius *Eccl. Hist.* 2.9); Chrysostom *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 26; Gregory of Nyssa; *Homily 2 On Stephen*; Philip of Side, Papias fragment; lack of any competing tradition).

³⁵Keener, *Acts*, 1:201.

CHAPTER 13

MARTYRDOM OF PHILIP

The apostle Philip appears in the Synoptic tradition only in the lists of the apostles (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14). He always appears fifth, behind Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Along with Peter and James the son of Alphaeus, Philip is one of three apostles who always appear in the same position in the apostolic lists (first, fifth, and ninth respectively), which may indicate their leadership roles over their respective subgroups.¹ In Acts 1:13, Philip again appears fifth, but this time he is paired next to Thomas rather than Bartholomew. Philip is clearly among the middle-level apostles, and given his consistent primary listing among this group, he may have had some degree of prominence and responsibility within the Twelve.

The Scriptural Philip

John 1:43-48: The Call of Philip

Philip appears much more frequently in the Gospel of John, who describes him as coming from Bethsaida, the “town of the apostles”² (John 1:44). Philip may have been a disciple of John the Baptist since Jesus called him to discipleship near Bethany, where John was baptizing. The day after calling Peter and Andrew, Jesus went to Galilee and

¹Beltran Villegas has argued that the consistent listing of Peter, Philip, and James of Alphaeus as first, fifth, and ninth, demonstrates that they are to be seen as leaders over their respective smaller group of apostles. See Beltran Villegas, “Peter, Philip, and James of Alphaeus,” *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 292-94.

²The Gospels specifically link Peter, Andrew, and Philip to Bethsaida. Later tradition credits James, John, and James the son of Alphaeus to Bethsaida. There is no other city that can claim so many apostles. The association of the apostle Philip to this city is appropriate since Philip, son of Herod, governed the surrounding region. See Fred Strickert, *Philip’s City: From Bethsaida to Julias* (Collegeville, MD: Liturgical, 2011), 47-48.

found Philip and said to him, “Follow me” (John 1:43).³ The text does not specifically say that he chose to follow Jesus, but the implication is clear since Philip immediately goes to Nathanael and proclaims, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (1:45). Mentioning where Jesus was from (Nazareth) and the name of his father (Joseph)⁴ is exactly how someone was identified in first century Palestine. Yet Nathanael responds with incredulity: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”⁵ Rather than giving an answer, Philip merely invites Nathanael to come see Jesus in person and consider the evidence himself (1:46).

Thus, Philip was a *witness* of Jesus and he invited Nathanael to become a witness himself. The root of their belief is not secondhand testimony, but from experiencing Jesus with their own eyes. The writer of the Gospel of John is making it clear that Philip personally saw Jesus and could act as a legal witness on his behalf. Beasley-Murray explains, “So in the Fourth Gospel the whole story of Jesus is shot through with trial motifs; witnesses are called, witness is borne, and the testimony is constantly questioned and rejected by opponents of Jesus, till at length he undergoes a final trial.”⁶

This brief episode of the call of Philip reveals three important things about his character. First, he was expecting the Messiah. He spoke of Jesus as the one whom the Old Testament Scriptures bore witness (cf. Luke 24:27). As a Jew, Philip was familiar

³It could be that Andrew first found Philip and brought him to Jesus. The grammatical structure of the passage is somewhat ambiguous. That Andrew brought Philip to Jesus is supported by the theme of the importance of bearing witness in the Gospel of John. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 157-58.

⁴There is no reason to take the mention of Joseph as the father of Jesus as a denial of the virgin birth. Joseph was the legal father of Jesus and Jesus would have been known as “the son of Joseph.” Luke also mentions the virgin birth (1:26-38) but lists Joseph as the father of Jesus in the genealogy (3:23).

⁵The incredulity that anything good could come from Nazareth is believable, as it was a small, insignificant town. While Jesus was said to be from Nazareth (1:45), he later moved to Capernaum (Matt 4:13).

⁶George, R Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 29.

with the Scriptures and was anticipating their fulfillment. Second, Philip had a missionary mindset. He was eager and willing to introduce others to Jesus. As Andrew had brought Peter and possibly Philip to Jesus, Philip in turn witnesses to Nathanael. The fact that Philip immediately brought Nathanael to Jesus shows that he was deeply impressed by Jesus. Third, Philip was a witness of Jesus. His belief in Jesus was rooted in what he saw with his own eyes, not secondhand testimony from others. Like the other apostles, he was a witness of the *risen* Jesus (Acts 1:3) and was willing to suffer for that conviction (Acts 5:17). Philip may even have been one of the unnamed disciples who saw Jesus by the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:1-2).⁷

John 6:1-15: Feeding the 5,000

The second time Philip appears in John is in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 (6:1-15). This is the only miracle story recorded in all four Gospels. In the Johannine account, a large crowd followed Jesus to the other side of the Sea of Galilee as they had seen many of the miracles he had done for the sick (6:2). Yet there was not enough food for them to eat. So Jesus asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (6:5). Jesus decided to test Philip, even though he already knew how he would feed them. Philip replies, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” Even though John reports “the signs that he was doing on the sick” (6:2), Philip perceives the problem entirely on a human level, hopelessly wondering how they could produce the means to feed all the people. Philip is clearly representative of the misunderstanding of all the disciples at this stage of the ministry of Jesus.⁸

Scholars have offered a number of hypotheses for why Jesus turned to Philip. Some have suggested that Philip was from Bethsaida and would know best where to find

⁷Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 128.

⁸A. T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 211.

food.⁹ Others suggest Philip was slower than the rest and needed the test. Some believe it was because Philip was a “coldly-calculating” type of person. Others assume Philip had just asked a question or just happened to be the one next to Jesus. While it is not clear why Jesus chose Philip, the point of Jesus’ question was to determine if Philip understood who he was. Although he does answer Jesus, it is clear that Philip, as the rest of the disciples, does not yet fully understand his mission or identity. Even though Jesus had turned water to wine at Cana (2:1-12), Philip failed to see that he could do the same with the fish and bread. As a result of this episode, Merrill Tenney concludes that Philip was both unimaginative and pessimistic.¹⁰

John 12:20-36: Some Greeks Seek Jesus

In this brief account, some Greeks came to see Jesus in Jerusalem during Passover. Josephus speaks of a large number of Greeks coming to worship at Passover but of their not being allowed to offer sacrifices.¹¹ Lincoln argues that they were proselytes (“God-fearers”) who were uncircumcised converts to Judaism (cf. 1 Kgs 8:42; Isa 56:7; Mark 11:17).¹² By contrast, Carson notes that they were referred to as “Greeks” instead of Grecian Jews (Acts 6:1), suggesting they were Gentiles from somewhere in the Greek-speaking world. He questions whether they were Jewish converts since others who went to worship at Jerusalem could not have been (e.g. Ethiopian eunuch, Acts 8:27).¹³ It may not be possible to determine which group they belonged to, but it is clear they were outsiders captivated by Jesus. The Greeks had become fascinated by the powerful stories

⁹D. A. Carson suggests that Philip was the obvious person since he came from nearby Bethsaida. According to Carson, this provides good reason to believe the account incorporates the recollection of an eyewitness. See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 269.

¹⁰Merrill C. Tenney, *John*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. J. D. Douglas and Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 71.

¹¹Josephus, *Wars* 6.426–427.

¹²Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 348.

¹³Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 436.

of Jesus and wanted to meet him personally. Borchert suggests they were intrigued by the powerful-heroic Jesus and wanted to get involved with him.¹⁴ They first come to Peter, who takes them to Andrew, who in turn brings them to Jesus. It seems likely the story singles out Philip and Andrew since they are the only two disciples with Greek names. Since Philip takes their request to Andrew rather than directly to Jesus, he seems to clearly understand his moderating role among the apostles.

John 14:8-21: Jesus Answers Philip

The final passage involving Philip occurs during the Last Supper. Jesus was telling his disciples to believe in him since he is going to prepare a place for them in heaven. Thomas asks how they can know the way and Jesus replies, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:6-7). Then Philip speaks up and says, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (14:8). Perhaps with a tinge of sadness,¹⁵ Jesus gently rebukes Philip for not yet knowing him, and by extension, the Father:

Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves (14:9-11).

As in the earlier case when Philip spoke up at the feeding of the 5,000, his response characterizes the ill-informed and dull-witted nature of the apostles who are unable to understand the full extent of who Jesus was. Philip wanted to see the Father with his physical eyes through some sort of theophany, as Moses experienced. But he failed to realize the far greater privilege he had personally been granted by being with Jesus.¹⁶

¹⁴Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, The New American Commentary, vol. 25B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 48.

¹⁵Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 494.

¹⁶William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:269-70.

Based on the criterion of embarrassment, this story has the ring of authenticity and is likely reliable. Tenney explains what this reveals about the character of Philip:

If Thomas was a skeptic, Philip was a realist. Having determined in his thinking that the Father of whom Jesus spoke must be the Ultimate Absolute, Philip demanded that he and his associates might see him. Philip was materialistic; apparently abstractions meant little to him. Nevertheless he had a deep desire to experience God for himself. If he and the other disciples could only apprehend God with at least one of their senses, they would be satisfied.¹⁷

Traditions about Philip

Traditions about Philip emerge in the second century onward. One of the difficulties in knowing what traditions apply to the apostle Philip is that he seems to be frequently conflated with Philip the evangelist (Acts 6:5; 8:4-8; 21:8-9). One tradition identifies Philip as the disciple who requested to bury his father before following Jesus (Matt 8:21; Luke 9:56; Clement, *Stromata* 3.4.25; 4.9.73).¹⁸ A Coptic *Gospel of Philip* is used by Gnostics and Manicheans, which dates to the mid fourth century, but is likely dependent upon an earlier Greek text. It is technically anonymous and may bear the title “Philip” since he is the only apostle mentioned by name (73:9-14).¹⁹ Philip also appears in other Gnostic writings, such as *Pistis Sophia* and *Book of Jews*, as a mediator between their teachings and Christ. *The Letter of Philip to Peter* is a late second or third century document from the Nag Hammadi library that emphasizes the leadership role of Peter and the importance of suffering. Given that Philip is named fifth in the apostolic lists, and his prominence in John, it should come as no surprise that he is a common figure in apocryphal texts of the second century onward. In fact, considering his influence in the Gospels, Acts, and non-canonical works of the second century onward, Christopher

¹⁷Tenney, *John*, 145.

¹⁸David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “Philip,” by Wesley W. Isenberg.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 313.

Matthews argues that Philip's name should be included among the select group of apostles who guaranteed the accurate transmission of the faith in the early Christian era.²⁰

Missionary Travels of Philip

Later traditions place Philip in Parthia, Athens, Scythia (among the Anthropophagi),²¹ and various cities in Asia for his missionary journeys. There is also a tradition by Isidore of Seville (AD 560-636) that the apostle Philip preached in France (*De ortu et obitu partum*, c. 72), but there is no record of a church in Gaul (France) before the eighth century, and thus this tradition is difficult to substantiate.²² The earliest and most consistent tradition places Philip in Hierapolis. In the early second century, Papias is the first to mention that Philip went to Hierapolis.²³ This finds further support in the writings of Polycrates and Gaius²⁴ as well as later apocryphal works such as the *Acts of Philip* and *The Apostolic Acts of Abdias* (Book X).

Schmidt says there is good reason to believe Philip preached in Hierapolis, but he qualifies his position with the possibility early church fathers conflated Philip the apostle with Philip the evangelist:

There is good authority for placing Philip's later ministry in Hierapolis. Eusebius quotes the early second-century writer Polycrates, who both report that Philip worked and died in Hierapolis with his daughters. The reference to the daughters may indicate either early confusion with Philip the deacon/evangelist or later

²⁰Christopher R. Matthews, *Philip: Apostle and Evangelist* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 1. It must be recognized that the arguments of Matthews rests upon his assumption that there was only one Philip in the early church, and thus traditions from the New Testament, early church fathers, and apocryphal texts all provide information for Philip. Thus, if he is mistaken about there being one Philip, then his claim may be an overstatement about the significance of the apostle Philip in guarding early church traditions.

²¹The tradition that places Philip among the Anthropophagi is found in the third/fourth century *Manichaean Psalms* and the Irish Biblical Apocrypha.

²²Els Rose, *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c. 500-1251)* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 128, 136-37.

²³Papias, *Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord*, found in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.9.

²⁴The writings of both Polycrates and Gaius are recorded in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31.2-5.

confusion by Eusebius; it could also mean that it was the deacon/evangelist and not the apostle who worked in Hierapolis.²⁵

There is no good reason to doubt that Philip engaged in missionary activity, even though there is debate about the particular locale. In his first appearance in the Gospel of John, Philip shows his missionary mindset by inviting Nathanael to come and see the Messiah (1:45-46). Philip had seen the risen Jesus and personally received the commission to take the gospel to the world (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). Given the general evidence the apostles engaged in missionary activity, as well as the variety of traditions from the second century onward, there is little reason to doubt Philip left Jerusalem to proclaim the gospel.

Which Philip?

One of the difficulties in tracing the missionary endeavors and fate of the apostle Philip is the existence of Philip the evangelist in Acts, apparently a different figure than the apostle (6:1-6; 8:4-14, 26-40; 21:8-9). Given the number of stories in Acts about Philip the evangelist, Barclay concludes that more is known about him than the apostle Philip.²⁶ This Philip has been suggested as the author of a number of anonymous New Testament documents of which authorship is unknown.²⁷ McBirnie concludes that there is no good reason to doubt that the apostle Philip ministered and met his fate in Hierapolis. Yet surprisingly, McBirnie makes no attempt to distinguish the apostle Philip from Philip the evangelist, and he may have conflated traditions concerning the two.

²⁵Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 143.

²⁶William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (London: SCM, 1960), 84.

²⁷Philip the evangelist has been proposed as the author of the first thirteen chapters of the Gospel of Mark, special material in Luke's Gospel (infancy stories, Sermon on the Plain, travel narrative in the middle section), the prime source for the Samaritan tradition in John, and the book of Hebrews. See F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 67*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1992), 15-16.

Acts 6:1-7

In the book of Acts, the apostle Philip only appears by name in the apostolic list (1:13). In Acts 6, the Twelve choose seven to help serve widows in the daily distribution of food. Among the seven are Philip and Stephen (6:5). The Twelve lay their hands on them in prayer and commission them for service. In this passage, Luke is clearly distinguishing the two Philips since he uses the term “twelve” to refer to the original apostles in contrast with the newly appointed seven.²⁸ This is the only time Luke uses the term “the twelve,” probably to distinguish them from the seven.²⁹

Acts 8:14-25

The evangelist Philip appears again in the Acts 8. Luke had just portrayed the martyrdom of Stephen, which caused a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem (8:1). Christians were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, but the apostles stayed in Jerusalem. While Saul is ravaging the church, and the apostles remain in Jerusalem, Luke shifts the story to the missionary work of the evangelist Philip in Samaria. Luke reveals that the preaching of the gospel is not limited to the Twelve and also includes Stephen and Philip. It is not merely the Twelve who take the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Bock notes,

The unit is an important literary bridge passage in Acts. Luke gives attention to the work of those outside the Twelve, especially Stephen and Philip. Their story is an important component of what Luke will describe in Acts 6-8 before he turns to his key hero figure, Paul. The section makes clear that Paul is not alone. Others also share in the task of taking the gospel out beyond Jerusalem.³⁰

²⁸Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 247.

²⁹I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 134.

³⁰Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 256-57.

Philip proclaimed Christ, performed many signs and wonders, and as a result, there was much joy in the city (8:6-8). Even Simon the magician believed when he saw the signs Philip performed (8:9-13).⁰⁰

When the Twelve heard about the work of God in Samaria, they sent Peter and John so they might receive the Holy Spirit (8:14-16). Two key observations are important. First, the mission of Philip is only complete when the apostolic witnesses (Peter and John) come to pray for the Holy Spirit. Second, Peter and John realize that messianic salvation is universally offered to all, including the Samaritans.³¹ While Philip was the author and initiator of salvation, the apostles completed the work of salvation in Samaria.³² The need of apostolic prayers for the reception of the Holy Spirit is not set up as a normative pattern for new believers. Normally the spirit comes by faith (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor 12:3, 13). Yet these are unique circumstances to indicate that God is breaking through old barriers in a new way.³³ If the Philip of this story were an apostle, he would have been able to lay hands on the Samaritans *himself* so they would receive the Holy Spirit. The fact that he needs an apostolic witness underscores that Luke does not view this Philip as a member of the Twelve but as a separate evangelist.³⁴

Acts 8:26-40

The evangelist Philip appears as the main character in one more narrative involving an Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40).³⁵ After Samaria, an angel guided Philip to head

³¹David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 285.

³²Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 287.

³³Bock, *Acts*, 331.

³⁴A. M. Johnson suggests that the baptism of Philip may be the same as the baptism of John the Baptist: "This is a most interesting point in the light of Acts 19:2-3 where Paul encounters certain disciples of Jesus in Ephesus who had never heard of the Holy Spirit and had been 'baptized into John's baptism', and the Ephesian traditions asserting the presence of Philip in Hierapolis, not to mention the fact that John the Baptist is also clearly connected with Philip's mission field, Samaria!" (A. M. Johnson, "Philip the Evangelist and the Gospel of John," *Abr-Nahrain* 16 [1976]: 57).

³⁵The Ethiopian eunuch was likely a gentile worshiper of the God of Israel. As a eunuch, he

south to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He met an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the queen of Ethiopia (Nubia), reading the book of Isaiah. Philip shared with him the meaning of the passage and then baptized him by the side of the road. Both Irenaeus and Eusebius report that the Ethiopian eunuch became a missionary to his own people.³⁶ Philip was taken away by the Lord and preached in multiple towns until he came to Caesarea.

Acts 21:8-9

The final time Philip the evangelist appears is roughly twenty years later, still living in Caesarea: “On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied” (Acts 21:8-9). Luke is clearly referring to the evangelist Philip since he refers to him as “one of the seven.” This reference is the first indication the evangelist Philip has four daughters. The earlier passages involving Philip are written from the third person perspective, but this latter passage appears in the “we” section, and thus provides incidental confirmation for its integrity.³⁷ When these three passages are considered, Luke unmistakably considers the apostle and the evangelist to be separate individuals who share the name “Philip.”

It may seem strange that Luke would commit so much space in his narrative to the work of a figure that was not even an apostle, but Dunn makes an important observation: “And there is no obvious reason why Luke should, of his own initiative, have chosen to credit the otherwise relatively obscure Philip with the breakthrough in Samaria (8.4-13) and the first Gentile conversion (8.26-39).”³⁸ If Luke were inventing the

was barred from religious observance in the Temple enjoyed by others (Deut 23:1). Isaiah prophesied the removal of this ban in Isa 56:3-5. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 175.

³⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.12.10; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 400.

³⁸James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids:

story, it seems far more likely he would have given credit for such an important missiological breakthrough to one of the apostles. The fact that he highlights the work of an otherwise obscure evangelist provides support for the credibility of the narrative. It has been suggested that Luke downplays the role of Philip and denigrates his mission by bringing it so quickly under the purview of the apostles. But there is not even the slightest hint that Luke downplays the work of Philip. Rather, the narrative is only praiseworthy of his role.³⁹

Evidence from the Early Church

Luke clearly portrays the two Philips as separate individuals with distinct roles, however, confusion regarding their identities seems to arise in the second century when traditions about Philip emerge in the writings of the early church fathers. Scholars take three general positions in identifying various traditions of Philip.

The Two Philips were Blended in the Early Church

Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, wrote the earliest known non-canonical statement about Philip. Eusebius claims that Papias learned key truths about the faith from those who directly knew Jesus. He provides a direct quote from Papias: “If, then, any one came, who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders, —what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord.”⁴⁰

Eerdmans, 2009), 2:278.

³⁹Dunn makes a few key observations. First, Philip is the one who makes the first breakthrough in Samaria. Second, His mission is attested with miraculous signs and Christian joy. Third, his message is consonant with the Lukan proclamation of the kingdom of God. Fourth, the immediate practice of baptism is in accord with the Lukan pattern. See *ibid.*, 290-92.

⁴⁰ Papias, *Exposition of Oracles of the Lord*, as quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4a, as cited in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 171.

Eusebius goes on to report that Papias personally heard miraculous stories from the daughters of the apostle Philip, who lived at Hierapolis.⁴¹ Papias is clearly referring to the apostle Philip since he pairs him with Thomas, James, John, and Matthew.

Earlier in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius reports the missionary travels of Philip the “diaconate.” Eusebius reports his preaching in Samaria, his success and fame, and his interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch.⁴² Clearly Eusebius understands this Philip to be the evangelist, not the apostle, since all these stories adhere with the accounts in Acts. But later he seems to conflate the two. He cites a letter from Ephesian Bishop Polycrates that refers to John and Philip the apostle: “For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the last day, at the coming of the Lord, when he shall come with glory from heaven and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who sleeps in Hierapolis and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus.”⁴³ Then Eusebius quotes Proclus in the Dialogue of Gaius: “After him there were four prophetesses, the daughters of Philip, at Hierapolis in Asia. Their tomb is there and the tomb of their father.”⁴⁴ Finally, Eusebius cites the biblical writer Luke to indicate that Philip and his daughters were at Caesarea (Luke 21:8-9): “We came unto Cæsarea; and entering into the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we abode with him. Now this man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy.”⁴⁵

⁴¹Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.8-9. Eusebius apparently contradicts his own report about whether he met the apostles in person or not. In *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.1-4, Eusebius states that Papias was not a direct hearer of the apostles, but garnered their teachings from those who knew them firsthand. Yet in 3.39-8-9, he states that Papias directly knew the apostle Philip and his daughters.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 2.1.10-14.

⁴³Polycrates (an epistle) in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31.3 as quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4a, as cited in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 162.

⁴⁴Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31.4.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 3.31.5.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Eusebius has confused traditions regarding the two different Philips. It is clear that Eusebius believes that all three of the quotes he included in *Ecclesiastical History* refer to Philip the apostle. The first quote by Polycrates is introduced specifically as referring to the apostle Philip. And before the second quote by Proclus, Eusebius says that he “speaks similarly about the deaths of Philip and his daughters.” There is no indication he is referring to a different Philip. In the final quote, Eusebius clearly believes that the Philip, who moved to Caesarea and was one of the seven, was the apostle Philip, even though the passage in Acts is clear they are distinct. Tertullian may also have confused the two Philips. He attributes the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch to an “apostle.”⁴⁶ The Calendar of the Coptic and Armenian Churches commemorates Philip as “deacon and apostle.”⁴⁷ A similar conflation may have also occurred in the *Letter of Peter to Philip* (second or third century), a gnostic text that came to light in the Nag Hammadi collection.⁴⁸ And the *Acts of Philip* likely conflated traditions of the apostle Philip with the deacon and evangelist.⁴⁹ This is why most scholars conclude that both Philips were fused as one in later church tradition,⁵⁰ although later medieval authors do distinguish them.⁵¹ If this view is correct, it would be

⁴⁶Tertullian, *Concerning Baptism* 18.

⁴⁷Barclay, *The Master’s Men*, 84.

⁴⁸Fred Lapham argues that the letter was addressed from Peter to Philip with the intent of convincing him to come back from his sole missionary enterprise and return to the rest of the apostles: “There can be no doubt that the circumstances reflected in the letter are best understood in terms of Philip the Deacon’s missionary excursion into Samaria (Acts 8). Yet the writer is at pains to show that it is Philip the Apostle, one of the Twelve, who is addressed. . . . It is clear that there has been some conflation of traditions; and it may be that the author of the *Epistle of Peter to Philip* himself shared in the confusion, conferring apostolic status on the Evangelist and Deacon, while crediting the Apostle with the evangelistic achievement of the Deacon” (Fred Lapham, *An Introduction to the New Testament Apocrypha* [New York: T & T Clark, 2003], 78-79).

⁴⁹Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:469.

⁵⁰Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 2:1242-43.

⁵¹Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 126.

exceedingly difficult to know which traditions of his travels and fate accurately apply to the apostle Philip as opposed to the evangelist.

There Were Two Philips, Both with Daughters

In contrast, J. B. Lightfoot has provided four reasons for why he believes the Philip at Hierapolis is the apostle, not the evangelist.⁵² First, Polycrates (c. AD 130-196), the earliest witness, distinctly says that the apostle Philip resided in Hierapolis with his daughters and is buried there.⁵³ Second, the subsequent historical account by Proclus is questionable in its authenticity, at least a quarter century later, and is suspicious in form (it reports four daughters instead of three). Third, the relationship between John and Philip would likely draw him to Asia after John. Incidents involving Philip had special interest for the writer of John as well as his audience. Fourth, Papias mentions Philip the apostle in his list of those he gathered stories from, but he never mentions Philip the evangelist. It seems natural, claims Lightfoot, that when Eusebius later mentions his interactions with the daughters of Philip, he is referring to the same person. Thus, Lightfoot concludes, “There is no improbability in supposing that both the Philips were married and had daughters.”⁵⁴ Although often dismissed by contemporary scholars, this view deserves greater consideration than it typically receives. It may seem unlikely but it is certainly not impossible. Arguments two and three (above) are somewhat speculative, but the first and last have some merit. That there were two Philips with daughters, and that the apostle Philip travelled to Hierapolis is certainly a live possibility. If this view

⁵²J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1879), 46, accessed May 1, 2014, <https://archive.org/details/saintpaulsepistl1880ligh>.

⁵³D. A. Carson does not find this point convincing: “Eusebius (*H.E.* III. xxxi. 3) cites Polycrates to the effect that Philip, one of the Twelve, was buried in Hierapolis, a city in Asia Minor, the province where the apostle John apparently ministered for the last twenty-five years of his life. But this evidence is of uncertain value; *Polycrates may have confused Philip the apostle with Philip the evangelist?* (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 158).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

were correct, it would provide some confidence that the apostle Philip met his fate in Hierapolis.

There Was Only One Philip

A final option for the identity of Philip is that there was only one Philip who was *both* apostle and evangelist. In an extensive study on Philip, based upon his 1993 Harvard dissertation, Christopher Matthews suggests there was only one historical figure Philip who was used by the early church in a variety of ways. Thus, the Gospels, Acts, early church fathers, as well as other non-canonical texts all refer to the same apostle Philip, who was also an evangelist.

To support his thesis, Matthews provides three primary arguments. First, he argues that the reason scholars largely agree that early church fathers confused the two Philips is because they accept Lukan priority.⁵⁵ According to Matthews, if scholars recognized that Papias was a contemporary of Luke, who was at least as reliable historically, then they would see that the evangelist and apostle are one and the same. Second, the available onomastic evidence for Palestine suggests it is quite unlikely two early Christian figures would both have the name Philip.⁵⁶ Third, the term “evangelist” for Philip does not exclude him also being an apostle.⁵⁷ Even Martin Hengel concedes the plausibility of this approach: “An identity as both apostle and evangelist is thus not to be rejected as impossible. It is possible that he consciously left the circle of the Twelve to transfer into the ‘Seven.’”⁵⁸ F. F. Bruce also seems open to this possibility.⁵⁹

⁵⁵Matthews, *Philip*, 2, 15.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 16-19.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁸Martin Hengel, *Saint Peter: The Underestimated Apostle*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 118.

⁵⁹F. F. Bruce, “Philip and the Ethiopian,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989): 378.

Although Hengel is right that this is a *possible* reconciliation of the data, the question is whether it is the most *probable*. Significant questions can be raised against each of the points mentioned. First, while it is true that the case for two separate Philips rests largely upon Lukan priority, dismissing Luke is not so easily done. Against the consensus of most scholars, Matthews dates Papias before AD 110.⁶⁰ Even if this dating is accepted, it is still at least a generation after standard dating for Acts. Although a strong case can be made for dating Acts in the 60s, many scholars date it between AD 80-90. Thus, it is minimally one generation *before* the writings of Papias. If the early dating of Acts is correct, as well as the later dating for Papias, they may even be two generations removed. Matthews needs to provide solid reasons for dating Acts late and Papias early before scholars reject Lukan priority.

Second, the onomastic evidence indicates that “Philip” was not among the most common names for Jewish men of Palestine. It ranks sixty-first (seven instances from 330 BC to AD 200).⁶¹ Nevertheless, the fact that it was borne by several Macedonian kings, including the father of Alexander the Great, as well as a son of Herod the Great, suggests it was not entirely uncommon either.⁶² The unlikelihood that “Philip” would be the name of two prominent early Christian figures, as Matthews suggests, must be considered in light of the entirety of onomastic evidence for the Twelve. Richard Bauckham has observed that the frequency of names for the Twelve fits nicely with the onomastic evidence of ancient Jewish Palestine: “This mixture of very common, relatively common, rare, and almost unique names is not at all surprising in view of what we have learned about the Palestinian Jewish onomasticon, which contains a small

⁶⁰Matthews, *Philip*, 31.

⁶¹Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 102.

⁶²C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: T & T Clark, 1994), 1:315.

number of very common names and many very uncommon names.”⁶³ The overall onomastic evidence supports the frequency of names for the Twelve. When considered against the prominence of certain individuals named Philip, and the overall accurate frequency of apostolic names in the wider Jewish culture, the claim that there was likely only one Philip loses its force. If there were numerous “Philips” in the New Testament, then considering the onomastic evidence, there may be reason for concern. But the mere existence of *two* individuals named “Philip,” with a name that is not entirely uncommon, provides minimal reason to overturn the Lukan tradition.

Third, these points must also be coupled with the unlikelihood that Luke would invent a fictional character named “Philip.” Why would Luke intentionally name a significant character Philip (if the name is so unlikely, as Matthews suggests) when it could so easily lead to confusion? And more pressing, if Luke felt free to “to redescribe literarily or ‘reinvent’ known personalities or events in order to conform them to the needs of his narrative presentation,”⁶⁴ then why invent a non-apostolic character to preach so successfully, perform such powerful signs, and be the first to take the gospel outside Judea? It seems far more likely Luke would have imparted this role to a member of the Twelve, or at least to a more prominent individual such as Paul, Timothy, or Barnabas. Craig Keener observes,

Likewise, he [Luke] would hardly invent from whole cloth Philip’s ministry to a Gentile (8:26-40), since he already has the standard, institutional version of the earliest Gentile mission in the Cornelius narrative (Acts 10-11). Assuming Philip was a fairly reliable informant (and he seems to have been trusted by Paul and Caesarean church, 21:8-10), Luke’s account of Philip’s ministry in 8:5-40 likely is Luke’s rendition of genuine historical truth.⁶⁵

Even though the apostles shared in the Jewish antipathy for Samaritans (cf. Luke 9:54-56), Jesus had shown concern for the Samaritans (John 4). He instructed his

⁶³Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 102.

⁶⁴Matthews, *Philip*, 65.

⁶⁵Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 2:1488.

apostles to spread the gospel throughout Samara (Acts 1:8). And yet it took Philip the evangelist who was not even a member of the Twelve to take this to heart! It seems unlikely Luke would invent this narrative, and potentially cast the apostles in a negative light, unless it was true. The fact that Peter and John, who represented the apostles (cf. Acts 3:1-7; 4:20), came to approve of the ministry in Samaria shows that Luke viewed the apostle and evangelist as separate individuals.

The most likely reason Luke includes two separate Philips, and ascribes the traditions in Acts 6, 8, and 21 to the evangelist, is that this was the earliest account he received during his investigation (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3). Comparing the various accounts of Philip in Acts, F. Scott Spencer concludes,

Finally, the nexus between 8.1 and 8.4-5 sets apart the itinerant evangelist, Philip, from the company of apostles who remain in Jerusalem. This distinction goes back to 6.1-7 and becomes a critical factor in 8.14-25. Moreover, it eliminates any prospect of identifying Philip the evangelist with his apostolic namesake (Lk. 6.1; Acts 1.13).⁶⁶

Nevertheless, if the traditions do in fact refer to one Philip, both apostle and evangelist, then there would be little reason to question his journey and death in Hierapolis. While adopting this view would make the martyrdom of Philip in Hierapolis more likely, the evidence simply does not warrant it.

There is no easy answer to the question of the identity of the apostle Philip after the New Testament era. Kraeling seems right that there is no certainty on the matter and that no solution is unproblematic.⁶⁷ The existence of two Philips in Hierapolis is a live possibility that should not so easily be dismissed. Yet, the majority position that early church fathers conflated the two Philips seems most probable. This happened with other apostles, such as Matthew and Matthias, and the various biblical figures named James.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts*, 34.

⁶⁷Emil G. Kraeling, *The Disciples* (Skokie, IL: Rand McNally, 1966), 48.

⁶⁸Ancient writers often did distinguish individuals who shared common names, but not often with the same exactitude as modern scholars. There are at least eleven ways that ancient writers individuated people with the same name. See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 78-84.

Evidence for the Martyrdom of Philip

While the earliest church fathers such as Papias, Polycrates, Proclus, and Eusebius mention Philip the apostle in Hierapolis, none of them mention his martyrdom.⁶⁹ They state that he lived, ministered, and died in Hierapolis, but none of them mention *how* he met his fate. Only so much can be drawn from the absence of a martyrdom account for Philip in the earliest church fathers, but it is undoubtedly noteworthy that the first account arises in the fourth century apocryphal text, the *Acts of Philip*.

Thanks to the work of François Bovon and Christopher Matthew, there is an almost complete version of the *Acts of Philip*, which was previously unavailable.⁷⁰ While the *Acts of Philip* was put into its final form in the late fourth century, some of the content derives from the second and third centuries,⁷¹ and it was likely written in Phrygia, perhaps in Hierapolis itself.⁷² Like the other apocryphal Acts, the *Acts of Philip* contains many bizarre legendary tales, but it might also retain a historical core. The *Acts of Philip* has many similarities to some of the earlier Acts. For instance, reminiscent of the *Acts of Peter*, Philip gives a speech on the cross and then is crucified upside down. Nevertheless, Matthews cautions critics not to simply assume literary dependence and uncreative borrowing from these earlier works.⁷³

⁶⁹The one possible exception is a reference in the *Chronicle* by St. Jerome. Writing around AD 380, Jerome translated the *Chronicle* by Eusebius (c. AD 311) into Latin, adding some of his own content. It is difficult to know if the reference to Philip is truly from Jerome since there were a number of medieval additions to the text. In his translation, Roger Pearse placed it as a footnote, which indicates it was not in the reliable text. Nevertheless, under the 207th Olympiad the *Patrologia Latina* version reads, “Philip, the apostle of Christ to the people in Hierapolis, a city of Asia, while preaching the Gospel, is nailed to a cross and stoned to death” (Jerome, *Chronicle*, trans. Roger Pearse and friends, accessed May 1, 2014, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_chronicle_03_part2.htm).

⁷⁰For the most updated English translation of the *Acts of Philip*, see François Bovon and Christopher R. Matthews, *The Acts of Philip: A New Translation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 21.

⁷²Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 233.

⁷³Matthews, *Philip*, 161.

The *Acts of Philip* begins with the apostle Philip departing Galilee for ministry. He travels through multiple cities performing miracles, casting out demons, preaching the gospel,⁷⁴ debating Jewish religious leaders, and eventually dying by crucifixion. Perhaps the most memorable story in the *Acts of Philip* occurs when Philip, Bartholomew, and Mariamne travel through the wilderness of the she-dragons.⁷⁵ A leopard comes out of the wilderness, prostrates himself at their feet, and speaks in a human voice: “I prostrate myself before you, servants of the divine greatness and apostles of the only-begotten Son of God. Command me so that I might speak perfectly.” The leopard shares that he had a change of heart and decided to spare a kid (young goat) rather than eat him. Philip prays for the leopard to receive a human heart and invites him and the kid to join them on their journey.⁷⁶

The martyrdom account begins in chapter 15 when Philip enters Hierapolis. Nicanora, the wife of the Proconsul Tyrannos, became a believer in Jesus after hearing the preaching of Philip. Nicanora told her husband to repent from worshipping idols, but he became angry and demanded Philip and Bartholomew be tortured for their deception: “And he ordered Philip to be hung up and his ankles pierced through, and that iron instruments of torture be brought and passed through his heels, and that he be hung head downward before the temple on a tree.”⁷⁷ Suddenly the apostle John appears in the story. The people attempt to kill John as well, and Philip lashes out in anger: “Look, it may be

⁷⁴In *Acts of Philip*, Philip proclaims the Christian gospel clearly at times. For instance, before raising a child, he says to the mother, “But as for you, stop mourning, for now I will raise your child by the power of my God Jesus Christ, who was crucified, buried, rose from the dead, and rules forever—whoever believes in him receives life eternal” (1.2). But other times the encratic nature of the *Acts of Philip* is glaring. See Bovon and Matthews, *The Acts of Philip*, 32.

⁷⁵*The Acts of Philip* 8.16-21.

⁷⁶Frédéric Amsler has argued that the viper, the leopard, and the kid in the *Acts of Philip* are symbolic characters that constitute a polemic against the cult of Cybele. See Frédéric Amsler, “The Apostle Philip, the Viper, the Leopard and the Kid. The Masked Actors of a Religious Conflict in Hierapolis of Phrygia (*Acts of Philip VIII-XV and Martyrdom*),” *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers* (1996): 432-37.

⁷⁷*The Acts of Philip* 15.19.

that my Lord Jesus told me not to avenge myself. Nevertheless, I will no longer hold myself back, but I will bring my full indignation upon them and destroy them all.”⁷⁸ Philip then curses the people, which results in the earth opening up and swallowing the entire temple, the Viper the people were worshipping, and about seven thousand men, plus women and children. The only place left standing was where the apostles stood. The Lord appears and castigates Philip for returning evil for evil, barring him outside paradise for forty days.⁷⁹ After giving a speech on the cross, Philip gives up his spirit. After forty days, Jesus appears in the form of Philip to give instruction to Bartholomew and Mariamne about where they are to minister next.

Later writers affirm the tradition of the martyrdom of Philip. For instance, Isidore of Seville says, “Afterwards, he [Philip] was stoned and crucified, and died in Hierapolis, a city of Phrygia, and having been buried with his corpse upright along with his daughters rests there.” According to (pseudo) *Hippolytus on the Twelve*, “Philip preached in Phrygia, and was crucified in Hierapolis with his head downward in the time of Domitian, and was buried there.”⁸⁰ The *Breviarum Apostolorum* (c. AD 600) and other apostolic lists of the Middle Ages depict Philip as a martyr as well: “Thereupon he [Philip] was crucified in Hierapolis in the province of Phrygia and he died lapidated. And there he rests with his daughters. And his feast day is celebrated on the first of May.”⁸¹ The *Irish Biblical Apocrypha* also contains an account of the crucifixion of Philip in Hierapolis. In this story, Philip preaches to the people and Jewish priests about Christ, and in an attempt to silence him, they cut out his tongue, beat him, and stone him. But they cannot cause him harm:

⁷⁸*The Acts of Philip* 8.25.

⁷⁹*The Acts of Philip* 8.31.

⁸⁰If Hippolytus actually wrote this account, it would predate the *Acts of Philip*. But this has not been established and many consider it spurious.

⁸¹See translation in Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 136.

Thereupon the people and priests ordered that the apostle should be crucified, since they failed to inflict any other death on him. A certain wicked cruel man among them came forward, and placed a deadly noose around the apostle's neck, and they hanged him then, after he had endured much pain, insult, and scourging, like his master, Jesus. Hierapolis, then, is the name of the city in which Philip the apostle was crucified. Great splendor and ministering angels were seen around the gallows when Philip expired, and the angels placed the soul of the apostle in the mansions of the kingdom of heaven in the glory of the angels, after his attainment of the crown of martyrdom.⁸²

The tradition of Philip's martyrdom in Hierapolis finds some confirmation in the Martyrium of Philip, an ancient site that many believe was built on the place where Philip was martyred.⁸³ Around AD 400, the Philip Martyrium was built outside the city of Hierapolis to mark the spot where the apostle was crucified according to the *Acts of Philip*. Yet the same time Francesco D'Andria released his article on the Philip Martyrium, he announced that he had in fact found the tomb of the martyred apostle Philip, but it was not where expected.⁸⁴ Rather than being on top of the Martyrium, it was located in a newly excavated church about forty yards away. While the body is gone, D'Andria believes the tomb originally held the remains of the apostle Philip.⁸⁵

The tradition of the martyrdom of Philip, however, is not unanimous. In the Latin text of *The Apostolic Acts of Abdias* (Book X), Philip goes to Hierapolis to battle the Ebionites. He gets married and has two daughters who become evangelists of their own. But rather than facing martyrdom by crucifixion, he dies naturally at 87. Like the apostle John, Philip is depicted as experiencing a peaceful death at an advanced age. John and Philip are the only two apostles where there is an apocryphal tradition of their

⁸²Marie Herbert and Martin McNamara, eds., *Irish Biblical Apocrypha* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1989), 106-08.

⁸³Francesco D'Andria, "Conversion, Crucifixion, and Celebration," *Biblical Archaeological Review* 37 (Jul/Aug 2011): 34-46.

⁸⁴Biblical Archaeology Society, "Philip's Tomb Discovered—But Not Where Expected," *Biblical Archaeological Review* 38 (Jan/Feb 2012): 18.

⁸⁵The Martyrium of Philip is interesting and certainly demonstrates that there was a cult following surrounding the fate of the apostle Philip by the fourth century, perhaps even earlier. But given the lack of veneration or recognition of the site any earlier than the fourth century, it is difficult to consider the Martyrium positive evidence for his actual martyrdom by crucifixion in Hierapolis.

peaceful deaths. Although there are some points of contact between the *Acts of Philip* and Pseudo-Abdias (e.g., the dragon), there is unlikely any textual relationship between these two works.⁸⁶ This may represent an independent line of tradition regarding the fate of Philip and thus provides a significant counterexample to the crucifixion account in the ActPhil. Additionally, there is a hymn from the medieval ages, *Fulget coruscans*, which provides a similar natural death for Philip as the collection of Pseudo-Abdias. Most hymns of this sort treat the apostles as martyrs, and most hymns of Philip give him a martyrs' death, but in this hymn Philip dies peacefully after ministering in Scythia.

Since the *Acts of Philip* is likely the earliest source for the martyrdom of Philip, the issue is whether or not it retains a historical core. Certain details give it the aura of historical underpinning. For one, the *Acts of Philip* includes a number of historical figures such as the emperor Trajan, the high priest Ananias, and the twelve disciples. Second, it accurately depicts the missionary journeys of Peter to Rome, Thomas to India, Andrew to Achaëa, John to Asia, and more.⁸⁷ Third, Philip meets his fate in Hierapolis, which is the city that multiple church fathers attest he visited from the second century onward. Schmidt concludes, "The account is too late to be reliable, but parts are plausible and may represent a core of facts."⁸⁸

Yet there are reasons to question whether or not the martyrdom account in *Acts of Philip* is historical. First, it was likely written in the fourth century when many writings stop conserving historical material and resort to "pure legend and hagiography."⁸⁹ This does not mean the *Acts of Philip* necessarily contains an invented martyrdom account, but confidence that it is historical is greatly diminished. Second, the

⁸⁶Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:473.

⁸⁷*Acts of Philip* 8.1.

⁸⁸Schmidt, *The Apostles After Acts*, 144.

⁸⁹Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 231.

Acts of Philip likely did not circulate widely and was not well known.⁹⁰ Unlike the five primary Acts (Peter, Paul, Thomas, John, and Andrew), there are few external references to the *Acts of Philip*, and these are late.⁹¹ Finally, Bovon notes,

The companionship of Mariamne and Bartholomew with Philip is a distinguishing difference between this text and most ancient apocryphal Acts of the apostles, such as *Acts of John* and the *Acts of Andrew*. It brings the *Acts of Philip* closer to the “second wave” of noncanonical Acts (Like the *Acts of Peter and Paul* or the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*).⁹²

Conclusion

Traditions surrounding the apostle Philip are not easy to unravel. There is a consistent voice from the early second century that he went to Hierapolis, but even this is compromised by the possibility that early church fathers conflated traditions about Philip the evangelist with the apostle Philip. While the first church fathers list Hierapolis as Philip’s final destination, they do not mention his manner of death. The earliest source that mentions his fate is likely the *Acts of Philip*. While it may in fact report the actual martyrdom of Philip, it was written in the fourth or fifth century when legend and fabrication often grew untethered by a historical anchor. In the case of Philip, counterbalancing evidence leads me to the following conclusion:

1. Philip engaged in missionary work outside Jerusalem—*Very probably true* (General evidence for apostolic missions as found in Matt 28:18-20, Acts 1:8, and early noncanonical sources; Philip had a heart for evangelism as seen in John 1:45; *Letter of Philip to Peter*; *Acts of Philip*).
2. Philip experienced martyrdom—*possible* (*Acts of Philip*; Isidore of Seville; *Hippolytus on the Twelve 5*; *Breviarum Apostolorum*; Philip Martyrium).

⁹⁰Bovon and Matthews, *The Acts of Philip*, 12-14.

⁹¹For example, The Manichaeans valued the five Apocryphal Acts more than the biblical Acts. While the Manichaean Psalm-book contains episodes from each of the five Apocryphal Acts, there are no references to the *Acts of Philip*. See Lapham, *An Introduction to the New Testament Apocrypha*, 132.

⁹²Bovon and Matthews, *The Acts of Philip*, 29.

CHAPTER 14

MARTYRDOM OF BARTHOLOMEW

Bartholomew appears as a member of the Twelve in every apostolic list (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). He appears sixth in the Synoptics and is always placed after Philip, which may suggest they were close ministry partners or perhaps played a similar role among the apostles. In the canonical Acts, Bartholomew appears seventh after Thomas. While Bartholomew was not among the inner circle of disciples, his moderate place in the lists may indicate he was more prominent among the Twelve than some.

Many scholars believe that Bartholomew was the same person as Nathanael in the Gospel of John.¹ Three reasons have been offered for this identification. First, Bartholomew may have been a family name, not a proper name. Bartholomew comes from the Hebrew for *son of Talmi* (Bar-Tholami). Thus, his full name would have been Nathanael Bar-Tholami (cf. Simon Bar-Jonah). Second, Bartholomew immediately follows Philip in the three Gospel lists, and Philip is the one in the Gospel of John who brought Nathanael to Jesus (John 1:45). Third, Nathanael never appears by name in the Synoptic Gospels, and equally Bartholomew never appears by name in the Gospel of John. Although it cannot be confirmed with certainty, it seems reasonable to conclude that Bartholomew and Nathanael are different names for the same person.²

¹While Nathanael is commonly identified with Bartholomew, he has also been identified with Simon the Cananean, the unnamed disciple on the road of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), the Beloved Disciple of John, and Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:60). See William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (London: SCM, 1960), 109-10.

²Perhaps counting slightly against this tradition is the apostolic list found in the *Epistle of the Apostles* (c. AD 150-175), which lists Bartholomew and Nathanael as separate apostles. The reason this evidence is only slight is that it also has Peter and Cephas as separate apostles, yet virtually all scholars recognize Cephas is another name for Peter.

Bartholomew is the subject of many later apocryphal and Gnostic writings such as the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, *Acts of Andrew and Bartholomew* (Coptic),³ the *Acts of Bartholomew and Barnabas*, *The Questions of Bartholomew* (c. AD 2nd to 6th cent.) and *The Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle* (AD 5th/6th cent.).⁴ It may be surprising that these last two texts consider Bartholomew a central apostle who could bear such significant revelations about God. Yet Hans-Josef Klauck suggests these apocryphal traditions mark the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to Nathanael (aka, Bartholomew), whom he called an Israelite without deceit (John 1:47), who would “see greater things than these” (1:50).⁵

The Missionary Travels of Bartholomew

While the New Testament record of Bartholomew is bare, a variety of later tales report the travels and fate of Bartholomew. There are at least four primary traditions of the missionary travels of Bartholomew, which are not necessarily contradictory.⁶ First, according to the *Acts of Philip*, Bartholomew traveled to Hierapolis and Lyconia to minister along with the apostle Philip. Even though he was nailed to the wall of the

³This text likely came into being in association with the Acts of Andrew and Matthias. See Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:448.

⁴It is important to distinguish between the last two texts because sometimes they get confused. In *The Questions of Bartholomew*, Bartholomew is privy to secret revelations of Jesus after his resurrection. Bartholomew asks Jesus questions such as where he went after the cross and what sin is the most grievous. In *The Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle*, Joseph of Arimathea came with his six sons to the tomb of Jesus and they see him lying there with a napkin on his face. Then Jesus rises from the dead and mounts a chariot, wreaks havoc on hell, rebukes Judas Iscariot, and delivers Adam and other souls. Bartholomew has a special revelation of Jesus, which he reports to the other apostles. See J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 652-72.

⁵Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 99.

⁶Brownrigg suggests Bartholomew may have first gone to Phrygia, then India, and finally to Armenia where he was martyred. Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 136. The latter two points find confirmation in *Hippolytus on the Twelve*, which reports, “Bartholomew, again, preached to the Indians, to whom he also gave the Gospel according to Matthew, and was crucified with his head downward, and was buried in Allatum, a town of the great Armenia.”

temple, Bartholomew survived (unlike Philip who has his ankles and feet pierced before being hung upside down from a tree).

Second, Bartholomew travelled to Egypt. According to this tradition, when the apostles divided up countries for ministry, Bartholomew received a lot directing him to the Oases of Egypt. Since he was unfamiliar with the country, Bartholomew appealed to Peter for help. Yet since they were denied entrance into the country, Peter sells Bartholomew as a slave to a camel-owner. Bartholomew performed many miracles, preached the message of Jesus nightly, and eventually departed after three months. From there he leaves to Parthia, in which he suffers martyrdom.⁷

Third, the Armenian Church has claimed Bartholomew as their patron saint for at least 1,400 years. As far as the broader question of Christianity reaching Armenia, Nina Girosian observes,

The early appearance of Christianity coming to Armenia from Palestine by way of Syria and Mesopotamia is equally beyond doubt. The second century African church father Tertullian already listed the Armenians among the people who had received Christianity, and the mid-third century letter of Bishop Dionysios of Alexandria to an Armenian bishop named Meruzanes indicates a sizable community. . . . Consequently, it is now evidence that two currents of Christianity reached Armenia successively. The first came to the southern portion of the country closest to the original center of Palestine by way of Mesopotamia at a very early date. The second was brought to the northern Aršakuni Kingdom of Greater Armenia in the second decade of the fourth century.⁸

According to Orthodox Armenian historian Malachia Ormanian, the near instantaneous conversion of the whole of Armenia to Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century can only be explained by the preexistence of a Christian community that had taken root in the country centuries earlier.⁹ History records early persecutions in

⁷Given the similarities between this story and the *Acts of Thomas* (e.g., apostle sold as a slave; talking serpent which is commanded by an apostle to suck the poison out of its victim), Schneemelcher believes the author used the *Acts of Thomas* and adapted it to an Egyptian situation. See Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:451-52.

⁸Nina Girosian, "The Aršakuni Dynasty (A.D. 12-[180?]-428)," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 1:83.

⁹Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia: Her History, Doctrine, Rule, Discipline, Liturgy, Literature, and Existing Condition*, ed. Terenig Poladian, trans. G. Marcar Gregory (London: A. R. Wombray & Co, 1955), 7.

Armenia (c. AD 110, 230, 287) that could only have occurred if there were significant numbers of Armenian Christians at that time.¹⁰ Of course, this does not prove that Bartholomew actually visited Armenia, or that he was martyred there, but it does provide a historical context that helps make the narrative plausible. According to the Armenian tradition, Bartholomew appeared after St. Thaddeus, who had preached the gospel in Armenia beginning in AD 43, before suffering martyrdom at Artaz (c. AD 66). Bartholomew appeared around 60 AD and was martyred in 68 AD at Albanus.¹¹ According to the Roman Breviary,¹² Bartholomew was flayed alive and then beheaded.¹³ His tomb is venerated at Alpac (Bashkale), in southeast Armenia. Along with St. Thaddeus, Bartholomew is considered the *First Illuminator of Armenia*. Even though this tradition is not as central to the Armenian Church as the Thomas tradition is for India, it is widely accepted as part of their history.¹⁴

Fourth, Bartholomew went to India. *The Martyrdom of Bartholomew* (aka *The Passion of Bartholomew*) reports the travels of Bartholomew to India where he casts out a demon, heals the lunatic daughter of king Polymius, and then converts the royal family to

¹⁰Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 92.

¹¹Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 315-16.

¹²The Roman Breviary is a seventh or early eighth century composite work from earlier sources and authors. See Pierre Batiffol, *History of the Roman Breviary*, trans. Atwell M.Y. Baylay (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 1.

¹³A. Le Houllier, "Bartholomew, Apostle St." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York: Catholic University of America, 1967), 132.

¹⁴As a whole, the Armenian Church assumes the tradition to be true rather than feeling the need to defend it, as do many Indian scholars concerning the Thomas tradition. Many Armenian history books mention the tradition without providing the historical evidence for how it is known to be true. For instance, in *Armenia: A Journey through History*, Arra S. Avakian mentions the tradition of Bartholomew and Thaddeus visiting Armenia in a historical timeline of key events in Armenia, but begins the history of Christianity in Armenia at the turn of the third/fourth century when Armenia became the first nation to officially embrace Christianity. It is somewhat surprising to not see any details about the journey of Bartholomew (and Thaddeus) to Armenia. See Arra S. Avakian, *Armenia: A Journey Through History* (Fresno, CA: Electric, 1998).

the faith. The heathen priests become enraged at Bartholomew and have him beaten, beheaded, and then his body thrown into the sea. Although reminiscent of the features of Paul in the *Acts of Paul, The Martyrdom of Bartholomew* offers the earliest known description of the apostle Bartholomew:

He has black curly hair, white skin, large eyes, straight nose, his hair covers his ears, his beard long and grizzled, middle height: he wears a white *colobium* with a purple stripe, and a white cloak with four purple “gems” at the corners: for twenty-six years he has worn these and they never grow old: his shoes have lasted twenty-six years: he prays 100 times a day and 100 times a night: his voice is like a trumpet: angels wait on him: he is always cheerful and knows all languages.¹⁵

Eusebius offers support for the tradition that Bartholomew ministered in India. In the middle of the second century, there was a famous Stoic philosopher Pantaenus who became a Christian. Because of his zeal, he was sent East to India to preach the gospel. To his apparent surprise “he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language,⁶ which they had preserved till that time.¹⁶ Jerome confirms this tradition: “And there he [Pantaenus the philosopher] found that Bartholomew of the twelve apostles had preached the coming of the Lord Jesus according to the Gospel of Matthew which, written in Hebrew letters, he brought back with him on his return to Alexandria.”¹⁷

There is nothing surprising about Pantaenus finding Christians in India since tradition reports the apostle Thomas went there a century earlier. The question is whether or not Bartholomew *personally* visited India. There is no reason to see Bartholomew and Thomas as rivals. Considering the size of India, it is not unlikely or impossible that two apostles would minister in different parts, or they could have ministered together. If

¹⁵Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 518.

¹⁶Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.10.3, as cited in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 225.

¹⁷Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 36.

Bartholomew ministered with Philip in Hierapolis, there is no reason why he could not have gone to India with Thomas as well. On the other side, Kurikilamkatt suggests that Pantaenus may have misunderstood the local Christians, confusing “Mar Tholmai” with “Bartholomai.”¹⁸ If so, then the entire tradition was the result of a misunderstanding and there is no good reason to believe Bartholomew ever set foot ashore India. This is an interesting hypothesis, but it cannot be proven.

Given the tentative nature of the evidence, scholars disagree over the question of the journey to India by Bartholomew. Joe Luceford claims the entire tradition is questionable, at best.¹⁹ Neill finds the matter “perplexing.”²⁰ While the majority of scholarly opinion remains against it, a significant minority of scholars accept Bartholomew’s mission to India.²¹ Bernard Ruffin finds it likely Bartholomew travelled to India where he was eventually beaten, skinned alive, and finally beheaded.²² As noted in the section on Thomas, there is nothing implausible about an apostle travelling to India in the late first century. India may have been more open to direct communication with the West during the first two hundred years of the Common Era than any other period before the coming of the Portuguese in the seventeenth century. The pressing question, of course, is whether or not it is *probable*.

While there is some positive evidence for the visit of Bartholomew to India, the lack of a consistent Indian tradition (as there is for Thomas) is a challenge for the

¹⁸James Kurikilamkatt, *First Voyage of the Apostle Thomas to India* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005), 100.

¹⁹David Noel Freedman, A. C. Myers, and A. B. Beck, eds., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), s.v. “Bartholomew,” by Joe E. Luceford.

²⁰Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginning to AD 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 40.

²¹A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)* (Bangalore, India: Theological Publications in India, 1984), 65.

²²C. Bernard Ruffin, *The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997), 117.

tradition. Nevertheless, A. C. Perumalil suggests that the Bartholomew Christians continued as a separate community until the coming of the Portuguese when they became one with the Christians of Bombay.²³ Given the slight *positive* evidence for such an endeavor, Leslie Brown seems to provide the most promising scenario: “It may be that scholars have dismissed too easily the story of Pantaenus’s visit and his discovery of a Gospel brought by Bartholomew. This tradition, known to Eusebius, has never been considered very seriously because it was overwhelmed by the later universal reference to St. Thomas.”²⁴ The Indian tradition of Bartholomew may be lacking the requisite evidence to make it more probable than not, but there is at least some positive evidence that cannot simply be dismissed. Further research and analysis needs to be done by both Western and Eastern scholars on the potential Indian mission by Bartholomew.

Nevertheless, the consistent testimony is that Bartholomew engaged in missionary work beyond Judea. There is no record that Bartholomew stayed in Jerusalem and died there. Every account has him travelling well beyond Judea spreading the newfound faith. While there is disagreement over where he went, and how he died, there is no good reason to doubt that he left Jerusalem to spread the gospel of Christ. While the particular location(s) of the missions of Bartholomew may be difficult to discern, Bartholomew undoubtedly took the words of Jesus seriously, and helped spread his faith “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Evidence for the Martyrdom of Bartholomew

There are a variety of traditions regarding the fate of Bartholomew. While there are no known traditions that he rejected his faith or died peacefully, there is significant variety about *how*, *where*, and *when* he experienced martyrdom. In the *Acts of*

²³A. C. Perumalil, *The Apostles in India*, 2nd ed. (Dasarahalli, India: St. Paul Press Training School, 1971), 139-40.

²⁴L. W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 63.

Philip (c. fourth or fifth century), Bartholomew travels with Philip to Hierapolis. While both apostles are tortured, Bartholomew is set free, yet the crucifixion of Bartholomew in Lyconia is predicted just before the execution of Philip.²⁵

Martyrdom in Parthia

In the *Contendings of the Apostles*, Budge reports the tradition that Bartholomew met his fate in Naidas, Parthia. According to this tradition, Bartholomew travelled to Naidas, a great city upon the sea, to minister to people who had no knowledge of God. He preached to the people and God opened their hearts: “And the people of the cities and of all the countries round about them forsook the service of idols, and believed in God Almighty Who hath the desire to save the seed of Adam; and he turned their hearts to receive the faith which is in Him, and He might save their souls and grant forgiveness unto them.”²⁶ Bartholomew travelled around the country preaching, healing, and casting out demons. However, the wife of king Acarpus decided to stop sleeping with him, so the king accused him of sorcery and had him put to death: “Then he commanded the officers of his guard to fill a sack with sand, and to put Saint Bartholomew therein and to cast him into the sea; and they did as the king had commanded them.”²⁷

Martyrdom in Armenia

As noted previously, according to the tradition of the Armenia Church, Bartholomew was martyred in AD 68 at Albanus.²⁸ According to *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 6, “Bartholomew, again, preached to the Indians, to whom he also gave the

²⁵*The Acts of Philip* 15.36.

²⁶E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles: Being the Histories and the Lives and Martyrdoms and Deaths of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 88.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 92.

²⁸Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity*, 315-16.

Gospel according to Matthew, and was crucified with his head downward, and was buried in Allatum, a town of the great Armenia.”²⁹ One difficulty for establishing the reliability of the Bartholomew tradition is how late it appears in Armenian historiography. The first reference is in the *History of Armenia* by Movsēs Xorenac’I (Moses of Khorene) who was born between AD 410-415 and who probably wrote his *History* around AD 480. As a criticism of the tradition, Van Esbroeck notes that the oldest Armenian historians do not mention Bartholomew at all.³⁰ Yet it should be kept in mind that Movsēs Xorenac’I was the first Armenian historian to write a comprehensive history of Armenia, beginning with the most ancient events. Historians before Movsēs discussed particular events whereas Movsēs wrote an entire history of Christianity in Armenia (e.g. Agathangelos wrote his *History* on the life and times of Gregory the Illuminator).³¹ Xorenac’I is the first historian who would be expected to write about Bartholomew, and in fact he did.

It is also important to remember that Armenia had no native literature until the conversion of the nation to Christianity in the early fourth century.³² If Bartholomew in fact travelled to Armenia and experienced martyrdom, there would undoubtedly be no early written records since the tradition would have been transmitted orally. Like all ancient people groups, Armenian literature was originally preserved orally through epic tales, legend, ritual songs, and lyric poetry. Although the exact date for the origin of oral history for Armenia is unknown, recorded events trace back to the ninth century BC and

²⁹Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 6, as cited in *Fathers of the Third Century, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 5 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 255.

³⁰Michael van Esbroeck, “The Rise of Saint Bartholomew’s Cult in Armenia from the Seventh to the Thirteenth Centuries,” in *Medieval Armenian Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies 6 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983), 162. Esbroeck suggests there were both political and religious reasons for why the Armenians claimed Bartholomew as their apostolic saint.

³¹M. Chahin, *The Kingdom of Armenia* (New York: Dorset, 1987), 201.

³²Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York: Garland, 1997), s.v. “Armenian Christian Literature,” by Robin Darling Young.

possibly as early as the fifteenth century BC.³³ The authors of *The Heritage of Armenian Literature* describe how epic tales often contain a historical core:

Epic tales in particular seem to have a much wider appeal and more durability than other types of poetic expression. One reason for this may be that at the core of each tale is an actual historical event, often centered around a national hero or popular personality. Although garnished with mythical and supernatural beings, powers, and events shared by several cultures, the tale is nonetheless unique to a particular people and specifically reflects its collective consciousness. This is so because the moral and physical characteristics of the epic heroes and their modes of behavior represent the most cherished values and aspirations of the people who invented them.³⁴

The authors suggest that the origin of Christianity in Armenia is a “mixture of fact and fiction.”³⁵ They suggest there may be a historical core to the tradition that Thaddeus and Bartholomew both came as missionaries to Armenia, and that they both died as martyrs. The lack of early written records cannot count against this tradition since this is exactly what should be found regardless of their actual fates.

More significant for the Armenian tradition are the questions that have been raised as to the reliability of the *History* by Xorenac’I.³⁶ He is considered the “Father of Armenian History” and has been described as the Herodotus of Armenia. He undoubtedly preserved some material that is both sound and valuable, but scholars are divided on how much his scholarship can be trusted. Various extreme positions have been taken, from hypercritical rejection to naïve acceptance. Armenian scholar Aram Topchyan suggests a balanced approach:

Consequently, what one should do nowadays is, firstly, to get rid of extreme mistrust and prevailing negative stereotypes, and, secondly, to continue extracting from the work of the longsuffering “father of Armenian historiography” as much useful information as possible. Such an approach seems even more mandatory against the background of today’s balanced tendencies in the research of classical

³³Agop J. Hacikyan, *The Heritage of Armenian Literature*, ed. Gabriel Basmajian, Edward S. Franchuk, Nourhan Ouzounian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 1:24.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 23.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 75.

³⁶According to M. Chahin, most scholars criticize the work of Xorenac’I as inaccurate. Yet Chahin notes that many scholars for further research and study use the narratives of Xorenac’I. See Chahin, *The Kingdom of Armenia*, 201.

authors (tendencies applicable to ancient historiography as a whole), and given the absolute lack of any substitute for Xorenac’I’s book in Armenian literature, especially for the pre-fourth century history.³⁷

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the relevant passage concerning Bartholomew is straightforward and contains no flowery details.³⁸ No mention is made of the tradition Bartholomew was flayed to death, which first appeared around AD 600.³⁹ It simply reads, “There came then into Armenia the Apostle Bartholomew, who suffered martyrdom among us in the town of Arepan.” Immediately afterward, Xorenac’I mentions the tradition that the apostle Simon came to Persia and was martyred in Veriospore. Xorenac’I refrains from commenting on the reliability of the Simon tradition because he is not sure of the facts. He ensures his readers that he tells them only what is necessary and what he is certain about. Xorenac’I must have been quite confident, then, that Bartholomew was martyred in Armenia.

Armenian scholar Malachia Ormanian believes the apostolic origins of the Armenian Church can be considered “an incontrovertible fact in ecclesiastical history.”⁴⁰ While recognizing the facts are somewhat veiled historically, he provides three reasons for why the tradition can be trusted. First, there are no historical improbabilities in Bartholomew (and Thaddeus) ministering and dying in Armenia. Second, all Christian churches in Armenia agree on his apostolic journey, preaching, and martyrdom in

³⁷Aram Topchyan, *The Problem of Greek Sources of Movsēs Xorenac’I’s History of Armenia* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2006), 15.

³⁸ Movsēs Xorenac’I, *History of Armenia* Book IX: Martyrdom of Our Apostles.

³⁹Medieval martyrologies corroborate the Armenian tradition that Bartholomew was flayed. For instance, in the entry on Bartholomew, the *Breviarium Apostolorum* says, “He preached in Lycaonia. In the end he was skinned alive by the barbarians in Albanopolis, Great-Armenia, at the command of king Astartis, beheaded and buried on 24 August.” And according to the *De ortu et obitu patrum* by Isidore of Seville, “The apostle Bartholomew received a Syrian name, and in the division of the preaching he took upon him the region of Lycaonia. And he translated the gospel according to Matthew in the language of the Indians. Finally he was skinned alive by the barbarians in the city Albanopolis in Great-Armenia and buried” (Els Rose, *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c. 500-1251)* [Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009], 86-89).

⁴⁰Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia*, 4.

Armenia. Third, the name *Albanus*, which is the traditional site of his martyrdom, can be identified as Albacus. Ormanian writes,

The apostolic origin, which is essential to every Christian Church, in order to place her in union with her Divine Founder, is claimed to be direct when that origin is traced back to the individual work of one of the apostles; it is indirect when it is derived from a Church which herself has a primitively apostolic basis. The Armenian Church can rightly lay claim to such a direct apostolic origin. . . . And if tradition and historic sources, which sanction this view, should give occasion for criticism, these have no greater weight than the difficulties created with regard to the origin of other apostolic Churches, which are universally admitted as such.⁴¹

Martyrdom in India

The Martyrdom of Bartholomew reports yet another tradition of the fate of Bartholomew. This text is preserved in Greek, Latin, and Armenian, and likely originated in the fifth or sixth century.⁴² This account preserves the tradition that Bartholomew travelled to India and was beaten with clubs, beheaded by heathen priests who complained to the king about him, and then his body was thrown into the sea (later manuscripts from the ninth and twelfth centuries incorporate the Armenian tradition that he was flayed to death⁴³). From the fifth century onward, a variety of traditions report that Bartholomew met his fate in India.⁴⁴ The *Hieronymian Martyrology* (c. 5th cent.) also reports that Bartholomew was beheaded in India: “On the 9th Kalends of September the natal day of St. Bartholomew the Apostle who was beheaded for Christ in Citerior India, by order of King Astriagis.” Citerior most likely refers to the Western coast of India.⁴⁵ Perumalil believes that this is most likely Bombay (modern day Mumbai), a port town in

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 518

⁴³Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 84.

⁴⁴The reports that Bartholomew met his fate in India include Gregory of Tours (sixth century), St. Bede the Venerable (eighth century), Usuard of Sagermanum (ninth century), Odo Bishop of Vienne (ninth century), The Greek Menology of Constantinople (tenth century), a Syrian tradition written by Amr (fourteenth century). See Perumalil, *The Apostles in India*, 133-35.

⁴⁵Although the *Hieronymian Martyrology* does not specify where Bartholomew ministered, it says it was somewhere in India. There is a tenth century Constantinopolitan tradition that places Bartholomew in India Felix, which is likely Bombay. Ibid., 114.

western central India. The claim that the body of Bartholomew was thrown into the sea matches this identification. According to Perumalil, “If the writer was inventing a mere fable, a coincidence of this kind would not have been found.”⁴⁶ The same location is mentioned by Pseudo-Sophronius, a seventh century writer: “The Apostle Bartholomew preached the Gospel of Christ to the Indians who are called Happy” (i.e. Indians of the western coast).⁴⁷ A flourishing Christian community was found there in the sixth century. Perumalil concludes, “Hence in all probability the Apostle Bartholomew preached on the Kalyana [western] Coast of India, made converts and established a church that was still extant in the sixth century.”⁴⁸

The Historical Question

As with the case of other apocryphal accounts, the question is whether *The Martyrdom of Bartholomew* preserves historical material. Counting against the tradition is that it appears much later than the primary Acts. Thus, Schnabel concludes, “The late date of the tradition and the diverse details provided speak against the reliability of the tradition.”⁴⁹ Other scholars are much more sanguine about the possibility that it contains a historical nucleus. Thomas Schmidt notes,

The work is a fifth-century composition that, like other apocryphal works already described, may combine fabrication with a core of historical material. Certainly the pattern—healing, successful preaching (often involving an influential individual), then local reprisals—is familiar from the early chapters of Acts, and it formed a model for the spread of Christianity for almost a thousand years.⁵⁰

The Martyrdom of Bartholomew contains names of two kings and three gods.

Is there any reason to believe these names are historical? Perumalil notes that names

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., 111.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1:895.

⁵⁰Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 150.

often undergo change over time, especially when foreigners pronounce Indian names. When names are long and difficult to pronounce, they are often beyond recognition.⁵¹ Variant readings are found in the Latin text and some are hardly recognizable. As for the gods, Perumalil suggests that Astaruth may be the Indian god Astarudra, Baldad may be Baladat (an incarnation of Vishnu) or Baladeva (older brother of Krishna), and Becher may be the Hellenized form of Kanarese Bachiran.⁵² As for the two kings, Perumalil notes that historical sources for this time are very meager. Yet the numismatic and inscriptional data suggest that when the *Martyrdom of Bartholomew* speaks of king Polymius it refers to the Indian name Pulumayi, and that king Astreges may be identified as either Attrakan (of Pakrit) or Aristakarman (of the Puranas).⁵³

These points are enough to convince most scholars of the possibility that Bartholomew travelled to and met his fate in India. After analyzing the textual, archaeological, and numismatic evidence, Perumalil pronounced the tradition effectively true: “Hence in the light of the present stage of research we are led to conclude that St. Bartholomew the Apostle died about 62 A.D. by order of king Aristakarman of the Satavahana dynasty of Paithan in what is now the Bombay region.”⁵⁴

A few important points stand out from analyzing traditions of the fate of Bartholomew. First, there is no record that he either recanted his faith or died peacefully. Considering that Bartholomew appears in a decent number of apocryphal and gnostic accounts, this is not an insignificant point. Second, the various accounts unilaterally agree that he died as a martyr. R. A. Lipsius notes the breadth of variation in the accounts of the death of Bartholomew: “The gnostic legend of Bartholomew has him *crucified*, the Coptic narrative has him *put in a sack* full of sand then sunk in the sea, the local

⁵¹Perumalil, *The Apostles of India*, 128.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 118.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 126-29.

⁵⁴Perumalil, *The Apostles in India*, 136.

Armenian saga has him *beaten with clubs*, a fourth tradition (probably originating in Persia) has him *flayed*, and finally a fifth tradition has him *beheaded*.⁵⁵ While there is substantial disagreement about how and where he met his fate, there is no disagreement he was executed for reasons tied to his faith. William Barclay concludes, “The NT tells us nothing about Bartholomew except his name, but later stories—and they are at least true in spirit—tell us of a man who intimately knew his Lord, who lived and preached and died for the faith.”⁵⁶

Third, it is not necessarily the case that these accounts are true or false in their entirety. It may be that some traditions are completely false. It may also be the case that some traditions retain a historical kernel of his travels but incorporate fictional details of his martyrdom. And some may contain an accurate rendering of both his travels *and* martyrdom. At this point the data is inconclusive. But it is important not to sweep them all away as fictional simply because some of the accounts contain irreconcilable details.

Fourth, there is nothing implausible about the various means mentioned for his manner of death. Victims were regularly drowned, beaten, crucified, and even flayed to death.⁵⁷ Bartholomew could have been killed in any of these ways. In particular, death by flaying was one of the most painful and horrific methods of execution ever invented. Executioners would aim to remove the entire skin, peel by peel, while the victim was still alive. Victims who did not die from the flaying were often burned, impaled, or crucified. Flaying can be traced back long before the time of Christ, and was practiced in Turkey, China, and in many other eastern countries.⁵⁸ While the record of Bartholomew’s death by flaying is late, there is precedent for this kind of death during that time and no reason

⁵⁵As translated and quoted in Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 244.

⁵⁶Barclay, *The Master’s Men*, 107.

⁵⁷Geoffrey Abbot, *Execution* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2005).

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 113.

to doubts its plausibility. Although flaying was typically a form of punishment, there are other known reasons why it was administered to some. Sarah Kay provides two other historical examples:

The flaying of the corrupt judge by the Persian king Cambyses II...seems rather to punish the judge's rapacity. The judge who extorts the substance of others can be said to flay and devour those entitled to his trust (cf. Micah 3:1-3); just is served when he is repaid in kind. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* flaying is the last resort of envious competition (as when Apollo flays Marsyas, or Nessus causes Hercules to rip off his own skin, or Medea sends her rival a poisoned shirt). The association of flaying with covetousness and envy is confirmed in Guillaume de Deguileville's depictions of these sins in his *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Similar to other less prominent apostles, the evidence for the martyrdom of Bartholomew is mixed. There is disagreement about when, where, and how he died, but there is unanimity that Bartholomew met his fate by martyrdom. Yet it must be conceded that the first accounts are late. With these considerations in mind, the following probabilities seem most probable in regard to the missionary work and fate of Bartholomew:

1. Bartholomew engaged in missionary work outside Jerusalem—*Very probably true* (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 6; various traditions from Hierapolis, Lyconia, Egypt, Armenia, and India)
2. Bartholomew experienced martyrdom—*More possible than not* (*History of Armenia* by Movsēs Xorenac'i; *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 6; *Martyrdom of Bartholomew*; *Hieronymian Martyrology*; *Contendings of the Apostles*)

⁵⁹Sarah Kay, "Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36 (2006): 40. Kay suggests that Bartholomew was flayed, in medieval depictions, as a means of mutual destruction. Bartholomew had shattered the pagan idols and destroyed the wider culture, so king Astiages aims to deliver a fitting punishment that equally "destroys" Bartholomew.

CHAPTER 15

MARTYRDOM OF MATTHEW

Matthew is probably best known as the author of the first Gospel. Given how central this Gospel has been historically and theologically, it may come as a surprise to many that Matthew is among the apostles of Jesus that scholars know the least about. One author refers to him as the “phantom apostle” since so little is known about his life, ministry, and fate.¹ In contrast, Edgar J. Goodspeed claims that more is known more about Matthew than any of the other apostles, except possibly Peter.² While this is likely an overstatement, there is *some* information about the life and travels of Matthew that enable the critical scholar to make a reasonable inference about the manner of his fate.

Matthew is one of the only apostles for which there is an account of his call from Jesus: “As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him” (Matt 9:9). While his response to the call may seem sudden, Matthew was likely familiar with Jesus and had possibly even heard him teach on various occasions. His willingness to follow Jesus also demonstrated a great deal of faith. While fisherman could quite easily go back to their fishing business, his high-paying job would easily be filled. After all, who would hire a former tax collector?³

¹C. Bernard Ruffin, *The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997), 135.

²Edgar J. Goodspeed, *Matthew: Apostle and Evangelist* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1959), 10.

³Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 220.

When Matthew received the call to follow Jesus he was living and working in Capernaum, the hometown of Peter, James, and John. Mark refers to him as “Levi the son of Alphaeus,” which is probably another name for Matthew (Mark 2:14).⁴ If this identification is correct, Matthew was likely a Levite and would have been familiar with Jewish law and customs. He would also have been the brother of James son of Alphaeus, another member of the Twelve. Regardless, Matthew was certainly a Jew. He was undoubtedly familiar with Jewish traditions and Scripture. Hendriksen observes, “Hence, led by the Spirit, he was the kind of a man who would be able to interpret Old Testament passages in such a manner that they would apply to new situations. The Gospel according to Matthew tallies with this ability on the part of Matthew.”⁵

His name is from the Aramaic *mattai*, which is a shortened form of the Hebrew *mattanyâ* that means “gift of Yahweh.”⁶ Twice Matthew appears seventh in the list of apostles (Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15) and twice he appears eighth (Matt 10:3; Acts 1:13). The Bible and early church history offer no physical description for Matthew. But Clement of Alexandria suggests he had a unique diet: “Accordingly, the apostle Matthew partook of seeds, and nuts, and vegetables, without flesh.”⁷

As a tax collector, Matthew was in the service of Herod Antipas and thus knew at least Greek and Aramaic (he would have spoken Aramaic and kept records in Greek). He would be required to keep written records of the money he collected, and possibly

⁴As seen, it was common for Jews to have multiple names in the first century. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 155.

⁵William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, Baker New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 96.

⁶Catholic University of America Staff, ed., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 9 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2003), s.v. “Matthew, Apostle, St.,” by J. A. Lefrançois.

⁷Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 2.1, as cited in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 241.

even knew shorthand.⁸ Thus, Matthew must have had some formal education and training. Since he was employed through an unpopular government, which was sanctioned by Rome, he would have been profoundly resented and hated by patriotic Jews and the general populace.⁹ Tax collectors were regularly coupled with “sinners” (Mark 2:15; Luke 15:1). Jesus specifically contrasted the sinfulness of a tax collector with the self-righteousness of the Pharisees (Luke 18:9-14). When some tax collectors came to John for baptism, he instructed them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do” (Luke 3:13b), which suggests that some tax collectors did just that.

R. T. France provides key insights as to the significance of Jesus choosing Matthew:

For Jesus to call such a man to follow him was a daring breach of etiquette, a calculated snub to conventional ideas of respectability, which ordinary people no less than Pharisees might be expected to balk at. Fishermen may not have been high in the social scale, but at least they were not automatically morally and religiously suspect; Matthew was. Almost as remarkable as Jesus’ decision to call him is Matthew’s confident response; he does not seem to have felt uncomfortable at being included in a preacher’s entourage, though we are not told what the other disciples thought.¹⁰

Immediately after his call to discipleship, Matthew had Jesus over for dinner along with many other tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:15). But when the Pharisees saw that he was reclining with such unsavory company, they protested to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this he replied, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Since a feast of this sort would likely

⁸Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 95.

⁹Keener suggests three reasons why Jewish people in ancient Palestine disliked tax collectors. First, the local Jewish aristocracy was in charge of collecting the taxes. Second, there is good reason to believe tax gatherers overcharged people. In fact, there are ancient accounts of abuse, murder, and bribery being tied to tax collection. Third, taxes were already exorbitant. See Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 292-93.

¹⁰R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 351-52.

minimally require a decent sized home, Matthew may have been a man of considerable financial means.¹¹

While there is a significant minority of scholars who accept Matthean authorship for the first Gospel, the majority rejects it. One principal reason some scholars believe the Gospel was only secondarily attributed to Matthew is that the author seems to so closely follow Markan material. Ulrich Luz concludes, “If the author had been an apostle, as an eyewitness he would not have used the book of a non-eyewitness as his main source.”¹² Yet Michael Wilkins observes, “But if Matthew did have access to Mark’s Gospel, he would have known that Peter’s apostolic reminiscences lay behind Mark’s text, ensuring that Mark’s Gospel was reliable and a ready source for reinforcing his own reminiscences about the life and works of Jesus Christ.”¹³

Wilkins notes three other reasons supporting Matthean authorship of the first Gospel.¹⁴ First, the Gospel writers are not the kind of characters that would be invented by the church. This is especially true for Matthew, a tax collector. Later writers of gnostic and apocryphal accounts assign the names of more prominent followers of Jesus (such as Peter, Thomas, Andrew, or Mary). Second, patristic evidence consistently cites Matthew as the author.¹⁵ No other person was ever proposed as the author. Third, there should be no surprise the four Gospels (including Matthew) are technically anonymous. The evangelists recorded stories for communities of which they belonged, not too far away groups (such as the epistles of Paul, Peter and John were written to). Since the goal was

¹¹Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 121-22.

¹²Luz Ulrich, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary on Matthew 1-7*, ed. H. Koester, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 59.

¹³Michael Wilkins, “Apologetics Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew,” in *The Holman Apologetics Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Jeremy R. Howard (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 10.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 7-11.

¹⁵The patristic evidence that Matthew is the author of his Gospel includes Papias, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; Origen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.6; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 3.1.

to tell the story of Jesus, they may have felt it inappropriate to attach their names to their respective Gospels. Leon Morris concludes,

There remains the fact that in ancient tradition this book is universally ascribed to Matthew. To name anyone else as the author is to affirm that the name of its true author was forgotten within a comparatively short time (about 50 years?) and another name substituted, especially since Matthew was not, as far as our information goes, especially prominent either among the Twelve or in the early church. Accordingly, there seems to be no reason for assigning to him such an important writing unless in fact he wrote it.¹⁶

There is also internal evidence for Matthean authorship.¹⁷ First, the author writes in a manner that shows comfort and ease in handling numbers and figures, which is consistent with a tax-collecting author.¹⁸ Second, the sending of the Twelve has a prominent place in which Matthew distinguishes it from the other Gospels. This makes sense if the writer is one of the apostles.¹⁹ Third, the position in the Gospel of the call of Matthew suggests to the reader that he will be the recorder of the sayings of Jesus. Goodspeed observes, “If Jesus was going to train the four fishermen to fish for men, he was clearly going to give Matthew sayings and teachings to record. That was so obvious to the ancient writer that he did not think it necessary to say it!”²⁰

Even though a solid case can be mounted that Matthew was the author of the Gospel bearing his name, conservative scholars remain tentative of the conclusions. For

¹⁶Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 13.

¹⁷Goodspeed, *Matthew*.

¹⁸Goodspeed notes certain parables that relate to money, which are only mentioned (or fully developed) in Matt. These include the parable of the talents in Matt 25, the story of the workers in the vineyard in 20:1-16, and the unmerciful servant in 18:21-35. Furthermore, the word “talent” as a reference to money appears fourteen times in the Gospel of Matthew but not anywhere else in the entire New Testament. Goodspeed also notes the “quasi mathematical feature of the genealogy” in the preface of Matthew. *Ibid.*, 21-22, 59-60, 133.

¹⁹Goodspeed writes, “The sending out of the Twelve has no such place or emphasis in Mark or Luke as in Matthew. Here it is made the occasion of one of the six great discourses that distinguish the Gospel of Matthew. Certainly its inclusion as a complete discourse, comparable in length and vigor with most of the other major discourses in Matthew, must strike the readers as highly appropriate, if the writer of the Gospel is indeed one of the twelve apostles to whom the discourse is addressed.” *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 100.

instance, while Craig Blomberg believes Matthew is the most plausible candidate for authorship, he concedes there is no conclusive proof for this claim.²¹ Although he acknowledges that one cannot be entirely certain of the author of the Gospel of Matthew, D. A. Carson writes, “But there are solid reasons in support of the early church’s unanimous ascription of this book to the apostle.”²²

Missions of Matthew

Eusebius reports that Matthew first preached to the Hebrews and then he planned to go to other places as well.²³ It is not clear whether this was to Jews in Judea, those in the diaspora, or to both. Jerome confirms that Matthew was in Judea.²⁴ The church historian Socrates (born c. AD 379) reports that Matthew received the lot to go to Ethiopia.²⁵ *Hippolytus on the Twelve* places his fate in Hieres, Parthia. The *Acts of Andrew* has Matthew in Mermidona. Other traditions place him in Persia and Macedonia.²⁶ It is exceedingly difficult to know where legend begins and history ends with the itinerary of Matthew since there is such a variety of traditions and none fall within the window of living memory. There is little reason to doubt that Matthew spent at least some time ministering in Palestine, as the earliest traditions report, and then went abroad proclaiming the gospel. But where else did he go? Thomas Schmidt suggests the traditions describing him in Ethiopia and Egypt may be the most reliable:

The Nile was a convenient highway, there were land and sea routes into Arabia, and there were Jewish settlements throughout the region. Apostles could have traveled

²¹Blomberg, *Matthew*, 44.

²²D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. J. D. Douglas, Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 19.

²³Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.6.

²⁴Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 3.1.

²⁵Socrates, *The Ecclesiastical History* 1.19.

²⁶W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T & T Clark, 1988), 146 n. 125.

south beyond the borders of the empire just as they (more certainly) traveled to other compass points. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27-39) supports at least an awareness of the region and, perhaps, a connection to it through this early convert. Together, these factors support at least the possibility of an apostolic journey far up the Nile. Since Matthew is the only one of the Twelve with any traditional connection to the area; and since he is not strongly connected anywhere else, this account designates him the southernmost apostolic missionary.²⁷

This rendition is certainly plausible, although it is difficult to determine its level of probability. The existence of seemingly distinct traditions of his sojourn to Ethiopia does count in its favor. Ruffin agrees, noting the lack of any reference of Matthew by Paul, which may suggest Matthew's sphere of activity was not in the Mediterranean.²⁸

Considering the sparse and discordant accounts of the missionary travels of Matthew, Barclay provides an accurate assessment of the current evidence: "When we try to trace Matthew outside the Gospels in legend and in tradition, we are in difficulties. The stories differ; the legends are so fantastic that they can have no solid basis in fact; and, to complicate matters, legend and tradition confuse Matthew and Matthias."²⁹

It is undoubtedly difficult to ascertain which missionary traditions are history and which are legend. Nevertheless, the consistent testimony of the patristic evidence is that Matthew ministered in Judea for a period of time and then went forth proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no good reason to doubt that Matthew took seriously the last words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel by his name: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'" (Matt 28:18-19). And as with the other apostles, Matthew was an eyewitness of the risen Jesus (Matt 28:16-17; Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-23, 26-29; Acts 1:3) and was willing to suffer for his faith (Acts 5:17-32).

²⁷Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 174.

²⁸There may be some validity to the claim that Matthew's sphere of activity was not in the Mediterranean, although it must be recognized as speculation and an argument from silence. See Ruffin, *The Twelve*, 143.

²⁹William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (London: SCM, 1960), 63.

Evidence for the Martyrdom of Matthew

As with many of the other apostles, scholars differ on their assessment of the reliability of the martyrdom accounts of Matthew. Thomas Schmidt believes the traditions appear too late to be reliable and thus believes it is highly unlikely Matthew was a martyr.³⁰ On the other hand, Brownrigg claims there may be a vein of truth that Matthew died for his faith in a far away country.³¹ As usual, the evidence will be examined to see where the truth really lies.

Different traditions surround the fate of Matthew. According to *Hippolytus on the Twelve*, Matthew published his Hebrew Gospel in Jerusalem then travelled to Parthia where he “fell asleep.” Given that *Hippolytus* cites the crucifixion of Peter, beheading of Paul, stoning of James, and the specific methods of execution for many of the other apostles, it seems likely he believed that Matthew died naturally. This is certainly the most straightforward way to take the passage. The entry in Isidore of Seville’s *De ortu et obitu patrum* concurs that Matthew faced a natural death: “He preached the gospel first in Judea, and after that in Macedonia. He has his resting place in the mountains of the land of the Parthians.”³²

Yet there are numerous traditions that Matthew died as a martyr. According to the fifth century *Hieronymian Martyrology*, Matthew was martyred in the town of Tarrum, Persia.³³ Other medieval apostolic lists name Matthew as a martyr as well. For instance, the entry for Matthew in the *Breviarium Apostolorum* (c. AD 600) says, “He first preached the gospel in Judea, and after that in Macedonia, and he suffered martyrdom in Persia.”³⁴

³⁰Schmidt, *The Apostles After Acts*, 176.

³¹Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 159.

³²Els Rose, *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c. 500-1251)* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 175.

³³David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1992), s.v. “Matthew, Martyrdom of,” by Kenneth G. C. Newport.

³⁴Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 174.

Another account is found in the *Martyrdom of Matthew*, which was probably based on the apocryphal Acts of Andrew and Matthias.³⁵ The story begins with Jesus appearing to the apostles in the form of a child. Matthew cannot recognize him and simply assumes he was one of the children King Herod murdered in Bethlehem. Interestingly, Matthew is the only Gospel that records this story (Matt 2:16-18). After their commission, Matthew goes to Myrna (the city of man-eaters) to preach. There is no record of a city called “Myrna,” but there was a city called, “Myra” not far from Ephesus.³⁶ Many people were converted, including many in the royal family, but the king Phulbanus became upset when Matthew would not stop, so he ordered him burned to death. He sent soldiers who captured Matthew and aimed to torture him to death with oil, brimstone, asphalt, and pitch. Matthew was temporarily spared from the flames, which destroyed twelve idols, killed many soldiers, and turned into a dragon that chased the king until he returned to Matthew pleading for help. Matthew eventually “gave up the ghost” by his own volition and then returned to life before ascending to heaven with two angels.

Another tradition reports the martyrdom of Matthew in Parthia.³⁷ According to this tradition, Matthew travels to the city of Apayanno where he preaches and heals many. He meets a man who was thrown in jail when the ship he was guiding crashed and he lost all the possessions of the owner. Feeling compassion, Matthew let him out of prison for two days and guided him to find a bag of gold that he could use to repay his debt. But after he brought the money to the ship owner, he was accused of stealing the money and Matthew was summoned to give an account before the king. The king was

³⁵J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 520.

³⁶W. Milton Timmons, *Everything About the Bible That You Never Had Time to Look Up* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2002), 487.

³⁷E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles: Being the Histories and the Lives and Martyrdoms and Deaths of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 109-14.

profoundly angry with Matthew and had his guards behead him and leave his body upon the ground so the birds could eat it.

Another tradition from Book VII of the Latin Pseudo-Abdias places Matthew in Naddaver, a city in Ethiopia, during the reign of King Aeglippus.³⁸ Matthew counteracted two magicians, performed many miracles, preached the gospel, and built a massive church for the converts. The new king Hirtacus desired Matthew's help to persuade Ephigenia to marry him, but Matthew objected and proclaimed such an act sacrilege. Enraged, Hyrtacus sent a soldier to pierce Matthew in the back while he prayed. Yet Matthew came back from the grave, Hyrtacus committed suicide, and all Ethiopia was filled with churches. The medieval martyrology of Hrabanus (ninth century) offers a similar script: "When he had preached there [in Ethiopia] the word of God and converted many to the faith in Christ, at last a spy was sent by King Hirtacus, who killed him with a sword, thus making him a martyr of Christ."³⁹

The accounts of the journey and fate of Matthew vary so significantly that it may be tempting to dismiss them all as legendary. In one tradition Matthew dies peacefully, but in other traditions he is burned, beheaded, or stabbed to death. Yet there may in fact be a gem of truth in one (or some) of the traditions. Currently, while it may not be possible to determine with any confidence which of those traditions contain a historical core, it would be pretentious to dismiss them all as fabrications. Kraeling suggests a reason for why he believes the martyrdom accounts were invented: "After so many Christians had died for their faith it became incredible that any disciple of Jesus except John should have escaped such an end, and so legend took care of the desideratum."⁴⁰ This may be true, but he should provide positive evidence to establish this as the most *reasonable* conclusion.

³⁸Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 530-31.

³⁹Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 176.

⁴⁰Emil G. Kraeling, *The Disciples* (Skokie, IL: Rand McNally, 1966), 165.

Analysis of the traditions surrounding the fate of Matthew reveals a few important insights. First, the earliest patristic sources mention nothing of his martyrdom. Neither Eusebius nor Jerome make any mention of the fate of Matthew, although they both mention his ministry in Palestine. This is admittedly an argument from silence, but it does raise the question of whether or not the tradition of his martyrdom existed or was known at this time. Thus, whether or not they contain a historical core, it must be acknowledged that the various martyrdom traditions for Matthew are late. There are no known traditions of the death of Matthew until roughly two centuries after the close of the period of living memory.

Second, there is widespread difference over *how* he died. According to different traditions, he died by burning, beheading with a sword, and stabbing with a spear. If there were agreement that Matthew died by execution but disagreement about the method, then the issue of agreement might trump the particulars of how he died and reveal a historical core, but given the disagreement over whether or not he died peacefully or as a martyr, the disagreements over his method of execution are much more glaring.

Third, there are contradictory traditions that he died as a martyr as well as traditions that he died naturally. Unlike traditions of the fate of Peter or Paul, which unanimously indicate martyrdom in Rome, considerable disagreement exists as to whether or not Matthew died as a martyr. For instance, *Hippolytus on the Twelve* claims that Matthew “fell asleep” in Parthia, and the entry on Matthew in *De ortu et obitu patrum* seems to agree.

Another passage that is often cited in favor of a natural death for Matthew is found in the writings of Clement of Alexandria. In *The Stromata* 4.9, Heracleon says,

That there is a confession by faith and conduct, and one with the voice. The confession that is made with the voice, and before the authorities, is what the most reckon the only confession. Not soundly: and hypocrites also can confess with this confession. But neither will this utterance be found to be spoken universally; for all

the saved have confessed with the confession made by the voice, and departed. Of whom are Matthew, Philip, Thomas, Levi, and many others.⁴¹

Even though it is a minority position, many scholars take this passage as indication these apostles did *not* die as martyrs but experienced natural deaths.⁴²

The interpretation, however, is less certain than many take it to be. First, it is not clear that the term “departed” requires a natural death. It is undoubtedly a euphemism for death in this passage, and the point is that all believers (“the saved”) have confessed and then died. However, among the departed could also be those who testified before rulers and then were killed for their faith subsequently, but not before a magistrate. Second, Clement separates Levi and Matthew, whom the Gospels seem to take as the same person, which raises the question of whether Clement is passing on a reliable tradition. Third, it may be that Clement cites Heracleon but does not necessarily endorse his conclusion. Clement often jots down statements from various sources indiscriminately.⁴³

Fourth, if this passage were in fact indicating martyrdom, it may be an outlier that does not necessarily undermine the rest of the tradition. In the case of Thomas, there is an equally early and widespread tradition that he went to India and died as a martyr. It would be difficult to conclude that one vague passage by Clement (Heracleon) overturns this entire tradition. If Clement is wrong about Thomas, it raises questions regarding his conclusions of Matthew and Philip as well. Fifth, why is John not mentioned? If Clement’s goal was to mention apostles who testify and they stay faithful to the gospel throughout their lives without dying as martyrs, then John would have been the perfect candidate. Finally, there is no straightforward way to take this passage that does not raise further unanswered questions. Elaine Pagels asks, “Is he [Clement] saying that

⁴¹Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* 4:9, as cited in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus and Clement of Alexandria, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 422.

⁴²Newport, s.v. “Matthew, Martyrdom of.”

⁴³A. E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London: Ballantyne, 1905), 121.

martyrdom is fine for ordinary Christians, but not necessary for gnostics? Is he offering a rationale for gnostics to avoid martyrdom? If that is what he means, he avoids stating it directly: his comments remain ambiguous.”⁴⁴

Sixth, in the same document where Pseudo-Hippolytus claims that Clement died naturally, he mentions that Philip died as a martyr.⁴⁵ So, either Pseudo-hippolytus reports an entirely different tradition than Clement of Alexandria, or the passage in Clement is not meant to indicate they died naturally. While some see this passage in Clement of Alexandria as evidence *against* martyrdom for Matthew, Philip, and Thomas, and others see it as evidence *for* their martyrdom. The ambiguity of the passage leads me to consider it inconclusive.

Still, even if this interpretation is mistaken, and Clement was reporting that Matthew died a natural death, Heracleon does indicate that the three apostles confessed Christ before authorities and lived faithfully throughout their entire lives.⁴⁶ Heracleon confirms they stayed faithful to the end and never recanted or waived in their faith. The sincerity of their belief in the risen Jesus is substantiated either way. With this analysis in mind, the following probabilities seem most reasonable in regard to the missionary work and fate of Matthew:

1. Matthew engaged in missionary work outside Jerusalem—*Very probably true* (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Eusebius *Eccl. Hist.* 3.24; Jerome *On Illustrious Men* 3.1; Socrates *The Ecclesiastical History* 1.19; *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 7; *The Acts of Andrew*; other later traditions).
2. Matthew experienced martyrdom—*possible* (*Hieronymian Martyrology*; *Breviarium Apostolorum*; *Martyrdom of Matthew*; (Latin) *Pseudo-Abdias*; *Contendings of the Apostles*; earliest accounts in the fifth century; disagreement over martyrdom and natural death).

⁴⁴Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979) 97.

⁴⁵Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 5.

⁴⁶Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 97.

CHAPTER 16

THE MARTYRDOM OF JAMES, SON OF ALPHAEUS

James the son of Alphaeus is one of the Twelve for which the least is known. H. S. Vigeveno calls him “the unknown apostle.”¹ He appears ninth in all four apostolic lists (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), which may indicate that he was a leader of the third group of apostles.² Even so, he was undoubtedly one of the minor apostles. There is no record of his calling to follow Jesus. Outside of the apostolic lists, James son of Alphaeus appears nowhere else in the New Testament.

There are five individuals named “James” in the New Testament.³ This contributes to some of the confusion surrounding the identity of James the son of Alphaeus. Among the Twelve, two members have the name “James.” The first was James the son of Zebedee, who was known as “James the Great.” And the second is James the son of Alphaeus, often referred to as “James the Less.” Some have suggested that this is an indication he was smaller in stature. Others have suggested it means that he was not as close to Jesus as the son of Zebedee and was less significant among the Twelve. This identification, however, rests upon the assumption that James the son of Alphaeus is the same individual as the son of Mary (Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40), which cannot be proven.

The father of Matthew (Levi) was also called Alphaeus (Mark 2:14). This has led some scholars to consider them brothers.⁴ Yet according to the *Anchor Bible*, “But

¹H. S. Vigeveno, *Thirteen Men Who Changed the World* (Glendale, CA: G/L, 1967), 59.

²Beltran Villegas, “Peter, Philip, and James of Alphaeus,” *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 292-94.

³The five individuals named James include James the brother of Jesus, James the younger (Mark 15:40; Matt 27:56; Luke 24:10), James the father of Judas (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13), James the son of Zebedee, and James the son of Alphaeus.

⁴For instance, McBirnie draws much of his information about James from his knowledge about

since the evangelists seem eager to point out pairs of brothers among the Twelve (as in Peter and Andrew, James and John) but never refer to Matthew and James as brothers, this conclusion seems very improbable.”⁵

Even though there are no individual biblical stories of James son of Alphaeus, he personally travelled with Jesus for an extended period of time as one of his closest disciples. Thus, he had an inside track to the life, character, and ministry of Jesus. He heard Jesus teach on multiple occasions, witnessed his miracles, and saw his ascension. He witnessed Jesus alive after he had been killed (1 Cor 15:5; Matt 28:16; Luke 24:36; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:3), and like the rest of the apostles, James the son of Alphaeus was willing to suffer for his belief in the resurrection (Acts 5:17-29).

The extra-biblical information on James the son of Alphaeus is also minimal. From the second century onward, James is simply mentioned in various lists of the Twelve including the *Diatessaron* (8.11), the *Acts of Thomas* (1.1), and the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (Homily XXXII). The Book of Common Prayer (sixteenth century) lists James the son of Alphaeus as the author of the canonical book of James, but most scholars reject this designation. There no known Acts of James, and the only known *Passion* is not yet published.⁶

The Mission and Martyrdom of James

Beyond the general missionary call for the Twelve, no specific early accounts record the travels of James. There is a tradition that James the son of Alphaeus

Matthew, which he presumes to be his brother. Yet if they are not brothers, then this information is misleading. William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1973)

⁵David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: 1992), s.v. “James,” by Donald A. Hagner.

⁶François Bovon, “Byzantine Witness for the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, ed. François Bovon, Ann Graham Brock, and Christopher R. Matthews (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 91.

established Christianity in Spain.⁷ In the ninth century, the Bishop of Iria claimed a star guided him to the burial spot of James. Ever since, James has been recognized as a patron saint of Spain. Given how late these traditions are about James, Schmidt speculates, “The fact that both apostles [Matthias and James son of Alphaeus] disappear from view so quickly and do not reappear until centuries later in unreliable or contradictory traditions means that they probably died early, either in Jerusalem or nearby.”⁸ Schmidt suggests that James may have stayed in Jerusalem and was stoned to death by Jewish religious leaders who had accused him of blasphemy.

Death by Stoning

Schmidt suggests there is some historical precedent for the stoning to death of James in Jerusalem. *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 9 says, “And James the son of Alphæus, when preaching in Jerusalem, was stoned to death by the Jews, and was buried there beside the temple.”⁹ E. A. Wallis Budge reports a similar fate for James, although he does not mention the burial by the temple:

These are the words which the Apostle spake in the midst of the multitudes who were gathered together, and he was afraid of no man. And he was testifying concerning the birth of the only Son of God, and His Death, and His Resurrection, and His Ascension to His Father in heaven, and he taught all the people who were together there the faith [which] is in Christ. And it came to pass that, when the multitudes heard the words of the Apostle, they became exceedingly angry with the anger which is of Satan . . . and all the people were seeking after his blood . . . and when the king [Claudius] heard these things concerning the blessed Apostle he commanded them to stone him with stones until he died, and the Jews (may God curse them!) stoned him with stones, even as the king had commanded them.¹⁰

⁷Myrtle Strode-Jackson, *Lives and Legends of Apostles and Evangelists* (London: Morrison & Gibb, 1928), 149.

⁸Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 115.

⁹Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 9, as cited in *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 5 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1886), 255.

¹⁰E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles: Being the Histories and the Lives and Martyrdoms and Deaths of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 222.

Both stories agree that James was stoned to death in Jerusalem at the instigation of the religious leaders. Although this was a common means of death for blasphemy (cf. Deut 13:1-18), it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that traditions surrounding James the son of Alphaeus were conflated with traditions regarding James the brother of Jesus. It is not impossible both were stoned to death in Jerusalem, but the fact that Pseudo-Hippolytus reports the crucifixion in Jerusalem and burial by the temple (which was reported much earlier for James the Just) is a strong likelihood the traditions may have been conflated. The second fact that makes this tradition suspect is the line, “may God curse them!” in reference to the Jews. While this could be a personal line Budge added to the tradition he received, it seems equally possible the tradition of the death of James by the Jews was invented to set up James as a saint and further depict the Jews as “God-killers.”

Death by Crucifixion

There are two traditions that James was crucified. The *Hieronymian Martyrology* (c. fifth century) places his journeys and crucifixion in Persia. The second tradition comes from Nicetas David, the Paphlagonian (b. ninth century). In the early tenth century, he wrote a number of homilies on different saints.¹¹ His *Oration octava* was written on the life of James the son of Alphaeus. Similar to his homilies on other apostles, Nicetas provides little historical information about the life of James son of Alphaeus.¹² The primary focus of the homilies was not to impart historical information, but to connect readers (or hearers) to the apostle through faith.¹³ Yet, Nicetas does make it clear that Christian spirituality is tied to history. Bovon explains,

James is historically relevant on several accounts: as an eyewitness to Christ’s miracles, as an adherent to Christ’s words, as a participant in Christ’s passion, and, after Christ’s ascension, as an active apostle and martyr. Nicetas mentions all sorts

¹¹See Alexander Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), s.v. “Niketas David Paphlagon,” by Alexander Kazhdan.

¹²Bovon, “Byzantine Witness,” 92.

¹³*Ibid.*, 93.

of travels, agonies, humiliations, including persecution by the Jews and heathen uprisings against him. Finally, James is crucified.¹⁴

Nicetas tracks the travels of James through Eleutheropolis, Gaza, Tyre, and multiple smaller towns. The martyrdom account occurs in Ostrakine, Egypt. Like Andrew from the *Acts of Andrew* and Peter from the *Acts of Peter*, James gives a speech from the cross. Roughly four centuries later, Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos wrote his *Historia Ecclesiastica* and provided a similar story for James the son of Alphaeus. While there are some slight differences in the travel narratives, it is likely they both borrowed from an earlier source regarding James.¹⁵

Traditions surrounding the travels and fate of James are undoubtedly tentative. Vigeveno questions the reliability of these traditions: “Did James preach in Israel? In Egypt? Or both? Was he crucified? Supposedly. The sources are most unauthentic. Next to nothing is known of either of these men.”¹⁶ On the other hand, Brownrigg suspects there may be some truth to the tradition that James went to a far away country and was martyred for his faith.¹⁷ Although they are far from conclusive, the following points weigh in favor of the martyrdom of James

First, Jesus warned his disciples that they would suffer and be killed just as Israel had done to the prophets (Matt 21:33-40, 22:6; 23:30-31, 34, 37; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 6:22-23; 11:47-50; 13:34; 20:9-18)

Second, there is general evidence that some of the lesser-known apostles died as martyrs, and this may include James, son of Alphaeus. In his *Letter to the Philippians* 9, Polycarp lists Ignatius, Paul, and “other apostles” as examples of those who have stayed faithful during persecution and whom are now with the Lord:

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 96.

¹⁶Vigeveno, *Thirteen Men*, 69.

¹⁷Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 159.

I exhort you all, therefore, to yield obedience to the word of righteousness, and to exercise all patience, such as ye have seen [set] before your eyes, not only in the case of the blessed Ignatius, and Zosimus, and Rufus, but also in others among yourselves, and in Paul himself, and the rest of the apostles. [This do] in the assurance that all these have not run in vain, but in faith and righteousness, and that they are [now] in their due place in the presence of the Lord, with whom also they suffered. For they loved not this present world, but Him who died for us, and for our sakes was raised again by God from the dead.¹⁸

The key part of this passage is when Polycarp refers to Paul “and the other apostles.” To encourage the Philippians to remain faithful to death, Polycarp cites the examples of Ignatius, Zosimus, Rufus, Paul, and “other apostles” who remained faithful and are now “in the place they deserved, with the Lord, with whom they also suffered.” Bart Ehrman concludes, “In chapter 9, however, Polycarp shows that he knows that like Paul and other apostles, Ignatius had already been martyred for his faith.”¹⁹ Fourth century Syrian Church father Aphrahat said,

Great and excellent is the martyrdom of Jesus. He surpassed in affliction and in confession all who were before or after. And after Him was the faithful martyr Stephen whom the Jews stoned. Simon (Peter) also and Paul were perfect martyrs. And James and John walked in the footsteps of their Master Christ. Also (others) of the apostles hereafter in diverse places confessed and proved true martyrs.²⁰

Third, two independent traditions claim James the son of Alphaeus was martyred for his faith (by stoning or by crucifixion). They disagree on *where* and *how*, but they agree he was martyred. Fourth, there is no record that James recanted his faith or died peacefully.

Conclusion

These points are not insignificant, yet it must be conceded that the accounts of James are late and historically tentative. Beyond his membership in the Twelve, little is

¹⁸ Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 9, as cited in *The Apostolic Fathers—Justin Martyr—Irenaeus, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 35.

¹⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1:327.

²⁰ Aphrahat, *Demonstration XXI: Of Persecution* (§ 23), as cited in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1898), 2:401.

known about James with any considerable degree of confidence. When all the facts are considered, the following seems to be the most reasonable in regards to the travels and fate of James, son of Alphaeus:

1. James, son of Alphaeus engaged in missionary work outside Jerusalem—*Very probably true* (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; general evidence for the Twelve engaging in missionary work; *Hieronymian Martyrology*; Nicetas David, the Paphlagonian, *Oration octava*)
2. James, son of Alphaeus experienced martyrdom—*more possible than not* (*Hippolytus on the Twelve* 9; *Hieronymian Martyrology*; Nicetas David, the Paphlagonia, *Oration octava*; Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Historia Ecclesiastica*)

CHAPTER 17

THE MARTYRDOM OF THADDEUS

Little is known about the apostle Thaddeus. Along with Andrew and Philip, he was one of three apostles with a non-Hebrew name. Matthew and Mark place him tenth in their apostolic lists, right after James the son of Alphaeus (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18). Assuming Thaddeus and Judas the son of James are the same person, Luke places him eleventh, right before Judas Iscariot (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). Some scholars accept this identification. For example, Hendriksen claims that *Thaddeus*, *Lebbaeus*,¹ and *Judas of James* are three different names for the same person.² To the contrary, Borchert concludes that speculating about the identity of Judas of James is an exercise in futility.³ While this issue is far from settled, it seems most likely that the names Thaddeus and Judas son of James do in fact refer to the same person. It was not uncommon for Palestinian Jews to have both Semitic and Greek names⁴ and it seems unlikely Matthew and Mark would have retained the name “Thaddeus” in their apostolic lists if he had been replaced by someone else.⁵

¹There is early textual evidence that “Lebbaeus” should replace the name “Thaddaeus.” Some Greek manuscripts even combine the two forms of the text: “Thaddaeus who was called Lebbaeus” or “Lebbaeus who was called “Thaddaeus.”” See Barclay M. Newman and Philip Stine, *Matthew: A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 284-85.

²William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:282.

³Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, The New American Commentary, vol. 25B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 129.

⁴Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 100.

⁵Kraeling believes that Thaddeus, Judas son of James, and Lebbaeus were different people, and that a few deceased members replaced living persons. Specifically, he argues that Judas son of James filled the position vacated by Thaddeus. This is not impossible. See Emil G. Kraeling, *The Disciples* (Skokie, IL: Rand McNally, 1966), 203.

Thaddeus does appear (under the name Judas) in one story in the Gospel of John. During the upper room discourse with the apostles, Judas Thaddeus, who is specifically identified as *not* Iscariot, asks Jesus a question: “Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, ‘Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?’” As in the case of Philip and Thomas, who had just previously asked questions, the writer of John makes it clear that Judas also does not yet grasp the true identity of Jesus or the full purpose of his mission. Judas was likely expecting Jesus to make a public proclamation of his identity to convince the world that he was the awaited Messiah. Hendriksen suggests that Judas Thaddeus essentially meant, “Lord, what has happened (in other words, *why is it*) that, in a dramatic manner, thou art about to display thy great power to *us* alone, and not also to *the public in general*? Would not the latter policy be far better and more effective?”⁶ He expects Jesus to show his glory in power, whereas Jesus would show his glory through his death and suffering (John 17:1-5).

Jesus answers his question by talking about love and obedience. He insists that anyone who loves him must keep his commands (cf. 8:51; 17:6; 21:15-17): “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me” (14:23-24). Then Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, who will help them and teach them all things (14:25). It is difficult to determine what this passage reveals about the character of Judas Thaddeus. The main points seems to be that, like the other apostles, he does not yet understand the character and mission of Christ.

Lockyer notes the lack of reliable information surrounding Judas Thaddeus: “We literally know nothing of his occupation before he met Christ, or under what circumstances he was called to discipleship, or what he accomplished for the Master, either before or after the ascension. A dead silence surrounds his life and history, with the

⁶William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:283.

sole exception of the one question he asked.”⁷ Nevertheless, there are a few areas of speculation surrounding his life. Some have argued that Thaddeus was a zealot, like Simon the Canaanite.⁸ Whether or not Thaddeus was zealot, he was always placed next to Simon in the apostolic lists, which has led some to conclude they were close friends or ministry partners.⁹ Others have argued that he was probably the son of James the Great,¹⁰ and some have suggested that Levi is the apostle Thaddeus.¹¹ These are certainly possibilities, but cannot be held with any high degree of confidence.

It is known that Thaddeus travelled with Jesus during his public ministry for an extended period of time. He heard Jesus teach and witnessed his many miracles. Jesus considered him one of his trusted friends. For some unknown reason, Jesus believed Thaddeus would be a good follower who could help take the gospel to the “ends of the earth” after his death. He witnessed the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:5; Matt 28:16; Luke 24:36; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:3) and saw him ascend to the Father (Acts 1:9). And like the rest of the apostles, Judas Thaddeus was willing to suffer for his belief in the resurrection (Acts 5:17-29).

⁷Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 171.

⁸Brownrigg notes that in two of the oldest manuscripts of the *Apostolic Constitutions* Thaddeus is described as “Thaddeus, also called Lebbaeus, who was surnamed Judas the Zealot.” Brownrigg notes that the last three disciples—Simon, Thaddeus, and Judas Iscariot—would all have been zealots. See Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 163-70.

⁹Simon the Canaanite and Judas Thaddeus do appear together regularly in later traditions regarding their ministry travels and martyrdoms.

¹⁰McBirnle argues that James the Great is the most likely candidate for the father of Judas (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). He rules out James the brother of Jesus as being his father since this James was likely the younger brother of Jesus. And he rules out James the son of Alphaeus as he identifies him as “James the Younger,” which means he would not have been old enough to have a child who was a member of the Twelve. The other possibility, of course, is that he was another unknown James. William Steuart McBirnle, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1973), 150-52.

¹¹Barnabas Lindars, “Matthew, Levi, Lebbaeus and the Value of The Western Text,” *New Testament Studies* 4 (1958): 220-22.

Extra-Biblical Accounts of Thaddeus

There is an early story of Thaddeus that has perplexed scholars for some time. This story is popular in Eastern churches and possibly dates to the end of the second century.¹² According to Eusebius,¹³ the miraculous healing power of Jesus was “noised abroad among all men on account of his wonder-working power, he attracted countless numbers from foreign countries lying far away from Judea, who had the hope of being cured of their diseases and of all kinds of sufferings.¹⁴ As a result, King Abgar V (AD 13-50), ruler from the other side of the Euphrates, sent a letter to Jesus pleading to be healed. Jesus sent him a personal response, promising his request would be fulfilled. Then the apostle Thomas sent Thaddeus (also an apostle and member of the Seventy) to Edessa to preach, evangelize, and heal Abgar. Eusebius claims there are written records that provide evidence of this in the archives of Edessa, the royal capital at that time. The story ends with Thaddeus preaching to all the citizens at Edessa and then refusing to accept money from Abgar saying, “If we have forsaken that which was our own, how shall we take that which is another’s?”¹⁵

John of Damascus (AD 676-749) tells that when Jesus could not go to Edessa himself, the king sent a painter to capture his likeness. But the painter could not draw it because his face was so bright. So Jesus put a garment over his own face in order to send an impression to the king.¹⁶ Armenian historian Movsēs Xorenac’I also reports a similar

¹²Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles*, 170.

¹³R. A. Lipsius makes an important qualification on this tradition: “The name of this apostle of the Edessenes, however, is called by the Syrians Addaeus (Addai), and it is possible at all events that Eusebius first changed the name Addai, which was unknown to the Greeks, into Thaddaeus” (William Smith and Henry Wace, eds., *Dictionary of Christian Biography* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1887), s.v. “Thaddaeus,” by Richard Adelbert Lipsius.

¹⁴Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.13.1, as cited in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 100. A similar version of the story is found in Jerome, *Homily on Matthew* 10.4. Jerome admittedly uses Eusebius as a source.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 1.13.20.

¹⁶John of Damascus, *Orthodox Faith* 4.16.

story in his *History of Armenia* (XI-XIII), obviously borrowing from Eusebius. He also reports that the fate of the apostle Thaddeus in Armenia (IX).

Asbury Smith finds the story of Thaddeus ministering in Edessa beautiful, but concludes it does not pass the historical test of authenticity.¹⁷ While there is no consensus on the veracity of the story, Fred Lapham acknowledges that it bears all the marks of legend. Nevertheless, he cautions “not to exclude the possibility that a simpler form of the tradition could be very much earlier, and on which, like many legends, is not entirely without historical foundation.”¹⁸ Nonetheless, even if this story involving King Abgar were true, it would reveal little about Thaddeus compared to any of the other apostles. Emphasis in the story is on the role he plays as an apostle rather than his unique character as an individual. From what is known of the apostles, many of the others (if not *all* the others) could have performed the same function in Edessa as Thaddeus. But whether or not it is true, Thaddeus’s mission to Edessa has been forever sealed into his legacy.

Travels and Fate of Thaddeus

A significant variety of traditions surround the travels and fate of Thaddeus. Schmidt notes, “Their [Simon and Thaddeus] traditional areas of missionary activity are literally all over the map, which may indicate either that they traveled extensively or that ignorance of their movements made them convenient subjects for invention.”¹⁹ It could be that some of these are true and others false. Traditions need not be accepted or rejected in their entirety.

A Coptic tradition reports that Thaddeus (Judas) preached and died in Syria.²⁰ This story is independent of either the Greek or Latin *Acts of Thaddeus*.²¹ In this Coptic

¹⁷Asbury Smith, *The Twelve Christ Chose* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 139.

¹⁸Fred Lapham, *An Introduction to the New Testament Apocrypha* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 37.

¹⁹Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 162.

²⁰E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles: Being the Histories and the Lives and Martyrdoms and Deaths of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935),

account, Peter joins Thaddeus as they preach, cast out evil spirits, and heal the wounded and sick. In their preaching, the apostles incorporate well-known teachings of Jesus (e.g., The Rich Young Man, Mark 10:17-27). After their ministry is finished, Thaddeus died peacefully and Peter continued on his way: “Thus was the work of making them to believe performed by our Lord Jesus Christ; and immediately after they had made their confession of faith Thaddeus died.”²² There is a separate tradition, however, of his ministry and fate in Syria. In this account, Thaddeus is shot with arrows and stoned to death.²³

Another tradition aims to account for the origin of Christianity in Edessa. Following the account in Eusebius, the (Greek) *Acts of Thaddeus* (fifth century) report that Thaddeus went to Edessa to help heal the kingdom of Abgar (Abgarus).²⁴ In this account, Thaddeus finds Abgar already healed. After preaching the gospel, he baptizes many Greeks, Syrians, and Armenians. He destroyed idols and built churches throughout multiple cities in Syria. After traveling, preaching, and converting many to the faith, Thaddeus dies peacefully. This seems to be the same tradition as reported in *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 10: “Jude, who is also called Lebbaeus, preached to the people of Edessa, and to all Mesopotamia, and fell asleep at Berytus, and was buried there.”²⁵

In contrast to these stories, the western tradition pairs Simon and Judas (Thaddeus) together as missionaries and martyrs. The (Latin) Pseudo-Abdias (c. AD sixth century) reports that Simon and Judas were missionaries and martyrs in the East.²⁶

²¹Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. and trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:480.

²²*Ibid.*, 305.

²³Lipsius, s.v., “Thaddaeus.”

²⁴Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:481.

²⁵Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 10, as cited in *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 5 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1886), 255.

or seventh century)²⁶ places their activities in Persia, where they encounter the two sorcerers Zaroos and Afraxat (Aphraxat), which Matthew had expelled from Ethiopia. As they travel throughout Egypt and Babylon, Simon and Judas win multiple spiritual disputes with the two magicians. They also encounter the Persian commander Varardach, general for King Xerxes. Varardach's magicians predict war, but the apostles prophesy peace. When the apostles are proven right, Varardach threatens to put Zaroos and Afraxat to death, but the apostles intervene, preaching that people should love their enemies and respond to evil with good (cf. Luke 6:27-28; Matt 5:44). Even though their lives are spared, Zaroos and Afraxat continue to follow the apostles and heckle them in every city they enter. As they travel, the two apostles win many converts, ordain deacons, and found churches. They even ordain Abdias, the supposed writer of these stories, who became bishop of Babylon. Kraeling reports an interesting part of the tradition, which may suggest a late second-century date for its composition (*passio Simonis et Judae*). As Simon and Judas traveled through Persia,

One of their disciples, a man named Craton, is said to have written a long narrative in ten books about what they did and suffered during thirteen years of work in this field. Sextus Julius Africanus, a soldier who campaigned in Mesopotamia in AD 195 and became a friend of the rulers of Edessa, is said to have translated the narrative into Latin. It is from this quarter that the Latin *Martyrdom* must ultimately have derived its material concerning these apostles.²⁷

As the story continues, the religious leaders in the city of Suinar, Persia, eventually arrest Simon and Judas. They are given an option—worship statues of the sun and moon, or die. The apostles choose martyrdom and are killed with swords.²⁸ After their deaths, a lightning bolt strikes the temple and splits it into three parts. Zaroos and Afraxat are also

²⁶The Pseudo-Abdias writings were collected sometime in the sixth or seventh centuries. The *Passio Simonis et Judae* shows signs of familiarity with details of the fourth century Persian kingdom including ruler, religion, and the role of the magi. Thus, the *terminus post quem* for the origin of the *Passio* is the fourth century. More precise dating is unattainable. See Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:482.

²⁷Kraeling, *The Disciples*, 212.

²⁸One version reports that they were killed beaten with sticks and stoned to death. This is why Simon and Judas are often depicted with stick in hand. See Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles*, 174.

struck and their bodies are incinerated.²⁹ The Latin *Hieronymian Martyrology* (c. fifth century) also reports the Persian city of Suinar as the place of their passion and death.

There is yet another Western tradition placing the ministry of Judas in Mesopotamia and his death in Armenia. According to the *Breviarium Apostolorum* (c. AD 600), “Jude [Thaddeus], which means confessor, was a brother of James, and he preached in Mesopotamia and the inlands of Pontus. He is buried in the city Neritus in Armenia, and his feast is celebrated on 28 October.”³⁰ In his *De ortu et obitu partum*, Isidore of Seville (AD 560-636) largely agrees with the rendition in the *Breviarium*: “Jude, the brother of James, spread the gospel in Mesopotamia and in the inlands of Pontus, and with his teaching he domesticated the untamed and uncivilized people, as if they were wild beasts, and he submitted them to the faith in the Lord. He is buried in Berito, in Armenia.”³¹ These traditions do not state that he died peacefully, but this seems to be the strong implication. Later Greek writers, however, state that infidels in the town of Arat pierced Thaddeus with arrows.³²

Along with Bartholomew, Thaddeus is also considered one of the “First Illuminators of Armenia.” Popular tradition considers him the first evangelist of Armenia, ministering from AD 43-66.³³ After including the story of Thaddeus and King Abgar, Movsēs Xorenac’I states that Thaddeus was martyred and his body buried in Artaz (Book IX). While there is debate regarding the historicity of the Thaddeus tradition, Nina Garosian claims the spread of Christianity from Palestine through Mesopotamia and

²⁹The deaths of Zaroes and Afraxat are clearly reminiscent of the fates of Judas, who betrayed Jesus (Matt 27:3-10; Acts 1:18), and Herod, who persecuted the church and was responsible for the death of James the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:20-23).

³⁰Els Rose, *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c. 500-1251)* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 222.

³¹*Ibid.*, 223.

³²Lipsius, s.v., “Thaddaeus.”

³³Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 315.

Syria is “beyond doubt”: “The second century African church father Tertullian already listed the Armenians among the people who had received Christianity, and the mid-third century letter of Bishop Dionysios of Alexandria to an Armenian bishop named Meruzanes indicates a sizable community.”³⁴

Armenian scholar Malachia Ormanian considers the Thaddeus tradition and the apostolic origin of the Armenian Church an “incontrovertible fact in ecclesiastical history.”³⁵ The Armenian tradition is ancient and unvarying that the apostle Thaddeus was one of its apostolic founders. He notes that the presumption of history is not opposed to this tradition, and that this is all that could be asked of the Armenian Church to prove her origin.³⁶ While traditions regarding the ministry and fate of Bartholomew are unanimous in Armenia, traditions vary about Thaddeus. Louis Boettiger describes the various traditions:

Some suppose him to have been the brother of St. Thomas, and according to these, he traveled to Ardaze by way of Edessa. There is an anachronism, however, in this tradition which would transfer the mission of Thaddeus to the second century. According to a second tradition he is not the brother of Thomas, but one St. Judas Thaddeus, surnamed Lebbeus, who also is said to have established a sanctuary of worship at Ardaze, a circumstance admitted by the Greek and Latin churches. The Armenian church places the time of this mission as a period of eight years from 35-43. That this has been done to lay a strong foundation for the claim of apostolic origin may be suspected, especially in view of the belief that apostolic origin is essential to every Christian church, in order, as stated by Ormanian, “to place her in union with her Divine Founder.” The church, however, has us at its mercy, for conclusive evidence one way or another is lacking. Nevertheless, the fact of Thaddeus’ mission to Armenia wherever and whenever it might have occurred, is undisputed.³⁷

³⁴Nina Girosian, “The Aršakuni Dynasty (A.D. 12-[180?]-428),” in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 1:83.

³⁵Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia: Her History, Doctrine, Rule, Discipline, Liturgy, Literature, and Existing Condition*, ed. Terenig Poladian, trans. G. Marcar Gregory (London: A. R. Wombrey & Co, 1955), 4.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

³⁷Louis Angelo Boettiger, *Arminian Legends and Festivals*, Studies in the Social Sciences 14 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1920), 29.

The Armenian Church is convinced Thaddaeus was the first evangelist in their country and that he died there as a martyr. McBirnie agrees, “There is no serious reason to doubt that Jude did indeed evangelize that area of Armenia associated with the city of Edessa...It is likely that he died there and was originally buried at Kara Kelesia.”³⁸ Yet not all scholars are convinced.³⁹ The evidence may not be as strong as the Armenian Church insists, but it is not impossible.

Conclusion

As with the other minor apostles, the evidence for the missionary work and fate of Thaddeus is mixed. One of the difficulties in ascertaining traditions of Thaddeus is the uncertainty surrounding his identity. Possible confusion with Addai (*Doctrine of Addai*) as well as traditions involving Jude, the brother of Jesus, tempers the confidence of these conclusions. As far as his fate, there are traditions that Thaddeus died as a martyr including death by the sword, stoning, beaten with sticks, shot with arrows, as well as some martyrdom accounts that do not describe his means of death. But there are also some accounts that he died peacefully. Accounts of his peaceful death and his martyrdom occur in *both* Eastern and Western traditions. There seems to be independent lines of his martyrdom, but also independent lines of his natural death. Traditions vary considerably as to when, how, why, where, and *if* he died as a martyr, which could mean there was no known fate for Thaddeus and stories could be invented out of thin air to meet the theological needs of various communities. There could also be some truth in one (or more) of these traditions that remains amidst the legendary exaggeration. The truth is elusive.

³⁸McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, 159.

³⁹According to Lipsius, “Relying on these accounts [*Doctrina Addaei*], Moses of Khorni has related the last fortunes of Thaddaeus, except that instead of Assyria he describes his own country Armenia as the scene of the later labours of the apostle, and has added his experiences in Armenia under king Sanatruk, a son of Abagarus’s sister, and his martyrdom” (Lipsius, s.v., “Thaddaeus”).

Here are some facts that are known. First, Jesus warned his disciples that they would suffer and be killed just as Israel had done to the prophets (Matt 21:33-40; 22:6; 23:30-31, 34, 37; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 6:22-23; 11:47-50; 13:34; 20:9-18). Thaddeus expected to suffer and possibly die for his faith. He preached the gospel with this knowledge in mind, willing to face persecution (Acts 5:17-29). Second, there were early traditions that many of the apostles were martyred. Polycarp lists Ignatius, Paul, and “other apostles” as examples of those who have stayed faithful during persecution and whom are now with the Lord.⁴⁰ Additionally, Syrian Church Father Aphrahat said there is evidence that some of the lesser-known apostles died as martyrs in diverse places.⁴¹ Since some traditions place the death of Thaddeus in Syria, Aphrahat would likely have been familiar with traditions of his fate. Third, there are no stories that Thaddeus recanted from his faith. Even if he did die peacefully, there is no good reason to doubt he lived his life faithfully as an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, even amidst suffering and the prospect of death. With these facts taken into consideration the following probabilities seem most reasonable:

1. Thaddeus engaged in missionary work outside Jerusalem—*Very probably true* (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; general evidence for the Twelve engaging in missionary work; Eusebius *Eccl. Hist.* 1.13; *Acts of Thaddeus*, Movsēs Xorenac’I, *History of Armenia*; *Pseudo-Abdias (passio Simonis et Judae)*, Hippolytus *on the Twelve* 10; *Contendings of the Apostles*; various martyrologies).
2. Thaddeus experienced martyrdom—*possible* (martyrdom traditions include Movsēs Xorenac’I, *History of Armenia*; (Latin) *Pseudo-Abdias (passio Simonis et Judae)*; various martyrologies; non-martyr traditions include *Acts of Thaddeus* (Greek); Hippolytus *on the Twelve* 10; *Breviarium Apostolorum*; Isidore of Seville, *De ortu et obitu partum*).

⁴⁰Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 9.

⁴¹Aphrahat, *Demonstration XXI: Of Persecution*, §23.

CHAPTER 18

MARTYRDOM OF SIMON THE ZEALOT

In the New Testament, Simon the Zealot only appears in the apostolic lists (Matt 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). He appears eleventh in Matthew and Mark, and tenth in the two Lukan lists. He is sometimes referred to as the “Simon the Cananaean” or “Simon the Canaanite.” This is not an indication he was from Canaan, but is probably the Aramaic equivalent of the Greek “zealot” (*zēlōtēs*). Simon was called the Zealot to distinguish him from Peter. In terms of understanding Simon the Zealot, he is arguably the mirror-opposite of Peter. The most is known about Peter, who comes first in the apostolic lists. And the least is known about Simon, who is one of the last. This may be why he is often referred to as “Simon the Less.”

Many scholars assume that Simon was called “Zealot” not only to distinguish him from Peter, but to indicate his affiliation with the party known as Zealots. As a fanatical Jewish sect, the Zealots vehemently resented Palestinian control by Rome. They were prepared to use violence to fight for Jewish independence. Their radicalism was one of the reasons Rome destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. If Simon were indeed a Zealot, there would be much that could rightly be inferred about his character and temperament.

Some scholars have built their entire persona of Simon on his supposed affiliation as a Zealot. For instance, H. S. Vigeveno writes, “Now, I have to admit to you that this is all we know about Simon [that he is a Zealot]. This is all the gospel tells us about him. Yet, on that one word we can build a character. On that one word we will build a personality.”¹ Given his belief that Simon was a member of the Zealots, Lockyer concludes,

¹H. S. Vigeveno, *Thirteen Men Who Changed the World* (Glendale, CA: G/L, 1967), 53.

While we hear nothing more of Simon after his choice for the apostolate, we can believe that in his development and growth, there was no one among the twelve with a warmer enthusiasm and a willingness to face danger or death for the Master, than Simon Zelotes. With his tendency to violence and use of worldly weapons restrained, he likely became one of the boldest and strongest followers of the Son of David.²

If Simon was indeed a member of the Zealots, then these types of analyses make sense. But Keener urges caution in this identification since there is no evidence this title existed for a group of revolutionaries before AD 66.³ The term *zēlōtēs* could simply refer to someone who was committed to the fulfillment of the law.⁴ In fact, this reference is used many times in the New Testament. Paul describes himself as “zealous for God” (Acts 22:3) and says, “Extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal 1:14). When Paul came to Jerusalem to visit James, they described some Jews who were “zealous for the law” (Acts 21:20). Paul describes some Corinthian Christians as “eager [zealous] for manifestations of the Spirit” (1 Cor 14:12) and others who have been set apart by God as “zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). Finally, the author of 1 Peter refers to those who are “zealous for what is good” (3:13). Simon may have been a member of the Zealots, but more likely he was zealous for the traditions of his predecessors and eagerly awaiting fulfillment of the law.

The extra-biblical information on Simon the Zealot is minimal. In the first few centuries of the church, he is simply mentioned in various lists of the Twelve including the *Diatessaron* (8.11), the *Acts of Thomas* (1.1), and the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (Homily XXXII).

A variety of later legends arise about Simon—some possibly with a grain of truth, while others are pure invention. One legend claims Simon was one of the shepherds

²Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 164.

³Evidence seems to count against a unified revolutionary movement of Zealots in first century Palestine. The term “Zealots” referred to a more limited group. See Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:744.

⁴Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1:269.

the angels visited to reveal the birth of Christ.⁵ In the Byzantine church, Simon is identified with Nathanael, who was from Cana (John 21:2). Later ecclesiastical tradition identified Judas of James and Simon the Zealot as the brothers of Jesus named “Judas and Simon” (Mark 6:3; Matt 13:55).

Even though Simon the Zealot only appears in the apostolic lists in the New Testament, it is clear he personally travelled with Jesus for a lengthy period of time as one of his closest associates. Simon knew Jesus personally and saw his life, character, and ministry firsthand. He heard Jesus teach, saw him do miracles, and watched his ascension. He witnessed Jesus alive after he had been killed (1 Cor 15:5; Matt 28:16; Luke 24:36; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:3), and like the rest of the apostles, Simon the Zealot was willing to suffer for his belief in the resurrection (Acts 5:17-29).

Travels and Martyrdom

Eastern Traditions

Tracking Simon outside the New Testament is not an easy task. One difficulty is that Simon the Zealot is often confused with Simon, son of Cleopas (cf. John 19:25), successor to the Jerusalem bishopric after James.⁶ *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 11 seems to make this conflation: “Simon the Zealot, the son of Clopas, who is called Jude, became bishop of Jerusalem after James the Just, and fell asleep and was buried there at the age of 120.”⁷ The (Coptic) *Acts of Simon of Cananaean* also make this conflation, which is common in the Eastern Church. According to this apocryphal Act, Simon ministered in Jerusalem and Samaria. After being accused of magic, Trajan demands his crucifixion.⁸

⁵C. Bernard Ruffin, *The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997), 145.

⁶Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.32.

⁷*Hippolytus on the Twelve* 11, as cited in *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 5 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1886), 255.

⁸Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:479-80.

This is very similar to the version in the *Breviarium Apostolorum*, except it adds Egypt as part of his travels and places his fate during the emperor Hadrian:

Simon Zelotes, which means “the zealous,” was first called “the Cananean,” burning with zeal for God. He was Peter’s namesake and equal to him in honor. He received the guidance over Egypt and he is said to have held the chair of Jerusalem after James the Just. After a hundred and twenty years, he was worthy to suffer the martyrdom of passion through the cross during Hadrian’s reign.⁹

Isidore of Seville has a similar story for the fate of Simon, but he places it under Trajan rather than Hadrian.¹⁰

Another Eastern tradition claims Simon the Zealot and Matthias came along with Andrew on his third missionary trip to Georgia. According to this late tradition, Matthias died in the town-fortress of Asparos. Simon the Zealot died later in Abkhazia and buried in Nikopsia. Reportedly, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the remains of Simon were transferred to Anakopia.¹¹

Western Traditions

The Western tradition pairs Simon with Judas Thaddeus, and is a distinct from traditions found in the East. The (Latin) *Passio Simonis et Judae* (Book VI of Pseudo-Abdias) considers Simon and Thaddeus apostles and martyrs in Persia. They travel around preaching, performing miracles, and countering the magic of Zaroes and Arfaxat. They are attacked by priests and people and killed for refusing to offer sacrifices to the gods of the sun and moon. The author shows familiarity with the fourth century Persian kingdom, which provides a terminus post quem for its origin.¹² In the *History of Armenia*, Movsēs Xorenac’I reports that Simon experienced martyrdom in Persia as well, although

⁹Els Rose, *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c. 500-1251)* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 222.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 223.

¹¹Giuli Alasania, “Twenty Centuries of Christianity in Georgia,” *IBSU International Refereed Multi-Disciplinary Scientific Journal* 1 (2006): 117-18.

¹²Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:482.

he mentions the city of Veriospore. Movsēs mentions that he is unsure of surrounding details, although he is confident of the martyrdom of Simon.¹³ The *Hieronymian Martyrology* also mentions the martyrdom of Simon in Persia, although he mentions the city of Suinar. The ninth century medieval martyrologies of Hrabanus, Florus, Ado, and Usuard attribute a shared martyrdom for the two apostles as well.

Britain

There is a popular tradition that Simon evangelized Britain and was crucified there.¹⁴ According to this tradition, Simon was the second to visit Britain, after Joseph of Arimathea was there from AD 36-39. The earliest evidence comes from Dorotheus, Bishop of Tyre (AD 300): “Simon Zelotes traversed all Mauritania, and the regions of the Africans, preaching Christ. He was at last crucified, slain, and buried in Britain”¹⁵

While this early fourth century citation is relatively late, it is not impossible Simon visited Britain. He would have traveled during the *Pax Romana*, which means there were fortified roads for travel¹⁶ and relative peace. If Thomas made it east to India, there is no in-principle reason Simon could not have ventured west to Britain.

Morgan claims there can be little doubt Simon visited Britain.¹⁷ Schmidt, however, provides a more reasonable approach:

What of Britain and Gaul? To a modern reader, they may seem so far from Judea that the notion of travel there, especially by apostles in the first century, can only be the stuff of legend. And granted, there are some outlandish traditions, such as that of Joseph of Arimathea taking the boy Jesus to Glastonbury, England—conveniently

¹³Movsēs Xorenac’I, *History of Armenia*, Book IX.

¹⁴For an in-depth analysis of the tradition that Simon went to Britain, see George F. Jowett, *The Drama of the Lost Disciples* (Bishop Auckland, England: Covenant 2004), 149-60.

¹⁵This quote is from Dorotheus, *Synopsis de Apostol*, as found in Richard Williams Morgan, *St. Paul in Britain; Or, The Origin of British As Opposed to Papal Christianity* (Oxford, London: J. H. and Jas. Parker, 1861), 151.

¹⁶Immediately after the invasion by Claudius, the Romans were active in building road in Britain and other frontiers of the military districts. See Winston S. Churchill, *The Birth of Britain* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1956), 42.

¹⁷Morgan, *St. Paul in Britain*, 150.

enough, also the resting place of King Arthur. But is an apostolic missionary venture to the northern fringes of the empire out of the question? First century Roman roads were excellent, and it was a time of relative peace. By land, it is about 2,600 miles from Jerusalem to London. At [this pace], the journey could be made on foot in four months—or six months with fewer miles per day or longer stops. By sea, the journey is quicker, but perhaps more hazardous. Now, take a dozen young men determined to propagate the gospel throughout the empire and give them about fifty years to accomplish it (say AD 35-85), for a total of six hundred man years. Is it unreasonable to think of just one of those years devoted to Britain, and one more to Gaul?¹⁸

This is admittedly the most optimistic scenario as far as the prospects of Simon visiting Britain. There is no record of a church founded by Simon in Britain. And Bede the Venerable (eighth century) makes no reference to a visit by Simon in his *Ecclesiastical History of England*, although he does mention early Christians in Britain without giving explanation as to how they got there. Modern history books of England often similarly describe Christians there in the early centuries without claiming to know when they first arrived. For instance, A. R. Birley writes, “As well as their state cult, the Romans brought eastern forms of worship—of Isis, Mithras, and of Christianity. The last was already present in the third century, and by the fourth British bishops were already attending Church councils.”¹⁹ Other scholars recognize the existence of Christians in Britain in the early third century.²⁰ Tertullian mentions Christians in Britain at the end of the second century. In a passage in which he refers to nations that contain believers, Tertullian refers to “the haunts of the Britons—inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ.”²¹ There is good reason to believe that Christians were there by the late second century, but evidence for their existence in the first century is much more difficult to ascertain. It is

¹⁸Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 163-64.

¹⁹A. R. Birley, “Britons and Romans c. 100 BC-AD 409,” *The Cambridge Historical Encyclopedia of Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. Christopher Haigh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 13.

²⁰W. E. Lunt, *History of England*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 28.

²¹Tertullian *An Answer to the Jews* 7.4, as cited in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 3 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 158.

not impossible Simon was there, but the evidence is scanty. The fact that British scholars largely ignore his visit is a sign it may be apocryphal.

Some scholars believe that Simon may have gone to Britain, but they doubt he was crucified there as Dorotheus reports. Since crucifixion was a Roman practice, they reject that he could have died that way in Britain. Therefore, they conclude, his death by crucifixion was most likely invented as a copycat of the fate of Jesus. This may be true, but it is not entirely unreasonable that Simon could have been crucified in Britain. While Rome and Britain first came into contact during the two brief expeditions of Julius Caesar in 55 and 54 BC, lowland Britain was officially brought under Roman hegemony during the reign of Claudius in AD 43. Because of trade, however, Roman influence was throughout Britain long before the invasion by Claudius.²² Many times the Romans dealt harshly with the British to establish their control.²³ The evidence is late and questionable, but it is not entirely impossible that the Romans crucified Simon in Britain.

Conclusion

Simon the Zealot is an apostle for which there is simply little reliable information. He traveled with Jesus and witnessed his life, ministry, and resurrection, and that he proclaimed that truth and was willing to suffer for it, but beyond that, the information is minimal. Asbury Smith sums up the predicament well:

What happened to Simon Zealot after the death of Jesus? Did he, as tradition suggests, take the Gospel to Persia, Suamii Weriosphora, Jerusalem, or “that Island in the Sea” (Britain)? To the fish on a book that forms the symbol for the shield of Simon Zealot is sometimes added a battle-ax or a saw. Does this indicate the manner of his death? There are many questions to be asked about Simon Zealot. Unfortunately there are no sure answers for any of them. Beyond knowledge of his name we must rely on imagination until the great day we shall know as we are known.²⁴

²²George Clark, *English History: A Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 19.

²³Walter Phelps Hall, *A History of England and the British Empire*, 3rd ed. (New York: Ginn and Company, 1953), 7.

²⁴Asbury Smith, *The Twelve Christ Chose* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 127.

Here are some things that are known. First, Simon the Zealot was often confused with Simon, son of Clopas (cf. John 19:25). As with the other apostles (e.g., Philip), this makes it difficult to judge what traditions genuinely apply to the apostle. Second, there are a variety of traditions for his journeys as well as his fate. He is said to have travelled to Jerusalem, Samaria, Egypt, Persia, Armenia, Britain, Gaul, and more. It could be that Simon was particularly *zealous* for the Lord and traveled many or even all of these places, or various churches could simply invent stories about Simon since there were no reliable traditions at the time. Third, a variety of means for his fate claim he was crucified, slayed with a sword, hacked to death with an axe, and even died peacefully. Both eastern and western accounts of his supposed crucifixion exist, but given that crucifixion was a common means of execution, and that hagiographers wanted to paint the apostles similarly as the crucified Christ, this only has so much evidential value. Finally, there are no strong local traditions for Simon as seen for Thomas in India or Bartholomew and Thaddeus in Armenia.

Wherever scholars land on the fate of Simon, it must be conceded that there is a significant gap in knowledge within the first few centuries of the church. It is undoubtedly possible he died as a martyr. Jesus warned his apostles that they would face persecution, and they publicly followed a crucified savior who was a criminal in the Roman Empire. There is also evidence that some of the lesser apostles died as martyrs (Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 9; Aphrahat, *Demonstration XXI: Of Persecution*, §23), but it is also possible he died peacefully. Given the breadth of the data, the following conclusions seem most reasonable regarding the travels and fate of Simon the Zealot.

1. Simon the Zealot engaged in missionary work outside Jerusalem—*Very probably true* (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; general evidence for the Twelve engaging in missionary work; (Coptic) *Acts of Simon Cananaean*; Dorotheus *Synopsis de Apostol*; *Breviarium Apostolorum*; Movsēs Xorenac’I *History of Armenia*; *Hieronymian Martyrology*; *Pseudo-Abdias (passio Simonis et Judae)*).

2. Simon the Zealot experienced martyrdom—*possible* (martyrdom traditions include Dorotheus, *Synopsis de Apostol*; Movsēs Xorenac’I, *History of Armenia*; (Latin) *Pseudo-Abdias*; *Breviarium Apostolorum*; later martyrologies).

CHAPTER 19

MARTYRDOM OF MATTHIAS

While knowledge of the final four apostles is undoubtedly limited, information about Matthias may be the least. He appears only once in the New Testament, when he is chosen to replace Judas among the twelve apostles (Acts 1:12-25). The name Matthias is a shortened version of Mattathias, which means “Gift of God.” He has been suggested as a possible candidate for the Beloved Disciple.¹ According to Eusebius, Matthias was a member of the seventy before being chosen as an apostle.² Many of the earliest extra-biblical citations simply refer to his act of replacing Judas without providing further information about his life and ministry.³ Some early accounts where the apostles are assigned places of ministry do not even include Matthias.⁴

Clement of Alexandria records an interesting story that relates to Matthias. A heretical movement at this time known as the Nicolaitans, according to Eusebius, allowed unrestrained promiscuity among members.⁵ Clement mentions that Nicolaus, one of the Seventy (Acts 6:5), had a beautiful wife. The apostles accused him of jealousy and so Nicolaus brought his wife to them saying that anyone who wished could have her. Clement claims that Nicolaus was actually faithful to her, and his act of bringing her to

¹Eric L. Titus, “The Identity of the Beloved Disciple,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 69 (1950): 323-28.

²Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.12.3. Pseudo-Hippolytus also affirms that Matthias was one of the seventy. See *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 12.

³Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.20.2; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.13; Origen, *Contra Celsus* 2.65.

⁴*Diatessaron* 8.11; *Acts of Thomas* 1.1.

⁵Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.29.1.

the apostles was a renunciation of pleasure so he could serve the Lord. After reporting this story, Clement says that Matthias taught the importance of fighting against the flesh, not yielding to pleasure, and building up the soul through faith and knowledge.⁶

Another interesting account comes from Hippolytus of Rome, who claims that Matthias gave secret teachings from the Lord to Basilides and Isidore. Hippolytus does not mention the content of the discourses, but twice mentions that Matthias was the source of the secret teachings of Jesus.⁷

There is a *Gospel of Matthias* that is mentioned by both Origen and Eusebius that was likely composed sometime before the third century.⁸ There are debates as to whether this is the same document referred to by Clement of Alexandria as *Traditions of Matthias*.⁹ There is no trace left of its content, but it was considered heretical by Eusebius¹⁰ and was repudiated and condemned by Pope Innocent I in the early fifth century.¹¹ Even though the *Gospel of Matthias* was pseudepigraphal, its existence does reveal a significant interest in the life of Matthias in the first two centuries of the church compared to some of the other lesser-known apostles. While it is not impossible early traditions existed regarding Matthias, it is equally probable that little was known about him and so hagiographers could simply invent stories about his escapades without fear of reprisal. Arie Zwiep concludes, “All these speculations can be safely dismissed as

⁶Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.24.25-26.

⁷Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* Book VII, Chap. 8.

⁸Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:19.

⁹Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 206.

¹⁰Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.

¹¹Els Rose, *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c. 500-1251)* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 47.

historical fiction, construed to invest spurious teachings with apostolic authority. They do not provide us with reliable information about the historical Matthias.”¹²

One of the difficulties in tracing traditions of Matthias is that he was often confused with the apostle Matthew. For instance, in the *Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, a Coptic text attributed to Bartholomew, Matthias is referred to as the rich man who left everything to follow Jesus. This is likely a conflation with Levi-Matthew, the tax collector (cf. Matt 9:9).¹³ According to Clement of Alexandria, Zaccheus and Matthias refer to the same person, the chief tax collector,¹⁴ yet this is incredible since Zaccheus was not with Jesus from the baptism of John and there is no record he was a witness of the resurrection (cf. Acts 1:21-22). According to the early third century Nag Hammadi text, *The Book of Thomas the Contender*, a man named “Mathaias” (which could be Matthias or Matthew) wrote down the secret words of the resurrected Lord Jesus to his brother Jude Thomas.

Biblical Evidence: Acts 1:12-25

As noted previously, the only place Matthias appears in the New Testament is when he is chosen to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle in the first chapter of Acts. The book of Acts begins with the final appearance of Jesus to his disciples. After the final commission by Jesus to his apostles, the announcement of the coming of the Spirit (1:4-8), and his ascension (1:9-11), the apostles meet together in the upper room where Peter describes the fate of Judas in fulfillment of the Scriptures (1:12-20). Readers of the Gospel of Matthew would recognize why Judas was absent from the apostolic lists (Matt 27:3-10), but Luke needed to inform *his* readers.

The focus then shifts to the selection of the final apostle who will replace

¹²Arie W. Zwiep, *Judas and the Choice of Matthias* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 163.

¹³Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 220.

¹⁴Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.6.35.2.

Judas. There are three criteria for consideration as an apostle.¹⁵ This standard serves to ensure the teachings and traditions of Jesus are passed on faithfully (cf. 1:1-3). First, an apostle must have been one who continually followed Jesus.¹⁶ Second, he began with Jesus at the baptism of John and stayed with him until the ascension. Third, he must be a witness of his resurrection (1:21-22).

The apostles narrow potential apostolic replacements down to two, Justus (Joseph) Barsabbas and Matthias. “Barsabbas” means “Son of the Sabba” (the old man). Similar to many Jews of his time, Barsabbas had both a Greek and Jewish name. According to Eusebius, Barsabbas drank poison but God protected him from harm.¹⁷ Another tradition found in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* names Justus Barsabas as one of Nero’s chief men.¹⁸

The disciples cast lots and Matthias is chosen as the twelfth apostle. After his selection, he is never mentioned again in the New Testament. Some have suggested there was a mistake in the election of Matthias, and that Paul should have been selected.¹⁹ However, John Stott notes, “But Luke gives no hint at all that a mistake was made, in spite of the fact that Paul was obviously his hero. Besides, Paul did not have the fuller qualification which Peter laid down.”²⁰ It may also be surprising, as C. K. Barrett notes,

¹⁵James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Narrative Commentaries (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1996), 20.

¹⁶Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger make the point that an apostle was not merely of the person Jesus, but of Jesus the Messiah: “He [Peter] is insistent about the condition to be met by the candidates: they have to have been follow-disciples from the beginning (baptism) to the end (ascension) of the ministry not just of Jesus the man but of the Lord Jesus” (Josep Rius-Camps and Jenny Read-Heimerdinger, *The Message of Acts in Codex Bezae: A Comparison with the Alexandrian Tradition, Acts 1.1-5.42: Jerusalem*, ed. Stanley E. Porter [New York: T & T Clark, 2004], 1:129).

¹⁷Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.

¹⁸*Acts of Paul and Thecla* 11:2-6.

¹⁹Morgan G. Campbell, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1924), 19-20.

²⁰John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 58.

that James the brother of Jesus was not considered for the final apostolic spot.²¹ The primary reason, however, was that James was not a follower of Jesus during his lifetime (cf. John 7:5). Karl Heinrich Rengstorf concludes that the Lukan account of the selection of Matthias has the ring of authenticity:

The whole event appears to be altogether an internal affair of the disciples. One should not doubt its historicity. The confidence in its authenticity is supported by the fact that the names of both the candidates for the twelfth seat belong to the old and pre-Lukan stock of tradition. We gather this from the further fact that Acts does not show any close or personal interest in Matthias, who in such an extraordinary way rose to a particular dignity. He does not appear a second time, and the book does not mention again the second candidate, "Joseph, called Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justus." Thus we see that Luke did not use the information he must have possessed concerning these two men to give a more detailed and colorful picture of the beginnings of the Christian church.²²

Even though he was not mentioned in the Gospels, Matthias saw the life and ministry of Jesus just as closely as the other apostles. He traveled with Jesus, saw him preach, watched him heal the sick and demon possessed, and was a witness of his resurrection (Acts 1:22). Origen even surmised that the appearance to the twelve in 1 Corinthians 15:5 included Matthias.²³ And as with the other apostles, he was arrested and thrown in prison for preaching about Jesus. As a member of the Twelve, Matthias was beaten for his faith, but continued to proclaim Christ (Acts 5:17-42). He was clearly willing to suffer for his belief that Jesus was the expected Messiah who had risen on the third day.

²¹C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: T & T Clark, 1994), 1:103.

²²Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "The Election of Matthias: *Acts 1.15ff*," in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 182. Reginald Fuller makes the case for why there is no good reason that the choice of Matthias cannot be used as evidence for the historicity of the Twelve. See Reginald Fuller, "The Choice of Matthias," *Studia Evangelica*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingston (Berlin, Germany: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), 6:140-46.

²³Origen, *Contra Celsus* 2.65.

Travels and Martyrdom

One of the earliest accounts of the travels of Matthias is found in the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias* (AD fifth century). Some believe this was likely part of the original *Acts of Andrew*, but this is unlikely.²⁴ Yet the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias* are not meant to replace the *Acts of Andrew*, but is an additional story containing a missionary episode of Andrew and Matthias. There is uncertainty, however, whether the story is about Matthias or Matthew.

The story begins with Matthias (Matthew) being assigned to preach in the city of Myrmidonia, the city of cannibals. Some even title the text *Andrew and Matthias among the Anthropophagi*.²⁵ The word *Anthropophagi* comes from a combination of the Greek words *anthropos* (man) and *phagein* (eat). It can be broadly defined as human beings eating the flesh of fellow humans.²⁶ The text says, “The people of that city ate no bread and drank no water, but ate human flesh and drank their blood. They would seize all who came to their city, gouge out their eyes, and make them drink a drug prepared by sorcery and magic.”²⁷ When Matthias came to the city they drugged him and threw him in prison, intending to eat him in three days. But Jesus restored his sight and assured him that Andrew would come and rescue him. Andrew arrives and together they healed other blind men in prison. Although Andrew stays to preach in Myrmidonia, a cloud takes Matthias and his disciples to a city in the east where they meet Peter.

This story clearly has fanciful elements that may have been invented for a theological purpose. Schneemelcher notes, “Although the stigmatizing of cannibalism associated with the theme of these Acts can also be interpreted as a renunciation of any consumption of meat—in contrast to the man-eaters the apostles feed exclusively on

²⁴A. Hilhorst and Pieter J. Lalleman, “The Acts of Andrew: Is It Part of the Original Acts of Andrew?” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2000), 13.

²⁵Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:443.

²⁶Lewis Petrinovich, *The Cannibal Within* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 2000), 4.

²⁷*Acts of Andrew and Matthias* 1.

figs—there are here no pronounced encratite tendencies as in other episodes of the ancient Acts of Andrew.”²⁸ Nevertheless, it is not entirely impossible that Andrew and Matthias did journey together to a land known for cannibalism. Cannibalism was not uncommon in the ancient world. There are records of cannibalistic practices in distant lands hundreds of years before the time of Christ and for hundreds of years after. In the fifth century BC, Herodotus describes how the Issedonians serve the dead body of a man’s father at a banquet along with the flesh from a sacrificed sheep.²⁹ In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder later wrote that the Scythians feed on human flesh.³⁰ To dispel the myth that cannibalism has been a rare phenomenon, Carole Travis-Henikoff notes, “Few people believed their ancestor practiced cannibalism, and some scholars deny its existence altogether, but the truth is . . . we all have cannibals in our closet.”³¹

Another Eastern tradition claims that Simon the Zealot and Matthias joined Andrew on his third missionary trip to Georgia. According to this tradition, Matthias died in the town-fortress of Asparos.³² Given the existence of two separate traditions pairing Andrew and Matthias, there may in fact be a historical core to their ministry partnership.

In the apocryphal traditions of the fate of Matthias, Matthias is consistently confused with Matthew, yet one tradition is uniquely for Matthias, which involves a tomb of the apostle at a church in the Benedictine abbey in Trier, Germany. It traces back no earlier than the eleventh or twelfth century.³³ Ernst Haenchen relates this tradition:

²⁸Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:445.

²⁹Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus* 4.26; cf. 1.217.

³⁰Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 7.2.

³¹Carole A. Travis-Henikoff, *Dinner with a Cannibal: A Complete History of Mankind’s Oldest Taboo* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica, 2008), 23.

³²Giuli Alasania, “Twenty Centuries of Christianity in Georgia,” *IBSU International Refereed Multi-Disciplinary Scientific Journal* 1 (2006): 117-18.

³³Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 246.

“According to church tradition the remains of Matthias, sent by Constantine to Treves and lost under debris at the time of the Norman onslaught, were miraculously rediscovered and buried afresh. Matthias is the only apostle whose remains (without the skull, preserved in Italy) lie in Germany.”³⁴

There is a tradition that Matthias preached and died in Judea. *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 12 says, “And Matthias, who was one of the seventy, was numbered along with the eleven apostles, and preached in Jerusalem, and fell asleep and was buried there.”³⁵ Pseudo-Hippolytus does not mention that Matthias died peacefully, but given that he uses the term “fell asleep,” and that he mentions the martyrdoms of other apostles in the same passage, this is the natural interpretation. Budge reports the tradition that Matthias preached in Damascus, but died peacefully in Judea after the “men of the city” seized him and tried to burn him alive.³⁶ Schmidt notes,

The fact that both apostles [James son of Alphaeus and Matthias] disappear from view so quickly and do not reappear until centuries later in unreliable or contradictory traditions means that they probably died early, either in Jerusalem or nearby. This is more likely to have occurred in a period of turmoil like that just before the war. So although the fact regarding these two are few, in combination they support the circumstances described here.³⁷

Schmidt concludes that Matthias may have died by stoning at the hands of the chief priests and Pharisees. In *Sacred and Legendary Art*, Anna Jameson records a similar tradition that Matthias preached the gospel in Judea and was killed at the hands of the

³⁴Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell: 1971), 162 n. 5.

³⁵ Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 12, as cited in *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325: Fathers of the Third Century, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 5 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 255.

³⁶E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Contendings of the Apostles: Being the Histories and the Lives and Martyrdoms and Deaths of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 241-45.

³⁷Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles after Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 115.

Jews. But rather than dying by stoning, she reports that he was killed either by an axe or lance.³⁸

One of the more popular traditions is that Matthias journeyed to Ethiopia where he preached and then died as a martyr. The Byzantine church historian Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos (aka, Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos) first recorded this in the fourteenth century in his *Ecclesiastical Historiae* (2.40).³⁹ Nicephorus was largely dependent upon early church historians such as Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomenos, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Evagrius Scholastikos.⁴⁰ Since none of these writers mention the fate of Matthias in Ethiopia, it is highly unlikely that Nicephorus transmitted an unknown but reliable tradition of his fate. In his *Ecclesiastical History* (1.19), Socrates mentions that Matthew was assigned Ethiopia, but he makes no mention of Matthias. It seems more probable that Nicephorus conflated the traditions of Matthias and Matthew than he somehow retained an independent reliable tradition of the fate of the apostle Matthias in Ethiopia.

One final source must be evaluated concerning the fate of Matthias, which is found in the Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 43a (c. AD 4th/5th cent.):

Our Rabbis taught: Yeshu had five disciples, Matthai, Nakai, Nezer, Buni and Todah. When Matthai was brought [before the court] he said to them [the judges], Shall Matthai be executed? Is it not written, *Matthai* [when] *shall I come and appear before God?* Thereupon they retorted: Yes, Matthai shall be executed, since it is written, *When Matthai* [when] *shall [he] die and his name perish.*⁴¹

This particular passage follows a section about Jesus. While there is some debate among scholars whether or not certain rabbinical passages refer to Jesus, there is

³⁸Anna Brownell Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891), 1:254.

³⁹Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos, *Ecclesiastical Historiae* 2.40.

⁴⁰Alexander Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), s.v. "Xanthopoulos, Nikephoros Kallistos," by Alice-Mary Talbot.

⁴¹Rabbi I. Epstein, trans., *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin In Four Volumes III* (London: Soncino, 1935), 282.

almost universal agreement *Sanhedrin* 43a refers to Jesus of Nazareth. The context reveals that “Yeshu” was charged with practicing sorcery and leading Israel astray, witnesses were called, and he was hanged on the eve of Passover. Still, the historical value of this passage is questionable. While it is not entirely *impossible* that it retains at least the fossils of an older tradition about Jesus and his disciples,⁴² even conservative scholars consider it a “dubious source”⁴³ and “unlikely” to contain independent testimony related to the historical Jesus.⁴⁴ At best, it is a late Jewish account that affirms the existence of Jesus.⁴⁵

While some scholars have suggested this passage may provide evidence for the fate of Matthias, there are serious reasons to question its applicability. First, it is a late source. No rabbinic writings from the first or second century AD exist during the period of living memory. Second, historical questions were not the primary concern in early rabbinic literature such as the Mishnah and Talmud. The writings were more concerned to encourage Jews to follow the Torah than to discuss the past *per se*.⁴⁶ Third, this particular passage is more concerned with polemic against Christianity than providing an objective account of history.⁴⁷

Even if this passage were historically reliable, there would still be reason to

⁴²Ernst Bammel writes, “This incrustation cannot exclude the possibility that the Jewish texts contain, besides shrewd theological arguments, at least the fossils of old tradition and reveal something of a general view as to the nature and origin of Christianity which, because it is a panorama of the whole from a special point of observation, might be a worthwhile contribution to the problem itself” (Ernst Bammel, “Christian Origins in Jewish Tradition,” *New Testament Studies* 13 [1967]: 319).

⁴³Craig Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1998), 443-50.

⁴⁴Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 246-48.

⁴⁵John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:96.

⁴⁶Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 104.

⁴⁷Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:95.

question its relevance to the fate of Matthias. For one, it is not clear that “Matthai” refers to the apostle Matthias. It could be a reference to the apostle Matthew. Or since “Matthew” was a common name,⁴⁸ it could be a reference to an entirely unknown follower of Jesus. This is made more likely since four other unknown disciples of Jesus are mentioned along with Matthai: Nakai, Nezer, Buni and Todah.⁴⁹ This passage simply cannot provide any confident information as to the fate of the apostle Matthias.

Conclusion

Matthias is undoubtedly the apostle of which the least is known. He is only mentioned once in the book of Acts and then disappears from the New Testament. Nevertheless, some important observations can be made about his life and fate. First, as the twelfth apostle, he was a witness of Jesus during his entire ministry as well as of his resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). Second, along with the other apostles, he proclaimed the gospel publicly and was willing to suffer for his faith (Acts 5:17-42). Third, there are a variety of historically questionable stories about Matthias that appear in late traditions of the church fathers and in gnostic sources such as *The Gospel of Matthias*. Fourth, there are traditions Matthias died as a martyr as well as traditions he died peacefully. Methods of his execution include burning, stoning, and stabbing with either an axe or lance. And yet *none* of them are even close to the period of living memory.

The tentative nature of the evidence does not mean Matthias died peacefully. After all, Jesus made it clear that his disciples would be persecuted for their faith (Matt 21:33-40; 22:6; 23:30-31, 34, 37; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 6:22-23; 11:47-50; 13:34; 20:9-

⁴⁸Margaret Williams, “Palestinian Jewish Personal Names in Acts,” in *The Book of Acts In Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 91.

⁴⁹Graham Twelftree mentions that it is impossible to know why only five disciples are mentioned. He believes that it is reasonable to connect “Matthai” with Matthew and “Todah” with Thaddeus. As for the others, Twelftree suggests “Nakai” may be Nicodemus (John 3:1), Nicanor or Nicolas (Acts 6:5), or the founder of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6), “Nezer” may be an allusion to “Nazarene,” a reference for “Christian,” and “Buni” may be a corrupted allusion to Nicodemus. See Graham Twelftree, “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” in *Gospel Perspectives: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels*, ed. David Wenham (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1984), 5:322.

18). Matthias proclaimed the gospel publicly with the knowledge and expectation that he would suffer and possibly be martyred for his faith, just as Jesus and the apostle James had been early in the church. He was fully aware his proclamation may cost him his life, and he embraced it willingly. Additionally, there were early traditions that many of the apostles were martyred. In the context of martyrdom, Polycarp refers to Paul and “other apostles” who stayed faithful amidst persecution.⁵⁰ Syrian Church Father Aphrahat also mentions that some of the lesser-known apostles died as martyrs in diverse places,⁵¹ which could have included Matthias. With all the evidence in mind, the following conclusion seems most reasonable:

1. Matthias engaged in missionary work outside Jerusalem—*Very probably true* (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; general evidence for the Twelve engaging in missionary work; variety of traditions Matthias ministered in Judea, Damascus, Georgia, Scythia, Ethiopia).
2. Matthias experienced martyrdom—*possible* (Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 43a; Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos *Ecclesiastical Historiae* II.40; later traditions he was stoned or killed with an axe or sword; non-martyr traditions *Hippolytus on the Twelve* 12; E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthias*; later traditions he died naturally).

⁵⁰Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 9.

⁵¹Aphrahat, *Demonstration XXI: Of Persecution*, §23.

CHAPTER 20

OBJECTIONS TO THE FATE OF THE APOSTLES

So far the evidence for the martyrdom of the apostles has been carefully examined. There is convincing evidence Peter, Paul, James the son of Zebedee, and James the brother of the Lord died as martyrs. It is more probable than not that Thomas and Andrew died as martyrs. And the scanty evidence for some of the lesser known apostles, such as Simon the Zealot and Matthias makes it difficult to determine their fates with any confidence. The critical point is not that it can be established that they all died as martyrs. Rather, it is their willingness to suffer and die for their firsthand witness of the risen Jesus, the evidence some of them really died as martyrs, and the lack of a contrary story that any of them recanted.

Historian Michael R. Licona captures the key point:

After Jesus' death, the disciples endured persecution, and a number of them experienced martyrdom. The strength of their conviction indicates that they were not just claiming Jesus had appeared to them after rising from the dead. They really believed it. They willingly endangered themselves by publicly proclaiming the risen Christ.¹

The consistent testimony of the New Testament and the earliest sources is that the apostles were witnesses of the risen Jesus and willingly suffered for the proclamation of the gospel. There is no evidence any of them waived in their faith or commitment. Of course, this does not mean they were necessarily right, but it does mean they really thought it was true. They wholeheartedly believed Jesus had risen from the grave and they bet their lives on it.

¹Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 366.

To complete the analysis of the fate of the apostles, it is necessary to consider some common objections.

Objection 1: What about Others Who Have Died for their Faith?

Many people throughout history have died for their beliefs. Buddhist monks regularly light themselves on fire as a form of political protest.² On September 11, 2001, nineteen radical Muslims hijacked two planes and crashed into the twin towers, killing 2,977 people. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of either Buddhist monks or Muslim terrorists. They are both equally committed to their religious causes. Muslim radicals believed they were following the commands of the Qur'an and would be rewarded in the afterlife. Buddhist monks believed their sacrifice would save more lives in the future or lead to political freedom. Given these Muslim radicals and Buddhists were just as sincere as the apostles, should their claims be considered as reliable as well?

This objection misses a key difference between the deaths of the apostles and modern martyrs. Modern martyrs³ die for what they sincerely believe is true, but their knowledge comes secondhand from others. For instance, Muslim terrorists who attacked the Twin Towers on 9/11 were not eyewitnesses of any miracles by Mohammed. In fact, they were not eyewitnesses of *any* events of the life of Mohammed. Rather, they lived over thirteen centuries later. No doubt the Muslim radicals acted out of sincere belief, but their convictions were received secondhand (at best) from others. They did not know Mohammed personally, see him fulfill any prophecy, or witness him doing any miracles

²For example, a Buddhist monk suffered serious injury after setting himself on fire to protest the killing of cattle for meat. Months earlier, a Tibetan protestor in monk's robes doused himself with gasoline and lit himself on fire in political protest against China. See Anthony Boyd, "Buddhist Monk Sets Himself on Fire to Protest against the Slaughter of Cattle in Sri Lanka," *The Daily Mail*, May 24, 2013, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2330398/Buddhist-monk-sets-protest-slaughter-cattle-Sri-Lanka.html>.

³The term "modern martyrs" refers to those who die in the present age for their beliefs. Technically, Muslim terrorists would not qualify as *martyrs* since they are actively murdering people rather than being put to death for the proclamation of their faith.

such as walking on water, healing the blind, or rising from the dead. There is a massive difference between willingly dying for the sake of the religious ideas accepted from the testimony of others (Muslim radicals) and willingly dying for the proclamation of a faith based upon one's own eyewitness account (apostles). The deaths of the nineteen terrorists provide no more evidence for the truth of Islam than my death would provide for the truth of Christianity. My martyrdom would show I really believed it, but nothing more.

In contrast to the beliefs of Buddhist monks and Muslim radicals (and any other modern martyrs, including Christians), the beliefs of the apostles was not received secondhand, but from personal experience with the risen Jesus (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor 15:5-8). They proclaimed what they had seen and heard with their own eyes and ears, not stories received from others. According to Luke, "He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). In his first sermon after Pentecost, Peter says,

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. (Acts 2:22-24)

Peter not only claims that he was an eyewitness but that the events took place in public and that his audience had full knowledge of them. The events were not done secretly in a corner. Buddhist monks and Muslim terrorists certainly *believe* in the truth of their religion and are were willing to suffer and die for it, but the apostles were willing to suffer and die for what they *knew* to be true because they had seen it with their own eyes.

If Jesus had not risen from the grave and appeared to his apostles, then they would have been in the unique position of knowing the falsity of his claims. In other words, if the resurrection did not happen, the apostles would have willingly suffered and died for something they knew was false. While people die for what they believe is true, it is a stretch to think *all* the apostles were willing to suffer and die for a claim they *knew*

was false. The suffering and deaths of the apostles testifies to the sincerity of their beliefs that they had seen the risen Jesus.

In *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, Candida Moss objects to the claim that the deaths of Christians uniquely provides evidence for Christianity: “For much of the Christian era, martyrdom was viewed as particular to Christianity and as an indication of Christianity’s unique possession of religious truth. If Christians alone were prepared to die for their beliefs, it was thought, then there must be something special about Christianity.”⁴ Moss is certainly right that people of all religious persuasions have been willing to die for their beliefs, however, this is not the argument. The argument presented here rests uniquely upon the apostles as eyewitnesses to the risen Christ. They were willing to die because they had seen the risen Jesus and *knew* death was not the end. Yes, others have died for a *secondhand* faith, but the apostles died for what they saw *firsthand*.

Objection 2: The Apostles Were Executed Against Their Wills

Could it be possible the apostles were killed unwillingly? Maybe they recanted their faith, rejected the risen Jesus, but were killed anyways. There are a few problems with this suggestion. First, there is not a shred of evidence any of the apostles either waived in their faith or recanted their beliefs (excluding Judas). The uniform testimony from Acts and the early church fathers is that they willingly suffered for proclaiming the risen Jesus. Second, the apostles were killed in diverse places, at diverse times, and in diverse ways. If the apostles were all rounded up and killed together, this objection may have some merit. But this is simply not the case. The deaths of the apostles likely took place over a span of about sixty years (AD 42-c. AD 103) and hundreds of miles apart (possibly even *thousands*). Some of the apostles were known to have died (e.g. James the son of Zebedee) and yet the others continued to proclaim the gospel. Given the diverse

⁴Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 23.

stories of their travels and fates, it is inconceivable they all unwillingly suffered and died for their faith. In reality, there is no good reason to believe this is true for *any* of them.

Third, if an apostle did recant his faith, it is hard to imagine there would not have been at least one mention of it in history. Licona notes,

We may also expect that a recantation by any of the disciples would have provided ammunition for Christian opponents like Celsus and Lucian in the third quarter of the second century, the former of which wrote against the church while the latter wrote of the Christian movement in a pejorative manner. Thus to suggest that the disciples did not willingly suffer for their message would be to posit a scenario greatly lacking in plausibility.⁵

Objection 3: The Apostles Were Misguided

Could the apostles have been sincere but misguided in their convictions about Jesus? One problem with this objection is that the resurrection lies at the core of the first Christian *kerygma*. As seen in chapter 2, to be a Christian was to believe in the resurrection, which is clear from the earliest Christian creeds, the New Testament, and the apostolic fathers. William Lane Craig observes,

It is difficult to exaggerate what a devastating effect the crucifixion must have had on the disciples. They had left everything for him, and now he was dead. They had left everything for him, and now he was dead. They had no conception of a dying, much less rising, Messiah, for Messiah would reign forever (cf. John 12:34). Without prior belief in the resurrection, belief in Jesus as Messiah would have been impossible in view of his death.⁶

Craig argues that without the resurrection the Christian faith could not have come into being. It was the resurrection that turned tragedy into triumph. God had vindicated the person of Jesus Christ by raising him from the dead. Thus, he could be proclaimed as the long-awaited Messiah (Acts 2:32-36). If Jesus had not risen, Paul claims the faith of a Christian is worthless and there is no forgiveness for sins (1 Cor 15:14, 17). But since Jesus has risen salvation is possible (Rom 10:9), without belief in the resurrection, the

⁵Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 371.

⁶William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989), 406.

disciples would have seen Jesus as a failed Messiah (Luke 24:21). They would have returned to their previous jobs and gone on with their lives as before. Craig concludes, “The origin of the Christian Way therefore hinges on the belief of the early disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead.”⁷ If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then critics have to posit another explanation to account for the origin of Christian belief. While there are many candidates, none have more plausibility than the resurrection hypothesis.⁸

Second, it is difficult to conclude the apostles were misguided because they did not expect the resurrection to occur. While Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection (Mark 8:31; 12:1-12; Matt 16:21; Luke 9:22; Luke 13:32-33), it is clear the apostles did not understand what he meant until *after* his resurrection. And they were still incredulous when they first encountered the evidence he had been raised from the dead (Luke 24:13-35; John 20:24-29). As Jews, the apostles expected the resurrection to be a corporate event at the *eschaton*. They simply were not expecting the resurrection of an individual before Israel’s history had reached its climax. And yet according to N. T. Wright, “The resurrection was the sign to the early Christians that this living god had acted at last in accordance with his ancient promise, and had thereby shown himself to be God, the unique creator and sovereign of the world.”⁹ The apostles embraced the radical view that Jesus had resurrected *in time* because they thought they saw him alive after his crucifixion. If this is not the case, critics have to provide a more plausible explanation for the origin of the apostles’ belief in the resurrection.

Third, the belief of the apostles is rooted in their personal experience of seeing the risen Jesus. Thomas Wespelal concludes,

The alleged martyrdom of eyewitnesses of the resurrection, one of which (James) is recorded in Acts and others of which are supported by tradition, vanquishes the

⁷Ibid., 407, emphasis in original.

⁸For an in-depth analysis of competing explanations, see Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 465-610.

⁹N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 726.

objection that all martyrs are sincere but misguided—these died not for what they merely believed, but for what they claimed to have seen.¹⁰

Objection 4: Miracles Are Impossible

If miracles cannot happen then the resurrection claims are false. If the resurrection claims are false then the apostles were either deluded, mistaken, or liars in their claim to have seen the risen Jesus. Simply put, if miracles are impossible then the testimony of the apostles is worthless.

It is important to keep perspective on the limits of the argument presented here. The argument is not that the apostles died as martyrs for their faith and so the resurrection is true. That is too simplistic and skips a number of important steps. The argument is that they were willing to suffer and die, and many of them did actually die, for their belief that had seen Jesus alive after his death. Their deaths do not prove the truth of their claims, but demonstrate the sincerity and depth of their convictions. The fact that the apostles died for their faith does not singlehandedly demonstrate the miraculous. Rather, it is one piece within a larger argument that helps establish the sincerity and reliability of the apostles as witnesses to the resurrection.

Nevertheless, it is premature to dismiss the testimony of the apostles since it implies a miracle. There are thousands of well-documented accounts of instantaneous healings of people with serious injuries and severe illnesses, which took place without relapse, after concerted public prayers. Craig Keener has set up strict criteria for identifying a miracle and catalogued some of the most verified miracles in history. He conservatively estimates that roughly 200 million living people have either seen or had an extraordinary experience, not accounted for by contemporary scientific understanding, directly tied to Christian prayers.¹¹

¹⁰Thomas J. Wespelal, “Martyrdom and the Furtherance of God’s Plan: The Value of Dying for the Christian Faith” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2005), 236.

¹¹Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 1:211-599.

While Hume has often been credited with undermining the possibility of recognizing the miraculous, it is widely recognized today that he overstated his case.¹² The key question for the possibility of the miraculous is whether or not God exists. If naturalism is true, then the miraculous can be ruled out *a priori*. But if God does exist, then miracles are possible—if not probable. Gary Habermas observes,

If it can be successfully argued that naturalism is insufficient as an explanation of the universe and that an explanation like theism, which incorporates an external intelligent source, is plausible, then it may also be rational to believe that the resurrection of Jesus was an act performed in accordance with God's attributes and will. If this is a theistic universe, then we might require even less direct evidence to affirm God's intervention in this or other historical occurrences, since miracles might follow, due to what we would know concerning the nature of the universe.¹³

The primary question, as Habermas observes, is whether or not theism is true. In recent decades the case for theism has grown exponentially and naturalism has been put on the defensive.¹⁴ The case for theism can be found in such diverse disciplines as biology, biochemistry, chemistry, physics, astrobiology, cosmology, near-death experiences, philosophy, and others.¹⁵ The case for theism has grown so significantly that many atheists have begun to take notice. In fact, Antony Flew, who helped set the agenda of atheism for fifty years, changed his mind about God shortly before he died. In 2007, he

¹²See John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and R. Douglass Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).

¹³Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 53.

¹⁴Recent texts that challenge naturalism include R. Scott Smith, *Naturalism and our Knowledge of Reality* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012); William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Bruce L. Gordon and William A. Dembski, *The Nature of Nature* (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2011).

¹⁵See Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009); idem, *Darwin's Doubt* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013). In biochemistry, see Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Free, 2006). In chemistry, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 143-66. In physics, see Hugh Ross, *Why the Universe Is the Way It Is* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 2008. In astrobiology, see Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards, *The Privileged Planet* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004). In cosmology, see William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). In near-death experiences, see Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004). And in philosophy, see J. P. Moreland, *Consciousness and the Existence of God* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

released *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Flew concluded, "I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence. I believe that this universe's intricate laws manifest what scientists have called the Mind of God. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine Source."¹⁶ How did he come to this conclusion? "The short answer is this: this is the world's picture, as I see it, that has emerged from modern science."¹⁷

Five years later, renowned atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel released a controversial book titled, *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. While he has not abandoned his atheism, Nagel noted the failure of physico-chemical reductionism:

But for a long time I have found the materialist account of how we and our fellow organisms came to exist hard to believe, including the standard version of how the evolutionary process works. The more details we learn about the chemical basis of life and the intricacy of the genetic code, the more unbelievable the standard historical account becomes.¹⁸

Examining the merits of the particular arguments for theism is beyond the scope of the investigation, but it should be clear that theism is experiencing resurgence and cannot simply be dismissed as outdated: it is a rational option. Miracles are much more probable if God does exist, as these arguments aim to demonstrate, however, the key question is not whether the existence of God can be proven (epistemology) but that he actually exists (metaphysics). The failure of these arguments would not prove God's non-existence or that miracle-claims are false. It would merely follow that God's existence cannot be rationally demonstrated, which is a different matter. If God even *possibly* exists, then miracles may occur. To rule out the possibility of the miraculous, *a priori* is to beg the question against theism. Thus, the skeptic must not only defeat theistic

¹⁶Antony Flew and Roy Varghese, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 88.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos: Why The Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford, 2012), 5.

arguments, but must also provide positive reasons for establishing God's non-existence. Until skeptics have demonstrated the non-existence of God, rational people are well within their epistemic rights to be open to embracing the miraculous if that is in fact where the evidence leads.

Objection 5: Christians Wrote the Martyrdom Accounts

This objection is only partly true. Josephus provides an account of the death of James the brother of Jesus.¹⁹ As noted previously, this passage is largely undisputed. While the execution of James is included in a broader section about the priesthood of Albinus, James was stoned as a "lawbreaker," which suggests he was condemned for blasphemy and his Christological allegiances. While this is the only *positive* evidence from non-Christian sources, it is important to note that there are no secular sources competing with the Christian account regarding the fate of these men. No early non-Christian sources accuse the apostles of either being liars or recanting their faith. The unanimous testimony is that the apostles were willing to suffer and die for their faith, and some of them actually did.

Additionally, a few Gnostic sources attest to the fate of some of the apostles. For instance, in the case of Peter, this includes the (Coptic) *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocryphon of James*. As for James the brother of Jesus, the *First Apocalypse of James* and the *Second Apocalypse of James* are Gnostic sources that attest to his execution.

Nevertheless, the majority of sources that report the deaths of the apostles are in fact Christian, but is this reason to dismiss them wholeheartedly? This is essentially a charge that Christian writers are biased and either unwilling or incapable of reporting truth. This objection was answered in chapter 10 under the heading "Are historians hopelessly biased?"

¹⁹Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.197-203.

While the Apocryphal Acts are clearly laced with legend, and some local legends may have been developed for political reasons, many of the earliest accounts have the ring of authenticity. For instance, the brevity of the account of the death of James counts in favor of its reliability (Acts 12:2). And the apostolic fathers often mention the deaths of Peter and Paul incidentally, as if their fates were common knowledge.²⁰ They did not aim to establish them as martyrs or add flowery details to their deaths. Rather, they simply make reference to their fates as if it is a matter of common knowledge with their audience and report the details in a sober manner.

The majority of witnesses to the fates of the apostles are in fact Christians. But as seen, not all witnesses are equal in the ability and willingness to present the truth. Sources for the martyrdom accounts cannot simply be dismissed because they came from Christians—a classic example of the *genetic fallacy*—but must be judged on their own individual merit as with any other historical source.

Objection 6: What about Joseph Smith and His Followers Who Died for Mormonism?

Joseph Smith (1805-1844) is the founder of Mormonism. At the age of fourteen, he claimed to have seen a vision²¹ of God the Father and Jesus who told him not to follow any of the sects of his day but that God would restore the true church through him. He was later directed by the angel Moroni to discover some gold plates, which contained the spiritual history of the Nephites and Lamanites, including a visit by Jesus to the Americas. He claimed to have received revelation from God for the translation of the *Book of Mormon*, a scripture that is claimed to complete the message of the Bible.

In 1839, Smith and his followers moved to Nauvoo, Illinois. Under his

²⁰e.g., Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 3:1-2.

²¹According to the LDS Church, Smith saw a “heavenly manifestation” of God the Father and Jesus Christ. For a description of the first vision, see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, “First Vision Accounts,” accessed April 14, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>.

leadership, the city of Nauvoo prospered. Five years after moving to Nauvoo, some disaffected Mormons publicly criticized Smith in the *Nauvoo Expositor* for his unprophetlike behavior. Smith ordered the city marshal to destroy the press, but one of the men responsible for the press filed a complaint. Smith was eventually charged with treason by the state of Illinois and he and his brother Hyrum turned themselves in on June 25. They were placed in a low-security prison in the Carthage Jail, about twenty-two miles outside Nauvoo, along with their companions Willard Richards and John Taylor. Both Joseph and Hyrum possessed smuggled pistols. On June 27, 1844 a group of armed men with painted faces stormed the Carthage Jail, and in a short gun battle, Joseph and Hyrum ended up dead.²²

Many Mormons have since heralded Joseph Smith as a martyr. Doctrine & Covenants 135:4 says,

When Joseph went to Carthage to deliver himself up to the pretended requirements of the law, two or three days previous to his assassination, he said, "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I SHALL DIE INNOCENT, AND IT SHALL YET BE SAID OF ME—HE WAS MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD."

According to Brigham Young,

He [Joseph Smith] holds the keys of that kingdom for the last dispensation—the keys to rule in the spirit-world; and he rules there triumphantly, for he gained full power and a glorious victory over the power of Satan while he was yet in the flesh, and was a martyr to his religion and to the name of Christ, which gives him a most perfect victory in the spirit-world.²³

There is no question Smith was morally justified in defending himself. The important question is whether or not Smith qualifies as a *martyr* who can be compared to the apostles, or Jesus (as Mormons claim). Two important points stand out when analyzing his fate. First, Smith claims he was led "like a lamb to the slaughter." Jesus willingly gave up his life without a struggle (John 10:18). He had the power to free

²²Brigham Young University, "History of the Church," 6:618, accessed April 14, 2014, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/hc/hcpgs/hc.aspx> .

²³Brigham Young, "Intelligence, Etc.," *Journal of Discourses* 7 (October 9, 1859): 289, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://jod.mrm.org/7/282>.

himself and harm his attackers but he resisted (John 19:11), but Smith accepted a weapon while in jail and used it to shoot at his attackers, two or three of which reportedly died.²⁴ How can his actions rightly be compared to those of Jesus? Second, it is questionable if Smith was innocent of the charges brought against him. He had been guilty of polygamy, including relationships with teenage girls and married women.²⁵ He had been accused of abusing power and was responsible for ordering the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. He certainly deserved a fair trial, but there is no reason to believe these were trumped up charges without merit. Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson conclude,

He was considered by many in the community to be a scoundrel, and it was his disgusting behavior that created the conflict when the publishers of the newspaper exposed him. He was sent to jail because he was an assumed lawbreaker—charged with riot—and he died as a result of a brief firefight in which he participated, *willingly* using deadly force. Mormons are certainly free to insist that their founder perished as a martyr, but the facts lead a dispassionate observer to a different conclusion.²⁶

Even though the case for Smith being a martyr has been seriously compromised, outsiders at the Carthage jail unjustly attacked him and he did die as the founding prophet of the LDS faith. While he did attack and reportedly kill some men, he was also acting in self-defense. Should his example not provide evidence for the sincerity of his claims regarding the founding of the Mormon Church just as the deaths of the apostles provide evidence for the sincerity of their claims to have seen the risen Jesus?

Probing into the lives and motivations of the apostles shows a significant difference between them and Joseph Smith. When initially choosing to follow Jesus, the apostles believed they were going to reign in power with him in Israel, which is why

²⁴Brigham Young University, “History of the Church,” 7:103, accessed April 14, 2014, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/hc/hcpgs/hc.aspx>.

²⁵See Richard S. van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1989); Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997); Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); and Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

²⁶Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, *Answering Mormons’ Questions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 282.

James and John made their requests to Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10:37). They believed Jesus would be a military and political ruler like David, and they would share in his reign. Yet their hopes were dashed at his arrest and crucifixion (Luke 24:21). They went back to their lives as before, hoping the *real* messiah would eventually come. Even though Jesus had predicted it, they had no expectation of his resurrection. Reports of the empty tomb and risen Jesus were not enough—they needed an actual appearance of Jesus to be persuaded it was true (cf. John 20:24-29). By following the resurrected Jesus, the apostles willingly embraced a religion that would involve sacrifice, service, humility, and likely death. They did it not for personal gain, but because they had seen the risen Jesus and feared disobeying God more than the wrath of men (Acts 5:27-32).²⁷

In contrast to the apostles, serious questions can be raised against the motivation of Joseph Smith. He was clearly enamored with power, sex, and money. As for power, Smith built a militia of 5,000 men (which was more than half the size of the US Army). He was also a politician, campaigning for the presidency until the time of his death. As for sex, Smith had at least 33 wives, including four sister-pairs (Huntington, Patridge, Johnson, Lawrence), eleven polyandrous unions with women already married, one mother-daughter pair (Sessions), and some girls as young as fourteen.²⁸ As for money, Smith claimed to have received a prophecy to start a bank in Kirtland, Ohio. He was the personal cashier for the bank. Even though he promised his followers it would

²⁷In his book *Cold-Case Christianity*, detective J. Warner Wallace describes how in his entire career as a detective, there are three broad motives that lie at the heart of any type of misbehavior: (1) financial greed, (2) sexual or relational desire, (3) pursuit of power. And yet it is clear the apostles were not motivated by any of these. First, as ministers who went out to proclaim the gospel, they left everything behind (Luke 18:28). When a poor disabled man asking for money approached Peter, he said, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (Acts 3:6). Second, there is no record the apostles were motivated by sexual desire. They were most likely married (except John) and held sexual purity in high regard. Third, they had seen Jesus model humility by washing their feet (John 13:1-7) and dying on the cross. They knew following Jesus meant giving up power and offering their lives for the sake of the gospel. See J. Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013), 239-52.

²⁸Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 4-7.

succeed, it eventually failed and some members of the church lost everything they had.

These factors do not necessarily prove Smith was lying, but they raise serious questions about his motivation, character, and the claim he was a martyr. The apostles willingly embraced sacrifice and suffering because they were convinced Jesus had risen from the grave. There is no evidence whatsoever they embraced the faith for material gain. As the first chapters of Acts demonstrate, it cost them considerably to follow Christ. In contrast to the apostles, Smith had much to personally gain by propagating his church.

What about the first followers of Mormonism? The Book of Mormon begins with the three witnesses (Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris) and the eight witnesses (Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith, Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith) who testified that they have seen the engravings on the plates. However, in reality it appears that *none* of these witnesses actually saw the plates with their naked eyes.²⁹ They all saw the plates “spiritually.” In his review of *No Man Knows My History*, by Fawn M. Brodie, Mormon historian Marvin S. Hill writes,

What of the prophet's story about gold plates, and what about his witnesses? Given Brodie's assumptions, was there not deception here, if not collusion? Brodie maintains that the Prophet exercised some mysterious influence upon the witnesses which caused them to see the plates, thus making Joseph Smith once more the perpetrator of a religious fraud. The evidence is extremely contradictory in this area, but there is a possibility that the three witnesses saw the plates in vision only, for Stephen Burnett in a letter written in 1838, a few weeks after the event, described Martin Harris' testimony to this effect: “When I came to hear Martin Harris state in public that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or

²⁹*Doctrine and Covenants* 17:2-5 says, “And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them [the plates], even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old. And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God; And this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work. And ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., has seen them; for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1835). A few troubling questions emerge from this account: Why do they need faith to see the plates in the first place? Smith was already in the process of translation, so why not simply show them the plates? Since faith was necessary to have permission to see the plates, is it not likely that “seeing” the plates also took an act of faith? Why would prayer be necessary to see a physical object?

imagination, neither Oliver nor David . . . the last pedestal gave way, in my view our foundations.”³⁰

According to Mormon Church history, Joseph Smith was the only one who physically saw the golden plates. Unlike the twelve apostles (and Paul and James the brother of the Lord), there was only *one* witness to the plates, and as seen, this witness had questionable motivations. Despite popular Mormon claims, there is little reason to consider Joseph Smith a martyr whose death provides evidence for the truth of his religious claims.

Conclusion

There is no good reason to doubt the sincerity of the apostolic testimony in regard to the resurrection of Jesus. Blaise Pascal captures the absurdity of believing the apostles simply made it all up:

The hypothesis that the Apostles were knaves is quite absurd. Follow it out to the end and imagine these twelve men meeting after Jesus’s death and conspiring to say that he had risen from the dead. This means attacking all the powers that be. The human heart is singularly susceptible to fickleness, to change, to promises, to bribery. One of them had only to deny his story under these inducements, or still more because of possible imprisonment, tortures and death, and they would all have been lost. Follow that out (310).³¹

³⁰Marvin S. Hill, “Brodie Revisited: A Reappraisal,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (1972): 83.

³¹Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995), 97.

CHAPTER 21

CONCLUSION

The willingness of the apostles to suffer and die for their faith is a critical step in establishing their sincerity and reliability as the first witnesses to the risen Jesus. This section will contain summaries of key findings and draw some general conclusions from this investigation. These initial points portray the context, which provides a general expectation for the martyrdom of the apostles. The final section includes summary findings of the individual apostles and draws some final conclusions.

Summary of the Contextual Evidence

Six points stand out as most relevant for this investigation. First, the Christian movement was a resurrection movement since its inception. To believe in Jesus was to believe that he had risen from the grave, conquering death and sin. There is no evidence the earliest Christians considered the resurrection secondary. This is clear from the centrality of the resurrection in the earliest creeds, which predate the writing of the New Testament books (e.g., Rom 1:3-4; 4:24b-25; 1 Thess 4:14; 1 Cor 15:3-7). The resurrection also held central place in the apostolic *kerygma* as represented in the sermon summaries in Acts (e.g. Acts 2:24). From the earliest records of the Christian faith to the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, it is evident the apostles had a *resurrection* faith.

Second, the twelve apostles were the first witnesses to the resurrection and they launched the initial missionary movement from Jerusalem. The missionary efforts of the apostles are supported by both internal and external evidence. They had been with Jesus at least from his baptism until the ascension, and they were eyewitnesses of Jesus after his death (Acts 1:21-22). Paul and James the brother of the Lord were not members

of the Twelve, but they were eyewitnesses of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:7-8) who were willing to suffer and die for their beliefs. After Pentecost, the apostles boldly proclaimed that Jesus is the risen Messiah, even though they were threatened, persecuted, thrown in jail, and martyred (Acts 4:1-22; 5:18-32; 7:54-60; 12:2).

Third, Christians were persecuted in the early church. Jesus had predicted his followers would be persecuted (Matt 10:16-23; Mark 13:9; John 15:18-27; 16:2-3, 33) and that they would suffer and die like Israel had done to the prophets (Matt 21:33-40; 22:6; 23:30-31, 34, 37; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 6:22-23; 11:47-50; 13:34; 20:9-18). Paul not only suffered deeply for proclaiming the gospel (2 Cor 6:4-9), he also taught that Christians should expect to suffer as well (Rom 8:35-36; 1 Thess 3:3-4; Phil 1:29; 2 Tim 4:5). The expectation of persecution and suffering is a central theme throughout the entirety of the New Testament. Specifically, persecution began with the Jews, as reported in the book of Acts. They turned Jesus over to face crucifixion and threatened, beat, and killed some of the first Christians (Acts 4:13-22; 5:40; 7:54-60). Roman persecution began during the reign of Nero. He was the first emperor to use state power against Christians. Once Christians were officially condemned for *the name* by Nero, nothing would prevent other provincial governors from persecuting Christians in their districts for their “deviant” behavior. Christians were largely persecuted for three reasons including that they followed a crucified “criminal,” practiced seemingly bizarre rituals, and refused to pay homage to the Roman gods.

Fourth, although there is not early evidence *each* of the apostles died as martyrs, some general claims make their deaths more likely than not. For instance, in his *Letter to the Philippians* 9, Polycarp places “other apostles” in the same category as Ignatius and Paul, who were known martyrs. Fourth century Syrian Father Aphrahat referred to “(others) of the apostles hereafter in diverse places confessed and proved true martyrs.”¹

¹Aphrahat, *Demonstration XXI: Of Persecution* (§ 23), as cited in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1898), 2:401.

Fifth, the apostles were willing to suffer and die for their faith. The apostles begin healing the sick and proclaiming Christ at Pentecost. The consistent reason they gave is that Jesus appeared to them personally over a lengthy period of time (Acts 1:3). They were threatened, beaten, thrown in prison, and killed for their faith, and yet they refused to back down because they felt the necessity to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Whether or not all the apostles actually died as martyrs, they all willingly proclaimed the risen Jesus with full knowledge it could cost them their lives.

Sixth, there are no accounts that any of the apostles recanted their faith. If any of the apostles were known to have abandoned their faith under pressure, the enemies of the church would have seized this opportunity to discount the burgeoning movement. And yet there is not a single account that *any* of the Twelve, including Paul and James, recanted their belief that Jesus had appeared to them alive after his death. This is not insignificant evidence for the martyrdom of the apostles.

The Individual Apostles

As for the individual apostles, the historical evidence leads to the following assessments regarding the likelihood of their martyrdoms:

1. Peter: *the highest possible probability*
2. Paul: *the highest possible probability*
3. James, brother of Jesus: *very probably true*
4. John, the son of Zebedee: *improbable*
5. Thomas: *more probable than not*
6. Andrew: *more probable than not*
7. James, son of Zebedee: *highest possible probability*
8. Philip: *possible*
9. Bartholomew: *more possible than not*
10. Matthew: *possible*
11. James, son of Alphaeus: *more possible than not*

12. Thaddeus: *possible*

13. Simon the Zealot: *possible*

14. Matthias: *possible*

In sum, there are three apostles in the category of *highest possible probability*, one that is *very probably true*, two that are *more probable than not*, two that are *more possible than not*, five that are *possible*, and one that is *improbable*. Thus, of the fourteen apostles, eight are at least *more possible than not*, five are possible and only one is lower than *possible* (John). More evidence may arise someday that would alter these findings, but currently these are the most reasonable conclusions.

Table 2. Martyrdom probabilities

Highest possible probability	Very probably true	More probable than not	More possible than not	Possible	Improbable
*Peter *Paul *James, son of Zebedee	*James, the brother of Jesus	*Thomas *Andrew	*Bartholomew *James, son of Alphaeus	* Philip *Matthew *Thaddeus *Simon the Zealot *Matthias	*John, son of Zebedee

The willingness of the apostles to suffer and die for their faith is an important piece of the resurrection argument. It alone does not prove the resurrection is true, but it does show the apostles sincerely believed it. They were not liars. As Blaise Pascal once said, “I only believe histories whose witnesses are ready to be put to death” (822).² The apostles proclaimed the risen Jesus to skeptical and antagonistic audiences with full knowledge they would likely suffer and die for their beliefs. All the apostles suffered and were “ready to be put to death,” and there is good reason to believe some of them actually faced execution. There is no evidence they ever waived. Their convictions were not

²Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995), 249.

based on secondhand testimony, but their own personal experience with the risen Christ. They truly believed Jesus was the risen Messiah, and they banked their lives on it. It is difficult to imagine what more a group of ancient witnesses could have done to show greater depth of sincerity and commitment to the truth.

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ABSTRACT

A HISTORICAL EVALUATION OF THE EVIDENCE FOR THE DEATH OF THE APOSTLES AS MARTYRS FOR THEIR FAITH

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A commonly used argument for the reliability of the first witnesses to the resurrection is that the apostles willingly died as martyrs for their faith. It is often claimed that all the apostles, except John, faced martyrdom. And yet until now, there has been no thorough scholarly evaluation of this claim.

This dissertation demonstrates that (1) all the apostles were willing to die for their faith, and (2) a number of them actually did experience martyrdom. Their willingness to face persecution and martyrdom indicates more than any other conceivable course their sincere conviction that, after rising from the dead, Jesus indeed appeared to them.

This dissertation takes a historical approach, which involves studying various sources that include the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, secular writers, and pseudepigraphical texts, such as the Acts of the Apostles, and Gnostic sources. The evidence for each apostle is examined with a scale that ranges from not possibly true (certainly not historical) to the highest possible probability (nearly historically certain).

There are a few key steps to be established in this research. First, Christianity was a resurrection movement since its inception. The belief of the apostles was rooted in their conviction that Jesus rose from the dead. Second, the apostles were the closest followers of Jesus during his life and then were eyewitnesses of the resurrection. Paul and James are included along with the Twelve. Third, Christians really suffered and died for

their faith beginning at the end of the first century. These three points provide the context and likelihood the apostles were martyred for proclaiming the name of Jesus. Fourth, the evidence for each apostle is examined and compared with a historical grid. Fifth, objections are considered and rebutted.

While there is considerable evidence for the martyrdoms of apostles such as Peter, Paul and James the son of Zebedee, much less evidence exists for many of the others, such as Matthias and James the son of Alphaeus. Still, it is clear the apostles were all willing to die for reporting what they believed to be true and that many in fact did.

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