

Kevin McCruden's introduction to the four Gospels and letters of Paul combines a thorough familiarity with serious scholarship and a sensitivity to the important questions that new readers bring to these ancient texts. Within a framework defined by religious experience and the common life and with a view to their impact on modern interpreters, McCruden offers a sensitive reading rich in insight. His work is a superb tool for introducing undergraduates to the critical study of the New Testament.

—Harry Attridge
Yale Divinity School

Professors of New Testament as well as leaders of Bible study groups often find themselves searching for outside sources in the biblical field that go beyond the strictly academic analysis of the New Testament texts to address the personal experience of the community members and how that holds coherence with our current reality.

It is precisely for this reason that Kevin McCruden's *On the Way* distinguishes itself from other scholarly introductions to the Gospels and the letters of Paul. Without any mitigation of the scholarly knowledge necessary for the understanding of each document, and with his gift for gracefully communicating erudition in a smooth readable style, McCruden trains his special focus on those most pertinent texts that evince the convert's personal life and his or her desire to commit to community, and then moves to discussions of contemporary heroes and issues of religio-socio-political recent history.

As a result, McCruden effectively connects the Gospels and letters of Paul to our own world, as vibrant conversation partners from across the millennia, where we find common ground in their evidence of personal transformation and a community commitment that becomes a passion and joy.

—Wendy Cotter, CSJ
Loyola University Chicago

Kevin McCruden has convincingly traced the thread that runs through a significant portion of the canonical New Testament, the four Gospels, and the undisputed letters of Paul. Each of these books originated in the lived experience of the communal encounter of the Risen Christ, shared by its author and immediate audience.

By identifying the power of the shared religious experience of the communities of the New Testament in all its diversity, McCruden has opened a horizon for contemporary readers to understand more deeply their own encounter with the same Christ. A wide audience that includes students, teachers, and pastors will benefit from his insightful, focused, and lucid reading of the Gospels and Paul.

—Alan C. Mitchell
Georgetown University

In *On the Way*, McCruden consistently offers insightful interpretations of the relationship between the religious experience of God and living life in community as this relationship is reflected in the four Gospels and the letters of Paul. He writes in an enviably clear and delightful style. The reader not only learns a great deal but does so with pleasure. McCruden has a knack for clarifying without oversimplifying.

—Thomas H. Tobin, SJ
Loyola University Chicago

ON

Religious Experience and Common Life

THE

in the Gospels and Letters of Paul

WAY

KEVIN B. McCRUDEN


ANSELM
ACADEMIC

Created by the publishing team of Anselm Academic.

The scriptural quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (unless otherwise noted). Copyright © 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved.

Cover image: A fourth century fresco representing the raising of Lazarus from the Via Latina Catacomb, Rome. © Scala / Art Resource, NY

Copyright © 2020 by Kevin B. McCruden. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher, Anselm Academic, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, Minnesota 55987-1320, www.anselmacademic.org.

Printed in the United States of America

7093

ISBN 978-1-59982-793-3

Dedication

For Kerry, Liam, and Samuel



Author Acknowledgments

I express my deep gratitude and thanks to the many friends and colleagues who have helped support this project along the way either by offering encouragement or helpful critique. Amy Jill-Levine patiently read through early versions of the first four chapters of the manuscript and provided incisive feedback on the material relating to the Synoptic Gospels. Harry Attridge, Tom Tobin, along with several of my colleagues at Gonzaga, in particular Megan McCabe and Shannon Dunn, all read through earlier versions of portions of the manuscript and offered thoughtful feedback especially regarding issues of voice and tone. I owe an especially overwhelming debt of gratitude to the publishing and editorial staff at Anselm Academic. Paul Peterson's detailed editorial work as well as insightful comments have made this book much clearer and more persuasive than I could have accomplished on my own. And I cannot say enough good things about Maura Hagarty, who was the first to see a potential value in the project and whose commitment to the project never wavered. Throughout the writing of this book I have endeavored to keep foremost in my mind the mission of Anselm Academic to provide books that are both engaging and useful to undergraduates. My hope is that I have succeeded in this goal, if only in a modest way.

Publisher Acknowledgments

Thank you to the following individuals who reviewed this work in progress:

Sherri Brown, *Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska*

Timothy Milinovich, *Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois*

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

—Mark 9:33-34

Contents

Preface for Teachers	9
1. Religious Experience and the Common Life	11
2. Encountering Mark: The Way of Messiahship and the Way of Discipleship	31
3. Encountering Matthew: Jesus as Teacher of Living in the Kingdom of Heaven	59
4. Encountering Luke: The Journey of Faith in Community	84
5. Encountering John: The Mission of the Word of God in the Lives of the Children of God	107
6. Encountering Paul: Reflections on Reconstructing the Historical Apostle	135
7. Religious Experience and Common Life in the Letters of Paul: Participation in Christ and Ethical Transformation	155
8. Common Life in Crisis: Paul's Response in Letters to the Corinthians and Romans	176
Index	197

Preface for Teachers

Recently a colleague appeared at my office door wondering aloud whether students today find courses on scripture too remote from their lived experience. At that instant I could not help but recall an especially honest and humorous course evaluation I received some time ago in which a student praised my ability to “make an inherently uninteresting topic like the New Testament somewhat interesting.” Needless to say, I could immediately relate to my colleague’s sentiment. At the same time, I also sensed something else behind my colleague’s apprehension, namely, the recognition of how demanding the vocation of teaching can be for those who care deeply about the craft and desire to reach students where they are.

Whether as a result of cultural forces, institutional priorities, some combination of these, or perhaps other factors altogether, the task of introducing undergraduates to the academic study of scripture—in my own case the writings of the New Testament—does appear to be becoming ever more challenging. It is true that there are certain perennial challenges that go with the territory. Students always struggle, for example, to engage empathetically with texts that take as given the existence of a tripartite cosmos, or that espouse the belief that all of history will soon come to an end. These particular pedagogical speedbumps are, however, the relatively easy ones to navigate. Shaped by such contemporary cultural events as the me-too movement, the black lives matter movement, the migrant crisis at the border, and the clergy sexual abuse scandal, an ever growing number of students find deeply challenging—as they should—writings that raise problematic concerns relating to complex issues associated with ethnicity, gender, and class dynamics. Much of my work in the classroom focuses increasingly on guiding students in their articulation of these issues, reflecting with students on the relationship of these issues to the scriptural text, and encouraging students to discover ways in which the writings of the New Testament might offer resources for wrestling with the complexity of issues that impinge upon their lives. When I am successful in this work many

of my students arrive at the end of the semester less convinced in their judgment that the writings of the New Testament really are as remote from their experience as they may have thought upon entering the course.

This book explores the relevance of the study of the New Testament for lived experience by analyzing the topics of religious experience and common life as these are revealed in the New Testament Gospels and letters of Paul. The essential point of the study is that these writings function, at their most fundamental level, to articulate powerful experiences of personal encounter that result in the commitment to embody new patterns of living within community. This claim is, at the same time, quite problematic for the simple reason that the attempt to define what religious experience actually refers to is complicated by the fact that all human experiences are interpreted experiences. That is, human creativity always plays an essential role not only in the shaping, but also in the generation of any experience that is invested with ultimate meaning. The same dynamic is also evident in connection with the new patterns of behavior or common life that have as their purpose the translation of religious experience into action. Both on the individual and on the communal level, the embodying of religious experience in concrete behavior inevitably entails human creativity in the quest to discover meaning and ultimacy in our lives.

In this study I do not claim to give any sort of definitive treatment to the themes of religious experience and common life. Similarly, I must admit that I have been selective in the specific content drawn from the Gospels and letters of Paul that I have singled out for analysis. While the material I have chosen does reflect my judgment about what is particularly illustrative of the themes of religious experience and common life, this choice of material is by no means exhaustive. Students who read this book and immerse themselves in deep reading of the Gospels and letters of Paul will likely make connections that I have missed.

Religious Experience and the Common Life

My favorite novel is the nineteenth-century masterpiece by Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*. While there are many parts of the story that I enjoy, I am impressed most by Hugo's gift for illuminating timely issues of social justice through his sketching of such memorable characters as Jean Valjean, Fantine, and the young orphan girl, Cosette. Equally engaging are the many instances in the novel where Hugo explores the religious implications of the experiences of his characters. One of these instances involves the compassionate bishop Monseigneur Bienvenu, who appears at the beginning of *Les Misérables* as an exemplary religious figure whose depth of piety is complemented by his humility and acts of kindness to others.

He was indulgent toward women and the poor, upon whom the weight of society falls most heavily. He would say, "The faults of women, children, and servants, and of the weak, the indigent and the ignorant, are the faults of husbands, fathers and masters, of the strong, the rich and the wise. . . ." Clearly, he had his own strange way of judging things. I suspect he acquired it from the Gospels.¹

Hugo does not specify what episodes from the Gospels have influenced the portrayal of his fictional bishop. It might even be the case

1. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (New York: Signet, 2013), 13–14.

that what Hugo refers to as the “Gospels” has more to do with a pattern of living for others that, according to the Gospels, informed the life and teachings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth.² Whatever were Hugo’s intentions on this matter, I appreciate how he invites the reader to reflect on the relationship between religious experience and the living out of such experience in ways that challenge self-centered attitudes and behavior. I also find intriguing the suggestion that this relationship has something to do with the capacity of religious experience to transform how persons see and treat other human beings in community, particularly in ways that promote justice and reconciliation in place of selfishness and dominance.

The principal character and hero of *Les Misérables* is Jean Valjean. He first appears in the novel as a paroled convict attempting to return to society only to meet with unkindness and reproach from everyone he encounters. Nineteen years in prison had hardened him against humanity; his fresh exposure to the persistent harshness of society serves even more sharply to constrict his soul. This all changes, however, when Valjean meets the gentle bishop Myriel Bienvenu. Bewildered by the bishop’s hospitality and kindness, and inspired by his solemn consecration of Valjean’s soul, Jean Valjean begins the painful process of opening his life to the potentiality of transformation and renewal. Much of the remainder of Hugo’s novel is given over to the narration of Jean Valjean’s journey of learning to love and to live for others, especially the orphan girl, Cosette. As the story unfolds, the reader begins to suspect that a deeper divine pedagogy is at work behind Valjean’s choices, sacrificing self-interest for the benefit of others. By the novel’s end, this pedagogy transforms a convict into a saint.

Taking inspiration from these characters in Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, this study explores the relationship between religious experience and common life as it appears in the writings of the New Testament Gospels and the letters of the Apostle Paul. Given this project, at least three questions present themselves at the outset of this study: (1) How are the concepts of religious experience

2. Both Craig R. Koester and Michael J. Gorman employ the term *cruciform*, meaning cross-like, to describe the self-giving of Jesus that led ultimately to his execution. See Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 246. See also Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 118–19.



© CBS / Courtesy: Everett Collection

In the 1978 film adaptation of *Les Misérables*, Bishop Myriel Bienvenu (Claude Dauphin) gives costly silver candlesticks to convict Jean Valjean (Richard Jordan), solemnly charging Valjean to commit the remainder of his life to becoming a righteous man.

and common life to be defined? (2) Why choose these specific texts to serve as the basis for this study when other writings besides the Gospels and the letters of Paul appear in the New Testament? (3) What kinds of interpretive methods and intellectual commitments will guide this study?

What Does Religious Experience Signify?

Luke T. Johnson offers the following proposal for how to think about the diversity of writings that comprise the New Testament: “The NT writings approach us as witnesses to and interpretations of specifically religious claims having to do with the experience of God as mediated through Jesus.”³ This proposal raises what is perhaps the

3. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 6. For a more detailed treatment of the topic of religious experience, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

most basic of questions about the origins of the New Testament: Why, in fact, do these texts exist at all? Not surprisingly, no single answer can be given. A variety of factors, inclusive of complex historical, social, and literary dynamics all contributed to the emergence of the twenty-seven writings that comprise the New Testament. Among the many forces that shaped this process, however, Johnson privileges the role that religious experience exercised in the evolution of these texts. But what in fact is signified by the concept of religious experience?

The concept of religious experience—much like the concept of religion itself—is difficult to capture in any simple definition.⁴ Even the term *experience* appears to elude any unambiguous definition. In terms of general usage, the category of experience is perhaps used most often to denote a personal reaction to someone or something. That is, an experience is something that makes some sort of impression on a person by engaging the affective, intellectual, and psychological dimensions of human consciousness. But what, then, might the definition of religious experience be? Some see religious experience as having to do with a perception of reality that is considered to be transcendent; that is, a reality understood to be absolute, suprahuman, and otherworldly. Perhaps the most classic example of such a definition of religious experience is to be found in the writings of Mircea Eliade, who describes the religious person as one who “always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world, but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real.”⁵ For Eliade the perception of transcendence comprises the essence of all that qualifies as religious experience; moreover, it is this perception of absolute reality that, according to Eliade, enables human beings to find meaning and orientation in the world.⁶ Also integral to Eliade’s definition

4. Indeed for someone like Jonathan Z. Smith the concept of religion has no reference to any sort of objective reality at all; it functions purely as an academic term created for the purpose of describing and analyzing certain kinds of human activities. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xii.

5. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 202.

6. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 23.

of religious experience is the insistence that absolute reality, or the sacred, manifests itself to human beings, who then find themselves in the position of having to respond to such disclosure. For someone like Eliade, therefore, religious experience ultimately involves the experience of a reality that the human subject encounters as Other than itself.⁷

Other contemporary theorists of religion, however, have offered other proposals for defining religious experience, beginning with the observation that religious experience cannot easily be separated from the role that human creativity exerts in terms of both shaping and generating such experience.⁸ The human quest for meaning, as Ann Taves observes, is a quest that is never undertaken in isolation from other modes of connectivity. As particular human persons, we all find ourselves embedded within, and interacting with, a complex web of social, psychological, spiritual, cognitive, and cultural contexts, all of which influence the vast variety of experiences that define our lives.⁹ This is true of religious experiences as well.

Religious Experience as a Mode of Encounter

Returning once more to Luke T. Johnson's definition, it is clear that for Johnson religious experience has to do fundamentally with the perception of what can be termed ultimate or transcendent reality. Johnson defines religious experience, then, much as Eliade does, as an encounter with a reality that, on the face of it, seems like a contradiction: an encounter with a reality experienced as wholly Other than oneself, but at the same time an encounter that is experienced as intensely personal, life-changing, and real. It should be noted, however, that Johnson makes a point of specifying that what is perceived as transcendent reality is always a reality perceived by an experiencing subject.¹⁰ What Johnson means is that the nature of any religious experience should be understood as relationally true, and not

7. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 11.

8. Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

9. See Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 290–95.

10. Johnson, *Religious Experience*, 56–60.

necessarily objectively true.¹¹ It is impossible, in other words, to do away with the irreducible perspectival nature of such experiences. Whenever this perspectival aspect of religious experience is overlooked there is a danger of falling into discourse that defines specific religious experiences as either unique or universal, and thereby more legitimate than other religious experiences. Despite this danger, Johnson suggests that the category of transcendence is still essential to retain, since only the language of transcendence is able to give adequate expression to those experiences that are perceived—for whatever reason—to break the bounds of our more familiar, day to day categories for explaining the world around us.¹²

The insights of Robert Orsi on this topic might help to clarify the foregoing observations. Orsi notes that the intellectual developments that began in Enlightenment Europe and that gave rise to the modern world have made the very concept of transcendence a less obvious explanatory tool for mapping our awareness today of what counts as truly real.¹³ Defining transcendence as meaningful presence, Orsi observes that, “Western modernity exists under the sign of absence. Time and space are emptied of presence.”¹⁴ As a result, Orsi argues that modern notions of what constitutes religion are typically interpreted against the background of the more familiar and generally more accepted categories of scientific methods of inquiry. At the same time, Orsi recognizes that experiences of the “the eruption of presence” are not entirely absent from our lives.¹⁵ Individuals and communities still do on occasion speak of experiences in which “the transcendent broke into time.”¹⁶ Orsi proposes that linguistic expressions are therefore needed in our contemporary setting that do justice to experiences of meaningful presences that individuals and communities judge to be real, but that push up against the limits of

11. Johnson, *Religious Experience*, 61–62.

12. Johnson, *Religious Experience*, 59.

13. Robert A. Orsi, “Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity,” in *Recent Themes in American Religious History: Historians in Conversation*, ed. Randall J. Stephens (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 127–39.

14. Orsi, “Abundant History,” 131.

15. Orsi, “Abundant History,” 132.

16. Orsi, “Abundant History,” 128.

modern critical theories of explanation. The term Orsi proposes for such experiences is *abundant events*.¹⁷

By employing this term, Orsi seeks to capture as many of the multiple factors as possible that flow into highly personal religious experiences of transcendence. He points out that these factors are often profoundly relational, encompassing a subject's relationship and interaction with the surrounding culture, family, acquaintances, and social groupings, often over periods of many years. Such relationships, and the emotional and intellectual commitments they engender and nurture, interact in complex ways with experiences of transcendence. They provide both the foundation for such experience as well as the ground for investing the experience with new meanings that in turn bring forth into existence new modes of behavior and interaction with others. With such a rich, scholarly conversation on the definition of religious experience in the background, what might an exploration of the themes of religious experience and common life as disclosed in the writings of the New Testament look like?

Giving Expression to Religious Experience

While the texts that comprise the New Testament do not present anything like a flat, homogenous witness to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, they do share a fundamental religious claim that sounds clearly within all their diversity. This claim is that, through his life, death, and above all resurrection, Jesus both embodies and discloses God's ultimate purposes for the world and is now alive in a new and more powerful way through being raised from the dead. It is crucial to recognize that no part of this claim is open to historical, empirical verification; the claim is inherently perspectival in the sense that it is nurtured by the religious experience that Jesus is a living presence available to those who profess faith in him. One way to think, then, about the writings of the New Testament is to view them as diverse and creative articulations of an experience of an encounter with the divine understood to be mediated through the presence of the risen Jesus. It is important

17. Orsi, "Abundant History," 133.

to emphasize that this encounter should be understood as a real encounter; it is real, however, in a relational rather than an objective, empirical sense.¹⁸ That is, what is encountered is perceived to be a personal presence or power recognized as absolute by specific persons within a specific community that shares a common outlook and shared commitments.¹⁹

The element of personal involvement is always integral to the experience of an encounter with transcendence. The following passage taken from the Gospel of John helps to clarify this observation. Reckoning honestly with the fact that he has not narrated every single event or “sign” of Jesus’ ministry that could be included in his narrative, the author of John’s Gospel says this about the signs that have been included: “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).²⁰ In designating Jesus as the “Messiah” and the “Son of God,” the author of John’s Gospel does not intend to present the reader with anything like a propositional truth claim that can be proven empirically. Rather, the nature of the truth claims that we encounter in the Fourth Gospel—and indeed in all four Gospels—is relational and experiential. That is, they are claims that give expression to deeply personal and communal religious experience. To put this another way, both the author and the intended audience of John’s Gospel

18. Sandra Schneiders voices a similar idea in her theory of the nature of religious statements: “The affirmation of divine disclosure is, strictly speaking, a faith affirmation. The believer claims to perceive what some others, confronted with the same phenomenon, do not perceive. The most the believer can do is describe and explain the experience. It is useless to try to prove, from the phenomenon itself, that it is disclosive of the divine.” See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 50.

19. See Luke T. Johnson, *Religious Experience*, 184.

20. There is an interesting translation issue involved with the conclusion of chapter 20 of John’s Gospel in verse 31. Depending on how one translates the Greek verb for “to believe,” the meaning changes somewhat from a summons to come to belief for the first time as opposed to a call for the community to keep believing. In other words, rather than concerned with a missionary campaign to bring persons to faith, the author of the Fourth Gospel is writing to those already committed to a belief in Jesus. The translation presented in the NRSV best captures the underlying Greek preserved in the earliest and best manuscripts of John’s Gospel. See Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, Sacra Pagina 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 544.

encounter the living Jesus in their lives as a figure of ultimate significance, someone who makes possible a life of renewed fellowship both with God and with one another. John's Gospel represents an attempt at articulating, however imperfectly, something of the shape and quality of this experience of encounter.

None of these observations should be taken to suggest that the authors of the Gospels were uninterested in the task of preserving the historical memory of Jesus. The topic of the historical reliability of the Gospels is more complex, however, than it might at first seem. Since the Gospels appear as though they purport to offer a factual, historical narrative, many readers assume that historical objectivity must have been the primary goal of these texts. Modern readers need to understand, however, that when they assume that these writings are meant to be "history," they are expecting the Gospels to conform to a genre of writing that simply did not exist in the ancient world. To be sure, "historical" writings existed, but the ancient genre of history was very different from the modern one. For example, in many instances ancient authors had at best only a general idea of the sort of things said by, say, a specific general addressing his troops before a battle, or a politician advocating before a public assembly a particular political course of action to take, speeches that may have been delivered a hundred years or more before the historian's own day. The author's job was to *compose* a speech that fit the occasion and was in keeping with the point he wished to make.²¹ Ancient audiences knew this, and did not expect that the speeches they encountered in a history were necessarily the exact words of the character being depicted. Similarly, a given saying of Jesus recorded in the Gospels may well reflect the collective memory of something that Jesus said, but it is hard to imagine that readers at that time expected the saying to preserve the actual words of Jesus verbatim. Such an expectation was altogether alien to ancient literature; one does well, then, not to impose modern expectations on ancient genres. More will be said below on the issue of historical reliability with regard to the genre of the Gospels as examples of ancient biographies.

21. The use of the masculine pronoun here reflects the fact that, as far as we know, all the surviving histories from the ancient world were written by men.

Defining the Concept of Common Life

To an impressive degree, the writings of the New Testament focus less on the individual than on the communal. This is just one of the many ways in which the biblical text challenges the modern post-industrial approach to viewing reality. Contemporary US culture in particular tends to operate on the assumption that a person's identity is the outcome of some combination of unique personal gifts interacting with the personal choices that one makes. On an intellectual level Americans may be aware of being born into various kinds of collectives, such as a particular family and culture, but they typically act in ways that imply that identity is understood largely in individualistic ways. For example, enormous significance is placed on values such as personal responsibility, individual rights, and self-actualization. As one might expect, these values inevitably shape for both good and ill not only one's sense of self, but also one's interpersonal behavior.

In contrast to this accustomed individualism, an inclination toward the communal characterized the sensibilities of the authors responsible for the creation of the writings found in the New Testament. For example, one of the first episodes readers encounter at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus as described in the four Gospels is a scene where Jesus summons his first followers (Matt. 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–51). While the details of the episode differ from Gospel to Gospel, all four accounts agree that Jesus was highly intentional about sharing his mission and message with others. From the very beginning, the small cells of believers who responded to the message of the Gospel also sought to actualize that message in a communal setting.

This emphasis on the theme of community also characterizes the letters of Paul and is seen, for example, in Paul's use of the metaphor of the "body" (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–27). By visualizing the community as the body of Christ, Paul reflects on how the presence of the risen Jesus is made powerfully tangible and real only when every member of the community is honored, especially the vulnerable and less socially powerful members of the group. Integral to the persuasive power of the body metaphor is the communal implication that without the diversity of many kinds of people there



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Johnston Fund, 1924

Jesus summons Simon Peter and his brother Andrew in this sixth-century Byzantine mosaic representing Luke 5:1-11. All four Gospels agree that one of Jesus' first acts was to assemble a community of followers.

can be no community at all; indeed, the risen Jesus is encountered, according to Paul, precisely within the diverse lives and faces of all who make up the community. This example taken from Paul points to an important dimension of the definition of common life that will be developed in this study. Integral to the religious experience of encounter with God through the presence of the risen Jesus is the accompanying commitment to embody such experience in and through behavior that witnesses to transformation.

Why the Gospels and Why the Letters of Paul?

The decision to focus upon the New Testament Gospels and the correspondence of Paul is informed both by historical and religious considerations. Although a number of writings similar to the Gospels existed in the early church, the four canonical Gospels are the earliest narratives committed to articulating the shape of the human career of Jesus and the early Christian belief in his resurrection

from the dead. While the precise process by which these accounts attained an authoritative status remains obscure, the wide appeal of these four narratives to geographically diverse audiences suggests that the basic story they tell resonated with many early Christians as normative in some way.²² That is, already by the mid-second century CE there appears to have been a consensus that these writings best captured what a plurality of early Christians wished to say about Jesus as they reflected on their shared experience of the religious significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The attentive reader will observe the text using the term *Christian* to refer to both the belief system and social makeup of the audiences for the Gospels. This term can be misleading, however, since it might suggest to readers the image of self-identified members of a specific religion called Christianity. In fact, nothing like a separate religion called Christianity existed in the historical period in which the writings of the New Testament took shape. During this formative period the community that would become Christianity existed as a sect within Judaism, the religious tradition from which it emerged. Nonetheless, throughout this study we will use the terms *Christian* and *Christianity* as customary designations for this sect and movement within ancient Judaism.

Estimated Dates of Composition	
Undisputed letters of Paul	50-60 CE
Gospel of Mark	69-70 CE
Gospel of Matthew	80-95 CE
Gospel of Luke	80-95 CE
Gospel of John	90-95 CE

22. For all of their distinctiveness the four Gospels share in common an intense focus on the events of the suffering and death of Jesus. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 141-66.

Written even earlier than the canonical Gospels, the undisputed letters of Paul provide another window into early Christian thinking about the significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Scholars employ the term *undisputed* in order to make a distinction between letters most likely written by Paul and those that may have been written by later followers of Paul. Altogether there are thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament. Based largely on an analysis of perceived stylistic and thematic affinities, seven of these letters (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) are acknowledged by most scholars as genuinely authored by Paul. The six remaining letters attributed to Paul (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) are typically designated under the category of “disputed” or “contested,” meaning that their authorship by Paul is considered by many scholars to be either uncertain or that something more complex than simple authorship was involved in their composition, such as collaboration or delegation by Paul.²³

Apart from a brief notice in the Gospel of Luke to an otherwise unknown patron by the name of Theophilus, the Gospel narratives do not identify their intended audiences. By contrast, Paul’s letters provide a much clearer glimpse of the ancient communities that gathered in response to the early Christian proclamation about Jesus. We see this heightened communal character in Paul’s customary manner of designating his addressees as “assemblies” (see Gal. 1:2). In the ancient Mediterranean world, “assembly,” or in Greek *ekklesia*,²⁴ referred to a civic body constituted by citizens of a region; the basic meaning of the word, therefore, was that of an assembled community. Quite fittingly, then, Paul’s purpose in writing letters to the local communities that he called “assemblies” or “churches” had a clear communal function, namely, to support early Christians as they attempted to integrate their religious convictions about Jesus into patterns of behavior that complemented their beliefs.

For this reason, the subject matter and themes of Paul’s letters appear quite different from the subject matter and themes found in the New Testament Gospels. While Paul is certainly aware of the

23. See Maria Pascuzzi, *Paul: Windows on His Thought and World* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2014), 20–21.

24. In subsequent centuries, *ekklesia* would come to mean “church.”

major events of Jesus' career, nowhere in his letters does Paul purport to give an extended account of the life and death of Jesus as do the Gospels. Instead, Paul's interest is oriented toward the more practical and integrational task of relating the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to everyday life.²⁵ One encounters in Paul's writings, perhaps better than anywhere else in the New Testament, someone who is consistently thinking through the practical implications of religious experience.

Engaging Scripture in an Academic Way

Claims to objectivity on the part of scholars concerning any academic subject are inevitably illusory in nature. All observers have biases that need to be acknowledged. In my own case, specific intellectual as well as religious sensibilities influence the kinds of questions I ask of the biblical text and likewise condition the answers I receive from them. Identifying as a scripture scholar, I employ the varied methods of modern critical scholarship in the attempt to honor the complexity inherent in the origin and function of the scriptural text. Partly this means that I take seriously what I regard as an evident fact: the writings of the New Testament are contingent texts. That is, they are the products of human beings who were shaped by the environment of the first-century Mediterranean world in which they lived. For this reason, I consider it necessary to interpret them in an academically responsible way. What is meant by "an academically responsible way" will be defined more clearly at the conclusion of this chapter. At this point, it is enough to note that this entails interpreting the writings of the New Testament against the background of their social, historical, and literary context.

At the same time, I consider that what these writings do best is to make religious claims about the person of Jesus and the shape of communal life that flows from these claims. I recognize that my own personality and education have influenced such a sensibility for focusing on the religious dimension of these texts. It is neither expected nor desired that readers share the viewpoint or conclusions advanced in this study. Working from the assumption that the New Testament is amenable to the application of a variety of academic

25. See Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 119.

perspectives, this study articulates one voice in what ideally should be an ongoing conversation devoted to the task of the thoughtful interpretation of the texts of the New Testament. All manner of interpretation of the Bible, even academic interpretation, is inevitably shaped by one's own perspective; for that very reason it is both potentially insightful as well as potentially limited in terms of the conclusions it reaches. My modest hope is that in the pages to follow the balance will weigh more heavily toward the former than the latter.

The manner by which one goes about interpreting the writings of the New Testament cannot help but be influenced by the specific setting in which one encounters these texts. The experience of reading one of the New Testament Gospels, for example, will likely vary depending on whether one engages these writings in church, in an informal study group, or in the privacy of one's room. Each of these discrete settings also frequently elicits in distinctive ways the kinds of questions we raise in relation to the scriptural text. For example, an encounter with the text within the public setting of a church might entail simply listening to the passage recited as the prelude to a sermon. By contrast, informal study of the Bible with friends or even private reflection on a scriptural text might allow for a more personal meaning to be gained from the text.

Perhaps the most significant difference when it comes to interpreting biblical texts is between their study for personal, devotional purposes and the scholarly, disinterested approach of the academy. The latter approach is not in any way superior to the former; it is just different in terms of the kinds of questions it poses with respect to the text. When done well, a critical appraisal of the New Testament writings can allow for significant insight into the origin and purpose of these complex literary artifacts from a culture so different from our own.

The Academic Approach: Sensitivity to Historical, Cultural, and Literary Context

Foundational to the critical study of the New Testament is an appreciation for the historical, social, and cultural distance of these writings from the modern, post-industrial age. It is important to remember that the writings of the New Testament emerged within a context in which the ancient authors and their audiences shared

similar cultural perspectives and expectations. That is, to borrow the terminology of Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, the writings of the New Testament are the product of a “high context” society. Writings that come from high context societies, such as the world of Greco-Roman antiquity, take for granted that their audiences come to the text with a wealth of knowledge, values, and expectations already shared with the author.²⁶ For this reason ancient authors frequently introduced topics with little by way of explanation of details, details that modern readers often overlook.²⁷ As persons conditioned by present-day historical, cultural, and social norms, modern readers approaching these ancient texts do not recognize the unspoken assumptions, values, and experiences that ancient persons brought to their reading simply by virtue of their sharing the same cultural environment of ancient Mediterranean society. The result is often a misguided, if well-intentioned, interpretation.

An Example of the Academic Approach in Action: The Genre of the Gospels

In anticipation of the exploration of the New Testament Gospels beginning in the next chapter, the following observations pertaining to the genre of the Gospels might help to illustrate something of what is implied in an academic approach to the writings of the New Testament. Many scholars today contend that the Gospels most closely resemble a popular form of literature from the ancient world called a *bios* or, more simply, biography.²⁸ A *bios* was a narrative that focused on recounting in a chronological format the memorable words and deeds of significant persons such as famous philosophers, statesmen, or holy persons. A representative *bios* would be the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus.²⁹ Most people probably

26. See Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 11–12. See also, Leander E. Keck, *Taking the Bible Seriously*, 5th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 16–17.

27. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 11.

28. See Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

29. See Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, ed. and trans. Christopher P. Jones, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

have definite ideas about what constitutes an effective biography of a notable person. For example, if one were to consider purchasing a biography of former President Barak Obama from a neighborhood Barnes and Noble, one would expect that the biographer had researched the topic thoroughly by consulting a variety of sources available for independent study by others. One would also expect the biography to be comprehensive in scope and to give ample attention to such details as the childhood of the future president, his personal triumphs and disappointments, and perhaps the ideals that shaped his philosophy of life and made him his own unique person. And while one would expect to encounter the author's own creative point of view, there would at the same time be every expectation that the biographer would strive to be as objective as possible in his or her assessment of the former president.

Ancient biographies diverged in important ways from the modern assumptions and expectations outlined above. First, such narratives were seldom comprehensive, preferring instead to showcase the general character of the notable person by focusing on the typical actions of that person. Second, although ancient authors frequently drew attention to the genealogical lineage of the biographical subject, extensive treatment of childhood events was rare.³⁰ Third, the primacy given in modern biographical narration to psychological development is almost completely absent in ancient biographical texts. Fourth, the principal concern of ancient biographers had less to do with realizing the goal of objectivity than with lavishing praise upon the biographical subject. Such praise had a very clear pedagogical purpose, which was to encourage ancient audiences to emulate the values and virtues of the biographical subject.

All these characteristics of ancient biography are also present in the Gospel portraits of the public ministry of Jesus. For example, the Gospels offer nothing like an exhaustive list of everything that Jesus did. Instead, the evangelists, reliant on their sources, edited those events that they considered most appropriate for their narrative aims. As already noted, the author of the Fourth Gospel is quite honest

30. John P. Meier observes that apart from truly significant historical figures little to nothing is known about the birth and childhood of most figures from the ancient world. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Anchor Bible Reference Library 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 208.

with the reader about this: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book” (John 20:30). Only two Gospels, Matthew and Luke, discuss anything about the origins of Jesus, and neither provides extensive details concerning Jesus’ childhood. Did Jesus ever learn to read and write? What was his relationship with his family when he was growing up? Did Jesus grow in his awareness of his vocation? A tantalizing reference to the child Jesus growing in “wisdom” is found in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2:52), yet the author reveals nothing of the content of this wisdom. These are all interesting questions, but unfortunately the Gospels do not supply any definite answers to them.

These observations are not raised with the intention of arguing that the Gospels do not preserve important memories of the kinds of things that Jesus said and did. At the same time, it is important to be mindful of the fact that the Gospels were not written with historical objectivity as their primary goal.³¹ No literature coming down from the ancient world was written with such a goal in mind. The primary intention of each of the evangelists was to proclaim a message of salvation about a figure whom they saw as having ultimate or transcendent significance for their own lives as well as the lives of their audiences.

Summary

This chapter has offered the reader definitions of several important concepts that will inform this study. Key in this regard are the concepts of religious experience and common life as these concepts figure in the Gospels and the letters of Paul. Religious experience in this context has been described as the highly personal experience, given expression through religious proclamation, of the fundamental faith claim of the first Christians that Jesus was a living presence who embodied the ultimate purposes of God. In defining the concept of common life, it was emphasized that the writings of the New Testament tend to privilege the value of community as opposed to the value of individuality. Common life was defined as being

31. See Morna D. Hooker, *Beginnings: Keys That Open the Gospels* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1997), 2.

principally concerned with the living out in community of a highly personal faith commitment nurtured by religious experience. Lastly, the chapter supplied the reader with a broad sketch of the intellectual commitments that guide the approach taken in this book for the academic study of the New Testament.

Questions for Review

1. What is meant by the concept of religious experience?
2. What is meant by the concept of a common life?
3. Why are the terms *Christian* and *Christianity* problematic for describing the belief system and social makeup of the ancient audiences for the New Testament writings?
4. What do the designations “undisputed” and “disputed” mean in connection with the writings of the Apostle Paul?

Questions for Reflection

1. How does an academic approach help one to think about the nature of the differences between ancient and modern biographies?
2. Why is it important to consider the historical, sociological, and cultural distance of the writings of the New Testament from the modern, post-industrial setting?
3. Given that the Gospels do not attempt to offer objective history in the modern sense, do you think it is appropriate to draw upon them as historical sources, for example, for reconstructing a historical account of Jesus’ life?

For Further Reading

- Burridge, Richard. *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, 1959.
- Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

- Hooker, M. D. *Beginnings: Keys That Open the Gospels*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1997.
- Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. Translated by Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee. New York: Signet, 2013.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco: Harper One, 1996.
- . *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.
- . *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. 3rd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.
- Keck, Leander E. *Taking the Bible Seriously*. 5th ed. Nashville: Abingdon, 1981.
- Koester, Craig R. *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- Meier, J. P. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Anchor Bible Reference Library 1. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- Moloney, Francis J. *The Gospel of John*. Edited by Daniel J. Harrington, SJ. Sacra Pagina 4. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998.
- Orsi, Robert A. "Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity." In *Recent Themes in American Religious History: Historians in Conversation*, edited by Randall J. Stephens, 127–39. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009.
- Pascuzzi, Maria. *Paul: Windows on His Thought and His World*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2014.
- Schneiders, Sandra. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Taves, Ann. *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.