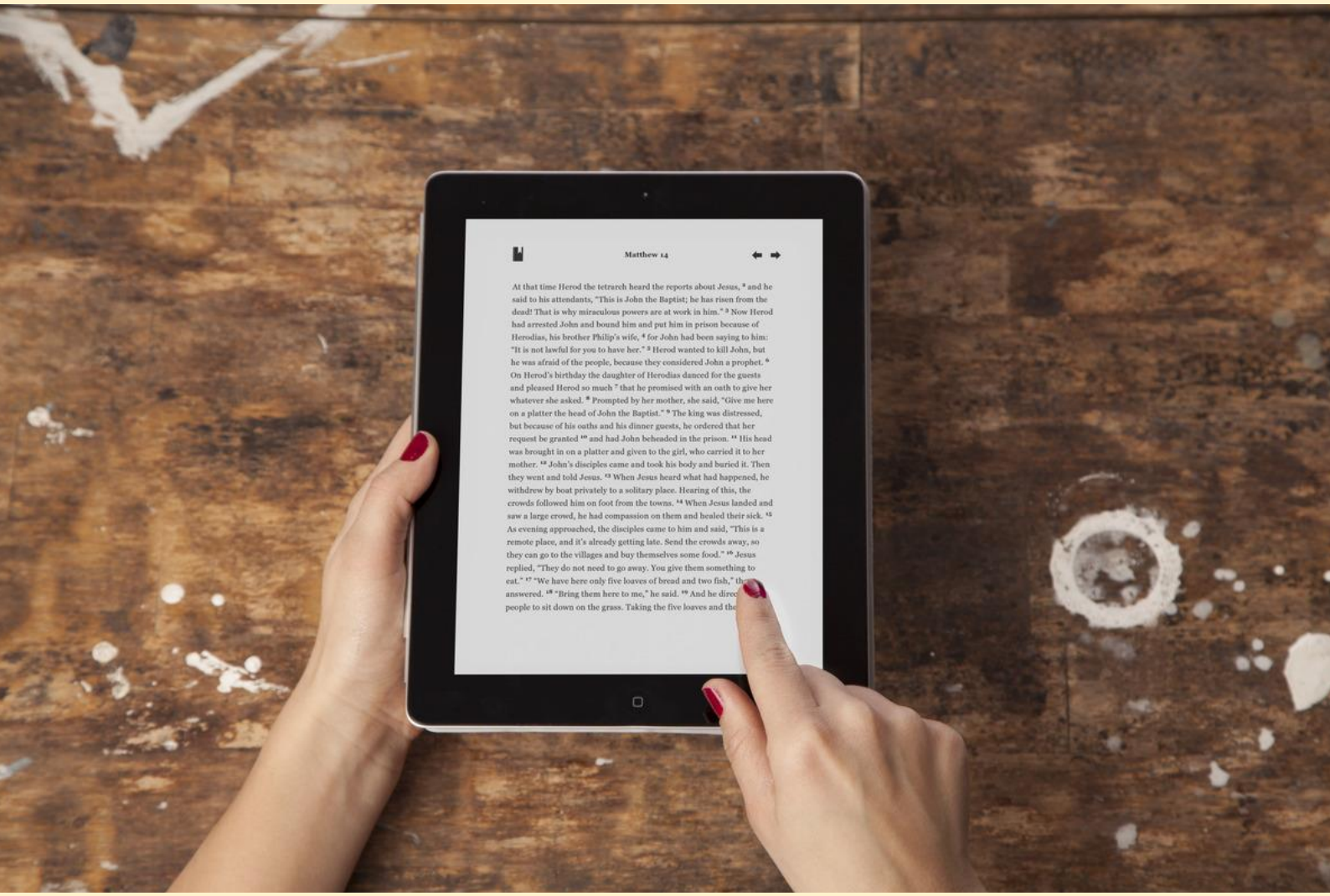
Create a Learning Site

The Early Years



Wilrens Hornstra

Create a Learning Site: The Early Years

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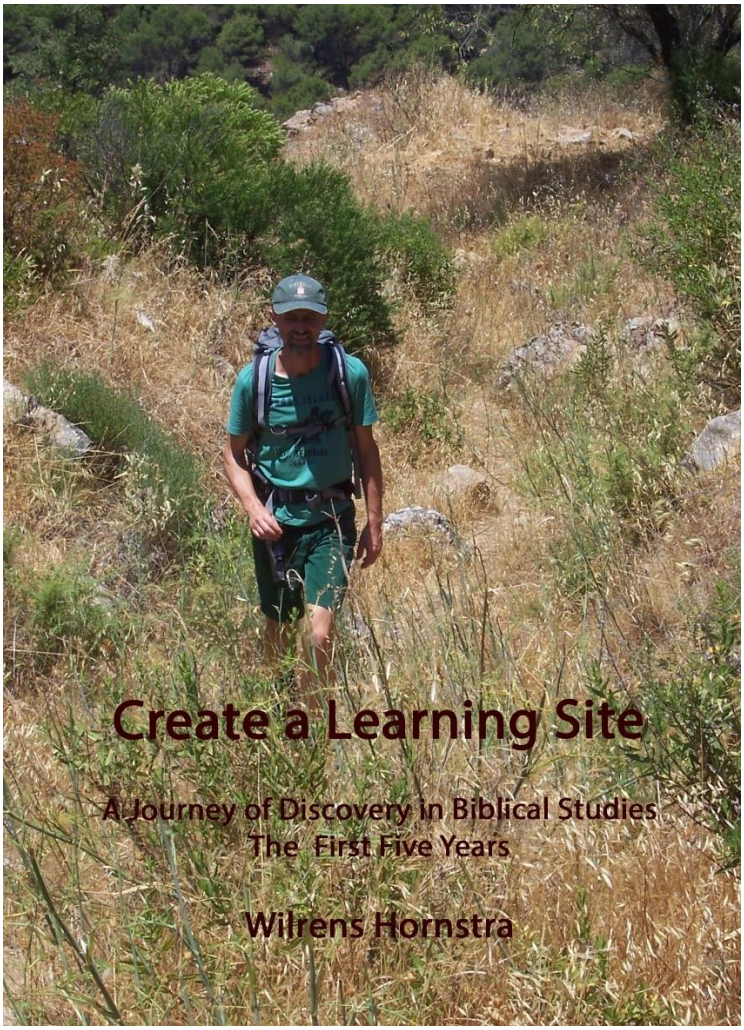
This resource was produced by Wilrens Hornstra for Create a Learning Site (https://www.wilrens.org). It contains ten past issues of the monthly training letter. A full version is available at Amazon starting June 2019:



1. Zechariah 9-14: Does It Make Any Sense? (May 2014)

Does it make sense? *Source: Jase Ess, https://unsplash.com/photos/g4aiU4mEsZM, CC0*

Once again, I have been asked to teach the book of Zechariah in an SBS this month. I suspect because no one else was eager to take it on. I can understand why. This is an intimidating book with some very confusing passages in it. I have often thought it may be the most difficult book in the Old Testament. (In my opinion, it is either this one, or Daniel, or Song of Songs.) Luther's statement about its last chapter is telling: "Here, in this chapter, I give up. For I am not sure what the prophet is talking about."[1] That's Martin Luther. Just so you know you are in good company if you are scratching your head reading Zechariah.

The first half of the book (Zech. 1-8) is easier. Some of the symbolism may leave us puzzled (coloured horses? a stone with seven eyes?), but at least the structure is clear: eight visions. And once we understand where we are in Israel's history, we can make reasonable sense of it all: it is the year 520 BC; a first wave of Israelites have returned from exile only about 18 years before, and the rebuilding of the temple is an unfinished project. In these circumstances, the priest-prophet Zechariah shares words and visions of encouragement to let this community and its leaders know that God is for them and that they can finish the job (of rebuilding the temple). Zechariah 7 and 8 are set a few years later. It may leave us perplexed why a simple yes-or-no question (should we fast on this occasion?) draws such a long answer. But this section, too, is by and large, if not necessarily in every detail, intelligible. So far, so good.

[1] Quoted in A. Wolters (2002), "Zechariah 14: A Dialogue with the History of Interpretation", *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 13: 41.

But…

But the second half? There are of course those who offer clear and certain answers. We find them especially in books and other writings dealing with the end times. Their exposition of Zechariah is always based on a select few verses. They are usually the same verses in different sources, such as Jerusalem becoming a heavy stone for all nations (Zech. 12:3) and all nations gathering for battle against Jerusalem (Zech. 14:2). Plus some gospel quotes: the king on a donkey (Zech. 9:9), the rejected shepherd and the 30 pieces of silver (Zech. 11:4-17; Zech. 13:7), and the pierced one (Zech. 12:10). There are two problems with this:

1. It leaves out most of what is in the book; the rest gets rarely reflected on.
2. It assumes a neat division between predictions fulfilled in Christ's life and death and those that are still future and will be fulfilled in the run-up to his return.

However, in the book, these statements and predictions are all swirled together. As in: scrambled eggs. It is not at all clear how one would separate them and sort them out. We have only one, dramatic portrayal, not a going back and forth between two (or more) pictures that we can tell apart. If we had not known the gospel story, we would never, ever have guessed that that is what would happen in fulfilment of these prophecies.

Historical Fulfilment?

Others have attempted to unscramble the eggs by finding references – and thereby fulfilments – in historical events such as:

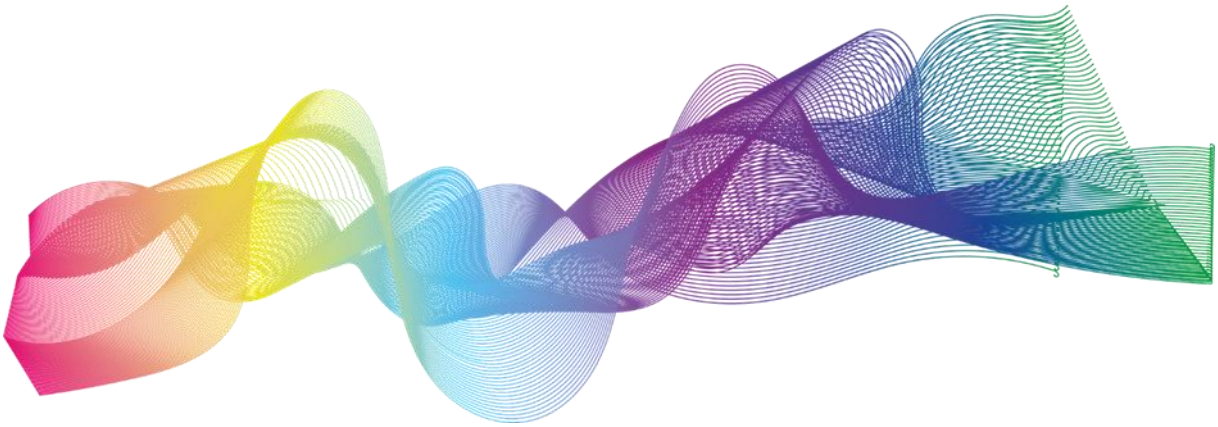
- Alexander the Great's whirlwind tour of victory climaxing in the conquest of Egypt (4th century BC) in the first half of Chapter 9
- The surprisingly successful uprising of the Maccabees (2nd century BC), leading to a period of independence for Israel, in the second half of Chapter 9 and beyond
- The ministry and death of Jesus, obviously
- Events around the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 at the end of Chapter 13 and in Chapter 14 (for instance, the flight of Christians from Jerusalem just before the siege began in Zech. 14:4f)

Problem is, it does not seem to fit all that well. When did the Philistines convert (Zech. 9:7)? And with the exception of a few references that the gospels apply to Jesus, doesn't Zechariah sound like something much bigger than what actually happened in Israel's history? It leaves the thoughtful reader wishing for a better explanation. Obviously, since this is not a 900-page commentary, I cannot cover the text in any sort of detail. But by tracing several significant themes I will aim to convey a Big Picture – that will hopefully enable us to make some sense of it all. [*Before you read on, it may be worth reading through Zechariah 9-14 first.*]

Themes That Build the Music

First, however, a general observation. The second half of Zechariah strikes me in several ways as similar to the second half of Isaiah (Is. 40-66). There even is a close parallel to the Servant Songs, those enigmatic passages in Isaiah about a suffering and rejected individual, and to the concept of a second exodus, even though Zechariah does not say nearly as much about this as Isaiah does. In both cases, we get a broad overview of what God is yet going to do. This is done by interweaving a number of themes in a way that has reminded many of the composition of a symphony. A different way of illustrating this is that both half books present us with a breath-taking panorama of God's purpose of salvation. All of it is brought together in one portrayal

with no attention given to chronological sequence. So what are some of the themes that make this music?



Source: Alexandra Koch, https://pixabay.com/illustrations/wave-graphic-curve-abstract-1817646/, CC0

The Coming King

Zechariah starts off in Chapter 9 with something that may look familiar if you have studied other prophets in the Old Testament. It is a movement of judgment coming from the north. In Israel's past, this would have been Assyria or Babylon. This time, it is different. First, because it seems to be God himself who is on the move. Second, because the Philistines are not only judged. In what must be considered a bold move for this time, the prophet includes their remnant in the people of God (Zech. 9:7). And third, because this time it is a reason to rejoice, not to be dismayed. Notice that there is really no cut or division in Zechariah 9:9 (or in Zech. 9:11). Indeed, verse 9 is the climax of the movement in the preceding eight verses. This is the return of God as king to Zion, both judging and saving the nations (and Israel) at the same time, to establish a worldwide kingdom of peace. It is what Jesus began to do while on earth, what his church continues, and what Christ will complete on his return.

Second Exodus

The return of the king goes hand in hand with the release and return of God's captive and exiled people (Zech. 9:11f; 10:6-11). It is a second exodus. Again, the past (exodus from Egypt) is a pattern for how God will act in the future. Space prevents us from pursuing this in any detail, but it should be obvious that Jesus presented himself as the agent of this second exodus; think for instance of the parallels between the Lord's Supper and the Passover meal. And he was the one to proclaime freedom to the captives, quoting Isaiah 61.

Empowerment and Abundance

The return of the king greatly empowers his people for battle (Zech. 9:13-15; 10:3-12; 12:5-8). The wondrous imagery in these verses conveys a sense of the great strength and vitality that God confers on his people. Briefly, the text also touches on the new abundance that will likewise be theirs (Zech. 9:17f).

The Shepherd and His Flock

It is in the context of empowerment that the image of flock and shepherd first appears (Zech. 9:16). Obviously, the flock is Israel and the shepherds present its leadership – a leadership that has failed and comes under God's judgment. What Israel needs is that God himself becomes the shepherd of his people.

However, there is a problem with this, and it is the parable or enacted prophecy in Chapter 11 that brings this out. To be fair, this is about the hardest passage in the book. No one has managed to make sense of a number of its details. We don't know who the three shepherds were or what they stand for (Zech. 11:8). We don't know to what extent it looks to Israel's past (divided monarchy? exile?), Zechariah's present experience, or something that – to him at least – was in the future.

But this much is clear. The flock is once again Israel. And when God attempts to shepherd them, he meets with rejection. In response, he gives up the flock to a cruel and worthless shepherd. This is something that had happened in Israel's past and would happen again, quite literally, in the rejection of Jesus, the harsh Roman yoke, and the even worse leadership Israel experienced in its revolt against Rome first in AD 66 and a second time in AD 132.

We learn more about the shepherd toward the end of Chapter 13. This time, the shepherd is struck ("pierced" in Zech. 12:10) and the sheep are scattered. Jesus quoted this passage immediately before his arrest (Mt. 26:31), clearly implying that he was this shepherd. It is not easy to interpret verse 8 and 9, where two-thirds are cut off and one third is refined, tested, and accepted. It is unlikely that this refers to a future Holocaust, even though this is a popular speculation in end time books. More likely it is about Israel's response to its shepherd in the first century. It is a familiar theme in the prophets that only a remnant – but in this case a sizeable remnant – remains.

These shepherd passages are a parallel to the Servant Songs in Isaiah. At first sight, they appear to break the flow, unexpectedly and almost disruptively popping up, both in Isaiah and in Zechariah. But in both books they are absolutely central to the prophets' vision of coming salvation. It is the Suffering Servant alias the Rejected Shepherd who will save Israel (and the world) from sin. They are God's agent to accomplish this.

Repentance

Seemingly in the midst of all this upheaval and eschatological turmoil, deep repentance happens, leading to a purging of the land and the new holiness. This, too, marks the time of the end (that is, the time after Christ's resurrection): it is not only a time of conflict but also of a real turning to God (of which we are part).

The Attack

Although there is a clear battle theme throughout, I discuss it last, because it includes the book's closing climax in Chapter 14. By the way, in this concluding chapter it is the least clear what we are to expect or envision happening, so we'd better tread cautiously in our interpretation. The chapter is rich in apocalyptic language and images that are graphic in their effect, but hard to define. Still, there are a few things we can say.

- Chapter 14 may be obscure in some of its details, but at least it has a clear structure. There is an interchange between descriptions of the battle (Zech. 14:1-5; 12-15) and descriptions of the new world order, the new age that will follow the conclusive defeat of evil (Zech. 14:6-11; 16-21). In this new age, Yahweh will be one, he will be the only one, and he will be worshipped in truth and in purity.
- There is a historical precedent for the attack in Chapter 12 and 14 in the Old Testament; this is a pattern from the past that is used to speak about Zechariah's future. In the background stands the Assyrian invasion under Sennacherib in the days

of Isaiah, in the 8th century. Jerusalem was miraculously saved through God's intervention. In the climactic confrontation of the last days, God would do this again.

- We should also be aware of the reinterpretation of such themes that takes place in the New Testament. There is no longer a geographical centre. Evil is much better understood in the New Testament. The Old Testament conflict between Israel and the nations has shifted to a conflict with the spiritual powers behind those nations. Where in the Old Testament God would judge the nations for their aggression against Israel, in the New Testament this turns into the climactic overthrow and defeat of all evil. In fact, these nations are themselves also the object of God's love, as is Israel. They are to be saved as well. The battle is against the powers and principalities, and these are to be judged and defeated. The unrepentant part of the world (and of Israel) will be caught up in this, but this is due to their unrepentance, not to their ethnic status. We find an extensive reinterpretation of this theme in Revelation 19-20 (actually, in a sense the entire book of Revelation is a reinterpretation of this theme). Clearly, the battle is against Christ and his people. And by implication: there may therefore not be an all-out military attack on the present city of Jerusalem in fulfilment of Zechariah.

All in all, Zechariah presents a particularly graphic portrayal of this familiar prophetic theme of the final battle. Perhaps the best illustration I can think of is Expressionist art. Expressionism doesn't paint to offer a close similarity to reality. It paints to bring out the emotion, what something feels like. And Zechariah paints in especially shrill colours. So these are not factual or near-photographic portrayals of future scenes, describing what we will see once it happens. Rather, they enable us to feel something of the anguish and turmoil that is involved, and to be empowered at the same time. Here are two quotes to help us grasp this nature of prophecy better:

> This collection of excerpts from prophecies yet to be fulfilled highlights an important characteristic of prophecy and apocalyptic: it is a stained-glass window, not a crystal ball. Under divine inspiration, the sanctified imagination of the biblical prophets communicated the themes of God's future judgment and blessing with vivid images. Look at the imagery and admire it, but do not attempt to see through the stained glass to what is off in the distance. The function of the prophets' language was to draw attention to basic ideas about the future, not to reveal precisely what will happen and when it will happen.[2]
>
> Prophecy and apocalyptic, then, are not suitable for microscopes, so that we might scope out specific details of the future. But they are suitable for macroscopes, because they allow us to see the big picture of how God will bring to conclusion the present era and establish the kingdom of eternity.[3]

God will save, that much is certain. There may be highly turbulent and violent moments on the way. But they will come with a deep sense of empowerment. So in case we are facing any battles or struggle even now, Zechariah has something to say to us: BE EMPOWERED!

The principle easily scales to larger areas of application. To choose just one area in the world where this seems particularly relevant right now: Christians in Ukraine, regardless of whether

[2] D.B. Sandy (2002), *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 184.
[3] Ibid., 189.

your first language is Ukrainian or Russian, there may be blood in the street, but BE EMPOWERED! Not to fight a war, but precisely *not* to fight it, at least not without discerning the *real* battle and the *real* enemy.

BE EMPOWERED!

2. Hungry? Come and Eat! (Isaiah Says It's on the House! June 2014)

Source: Office.com, licence free

What Do You Do to Feed Yourself Spiritually?

There is an unfortunate downside to asking this question. Too many of us respond with feelings of guilt. In a way, this is a strange reaction. Most of us will have dinner tonight. Let's assume that for some reason we forget or simply don't get around to it. How would that make us feel? Guilty? Or hungry?

I don't know about you, but I don't do breakfast or lunch so I have fulfilled a duty or an obligation. I do it because I am hungry, because I need energy for the day, and, well, because I like to eat. It does happen that I forget a meal. Sometimes I get so caught up in what I am doing that I lose all sense of time. At two or three in the afternoon, Franziska comes home and asks me if I had had lunch yet. The immediate result is that I feel my appetite – not guilt.

So why do I feel differently when I forget to spend time with God? It cannot be his reaction. Whenever I have knocked on his door after missing one or more appointments, I never walked into an atmosphere of offended reproach. I actually felt welcomed and loved.

Apparently, we don't sense our spiritual appetites as keenly as our natural ones. It therefore does take a bit more effort and "intentionality," to use the new buzzword, to stay in shape spiritually. But we do need that intake or we will be weak and ineffective. Busy perhaps, possibly impressively so, but not truly fruitful.

Feeding on God's Word

In this chapter, I will focus on one form of spiritual input only: feeding on the word. Before I get practical, allow me to say two things.

First, in case you are wondering if such a basic subject is an appropriate one when we are talking 'biblical studies,' let me explain – especially for those of you for whom several of the activities suggested in this letter are part of your everyday work!

I have tried to express my heart for this issue in a *personal manifesto*. The short version is: I am deeply convinced that biblical studies and biblical scholarship can never be an aim in and of themselves. If our studies do not bring us into the presence of God, we have missed the point. Likewise, if our study of his word leaves us unchanged. Biblical scholar Gordon Fee put it like this:

> The proper aim of all true theology is doxology [doxology is an expression of praise to God; in other words, worship].[4]

It therefore seems fitting to publish a reminder that we all need to spend time feeding on the word and "Listening to the Spirit in the Text" beyond our times of study and lecture preparation.

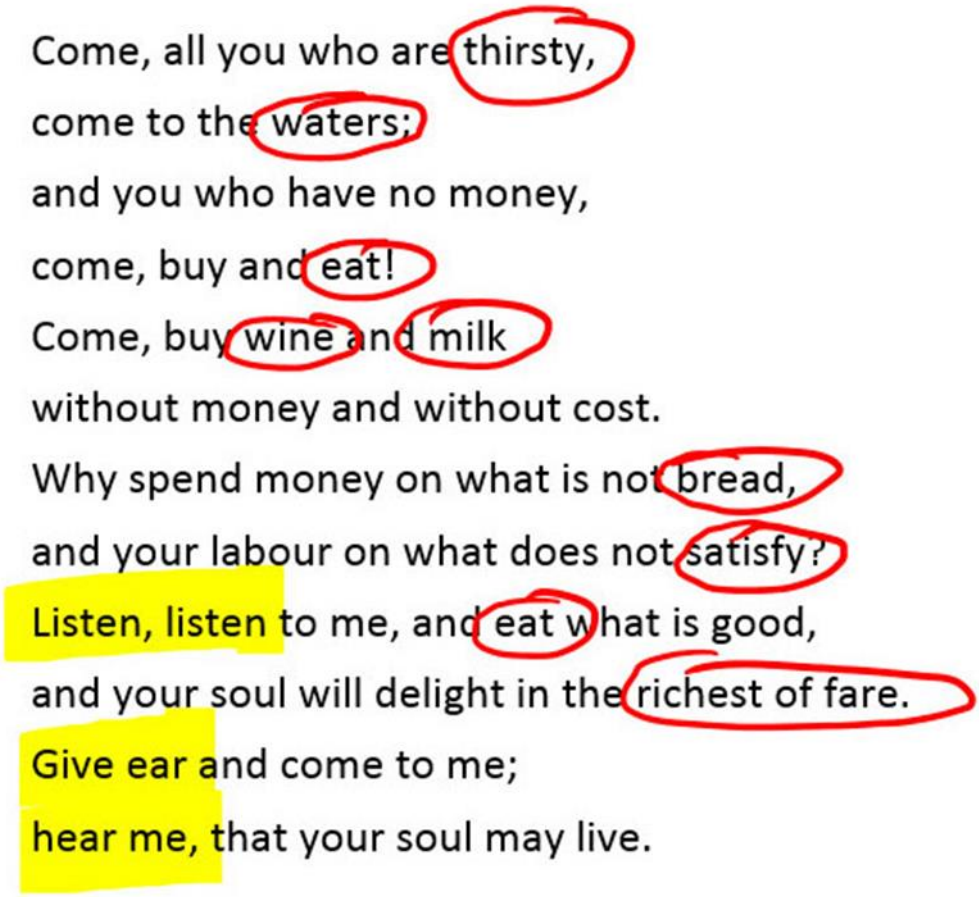
Second, something more theoretical, but absolutely foundational. Feeding on God's word is an act of receiving. Our attitude is therefore crucial. It only works if we are open to receive and ready to submit.

Our natural tendency is to read for information. This leaves us in control; we decide what is relevant. But the primary aim of reading the Bible or receiving God's word through other channels is not information. As the evangelist D.L. Moody quipped more than a century ago, "The Bible was not given for our information, but for our transformation."[5]

One key passage in the Bible that brings this out is Isaiah 55:1-3a (New International Version):

[4] Gordon Fee (2000), *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), Kindle position 93.

[5] At least everyone I have looked at claims D. L. Moody said it. But I have not been able to find a reference for this quote.



Do you notice how many words here have something to do with food or with eating and drinking? (If not, read it again!) Toward the end, it becomes clear – if it wasn't already – that all of this is not about filling our stomach. It is an image for listening or hearing what God says: "Give ear!" All these words imply receiving. We don't determine what is being said, but we do have influence over how we receive it and respond to it. Unless we aim for total openness, we may miss out.

One place where God speaks is the Bible. It is not the only place, but it is an important one. So when we come to the Bible, this attitude or willingness to receive is crucial. Without it, there will be no feeding.

Different Ways to Do This

Assuming we come to the text with the right attitude, what can we do? I wonder if one of the reasons why we find it difficult to be more consistent in our Bible reading is that we are trying to follow someone else's recipe. We are all different, and what works great for one person may not work for someone else. We each have to discover our personal preferences and find out what works for us. Here are some possibilities:

- Meditate on Scripture. I put this one first because it can be done even if you have little time; even then, it will still produce tremendous gains. What I just shared on Isaiah 55 is an example. Choose a verse or a paragraph and read it through several times. Start asking yourself questions, such as: Who is this about? What does it say? What does this word mean? What do I not understand? If no questions come to mind, ask yourself: what question should I ask about this passage? What does all of this have to

do with me? Keep reading the text. First, try to understand what you are reading, then ask God what he wants to communicate to you through the passage. Is there anything he would like you to know or understand more deeply? Anything to change or do? Meditation at its best ends in dialogue – but it is usually God who sets the agenda (overruling ours).

- As a specific, more structured and traditional form of meditation, practice *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio Divina* literally means *divine* or *godly reading*. It is an ancient practice coming out of the monastic tradition. Its purpose is communion with God through the reading of Scripture, meditation, and prayerful response. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, *Lectio Divina* is "the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer [bringing] about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart."[6]

  In its classic form, there are four steps involved:

  1. *Lectio*: take a moment to calm down and place yourself in God's presence. Read slowly, giving attention to every word and phrase. Does anything stand out or speak to you?
  2. *Meditatio*: meditate on this word or phrase and 'chew' on it. As you ponder, enter into prayerful dialogue with God, the next step.
  3. *Oratio*: pray and enter into a conversation with God, sharing your thoughts, asking questions, and listening.
  4. *Contemplatio*: rest and enjoy God's presence. Adore him and receive what he has for you.

  See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio_Divina as a starting point for more.

  [I realise that one could go anywhere with this, coming up with farfetched conceptions that have nothing to do with the text – it is not inductive. But in practice, it can work surprisingly well, and those of us with an SBS/BCC background are positioned to benefit greatly. After all, we already have so much interpretation and background understanding stored up to enlighten our more devotional and intuitive reading of Scripture. Ideally, *Lectio Divina* does not replace the study of Scripture, but builds on it.]

- Write out the words you are meditating on; this will force you to really pay attention and notice them.
- As you meditate, put your thoughts and reflections in writing, in the form of a journal. It may help you to keep a wandering mind more focussed.
- Memorize Scripture. Okay, I don't speak with authority on this one; I don't really practice it. And it seems to have gone out of vogue after the 1970s. But – maybe it is back. Some YWAM-ers are going around citing entire books from memory, and for some of us it might just be right, so I do want to mention it here.
- Read through the whole Bible. Google "bible reading plan" if you'd like a plan or schedule to help you. But be careful: if you have tried this before and failed, it may be wise to aim for something smaller. How about starting with one larger book that you have never read before or that you have not read in a long time?

[6] Quoted in: Wikipedia, "Lectio Divina," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio_Divina, 9. Mai 2014.

- Read a different version or even a different language. I'm presently reading the Bible in Spanish in order to improve my Spanish. It is a stretch, and it is slooooow going. But it also gives me a whole new, fresh reading of, at times, overly familiar passages. Plus, I see things I did not know were there (*does it really say that?*). I love it.
- Who says you must read by yourself? You may find it easier to read together with others. Start a Bible reading group that meets for an hour or 30 minutes on a particular time of the day or week.
- Who says you must read? You may find it easier to take the listening literally and look for an audible Bible. Check out the audible Bibles availabe at http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/ if you'd like to give this a try.
- Read what you read more than once. For instance, choose a short book and read it through from beginning to end every day for a whole week. By then, you will really know what is in this book.
- If you are more creatively inclined: read a passage or a book, and turn it into a painting, a song, or another creative expression.
- Turn what you read into prayer. Can it be reformulated as a blessing for a person who comes to mind, as a plea or intercessory prayer for someone or something, or as a proclamation over a nation, church, organisation, or individual?
- Read a book about the Bible or an issue in biblical studies. Sometimes we get stuck and we fail to get anything out of our reading or studying. At that point, it may help to get some fresh input that will unlock new perspectives on old and familiar passages. A good place to start is Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Or maybe a daily devotional book will help you get unstuck.
- If there is an SBS, BCC, or other Bible course not too far away, why not join them for a study week?
- Study a passage, a book, or a subject you are interested in. This is the most time-consuming alternative, which is why I put it last. For leaders and other busy people: do your study on something you can use for your ministry (perhaps for those base meetings you are scheduled to speak?).

  Since I have worked with the SBS for many years, I am of course a fan of inductive Bible study. I realise it is impossible to practice the full SBS method while involved in normal life and ministry. But here is the essence of it in three simple steps:

  - Observation: what is in this text? What does it say?
  - Interpretation: what does this mean?
  - Application: based on this text, what do I do? How do I respond?

  Even with a demanding schedule, it is not impossible to take a verse, a passage (for instance, a Psalm), or perhaps even a small book, and ask yourself these three questions.

The point of this long list is not, of course, that we do all of these. It is to give us a taste of the breadth of possibilities and to get us thinking: what in all this is mine?

"…That Your Soul May Live"

Before I close, I would like to add something for SBS staff and others who regularly study and teach the Bible as part of their job or ministry: lucky us! We get to spend time doing this and call it work. But let me restate the warning in the introduction to this chapter: it is not enough to study the Bible. By and large, the process of study leaves us in control. It does not require

that attitude of listening or receiving I wrote about. It is good and necessary as far as it goes, but it is incomplete. This is true even if we include application as the third step of inductive Bible study. After all, I may well be acting purely on the basis of *my* understanding, setting goals based on what *I* would like to change. So where does God get to chip in?

Therefore, those of us who get to study regularly may not need more study time, but rather need more time to hear and receive. We need to make room to listen and let the word do its work in us. In other words, we need the practice of meditation and reflection next to and on top of our studying.

Let me finish with one more food analogy. When we look back, I am sure there are certain special meals that we remember. They were extraordinary and probably marked special occasions. I think of the buffet at our wedding, my first Christmas in Switzerland, and the pancakes my grandmother used to bake for me as a child. But let's face it, it is not these relatively few special meals that enabled me to grow up and become who I am today. It is the thousands of meals that I don't remember that made growing up possible. (What did you eat on 28 June 1998? I don't remember either.)

It is what we do every day that matters most. According to Paul, the word of God is "at work" in us who believe (1 Thess. 2:13). It is wonderfully powerful to accomplish quiet transformations – but only if we give it time. So how about (re-)starting a habit of daily Bible reading and meditation (or whatever you choose to do) - *today*?

3. Eight Things I Learned from Living in a Mediterranean Climate (August 2014)

Over the past several years, we have spent most of our time close to the Mediterranean. I would like to share what I have been learning from living in a Mediterranean climate.

To be sure, my experience is not based in Israel, but in Spain, on the other end of the Mediterranean. I assume the climate here is a bit more temperate because the Atlantic is close, perhaps making for slightly milder winters and summers that are less hot. But there is still a lot that reminds me of various things in the Bible and that has given me a better feel for things in Scripture. Vegetation and crops are very similar, and so are the seasons and the landscape. So here we go.

1. Get Ready to Freeze

The first thing that has stood out to Franziska and me is not what you may expect. People don't normally think of Spain or Israel as 'cold' countries. And of course compared with the north of Europe, where ice and frost can take over for weeks or months at a time, they are not. However, houses in the north are well insulated and heated. It may be cold outside, but once you are inside, you can warm up.

Houses in the south of Spain tend to have neither insulation nor double glass windows. On a fine day in January, it may be 5°C outside early in the morning and 18 or so in the afternoon. The inside temperature will then settle around 11°C, unless we heat, but we can only heat the living room. And the first winter, we did not have heating. Seen in this light, Spain is by far the coldest country we have lived in.

It has given me a new respect for the ancient Israelites, whose houses probably were no warmer than ours today. People living in biblical times in biblical countries must have experienced a lot of cold. Especially since much of the area where the Israelites lived was in the mountains, 900 m and more up. Nice in summer, but cold in winter.

Where we live in Spain, we never have snow. But where the Israelites lived, it did get cold enough for snow. It made for a memorable event: “On a day when snow had fallen” (2 Sam. 23:20), but frequent enough that one had to be prepared for it: “She is not afraid of snow for her household” (Prov. 31:21).

Peter warming himself at the fire in the high priest’s courtyard (Mk. 14:54)? I believe it. Those shepherds out on Christmas Eve? Brrr… (Okay, maybe Jesus was not born in December; but shepherds would still be out with their flocks that month as well.)

2. Different Seasons

In spite of this, it is summer, not winter, which is the dead season, when nature grinds to a halt and the fields turn brown. This is the very opposite of seasons in the north. In the south, things grow during the winter half of the year and into the spring, not in summer.

Olive trees with flowers in March

Winter is the time when most of the rain falls. During summer there usually is no rain for several months in a row. This is the defining mark of a Mediterranean climate: summers are dry (and hot), and most of the rain falls in the winter half of the year.

Weather forecasts in summer are therefore a very boring affair.

The same field in July

Another characteristic of Mediterranean climates is that the amount of rainfall can vary dramatically from year to year. Our first two winters were very wet (which also made them cold). This led to an incredible abundance of flowers in the following springtime. The most recent winter, in contrast, was quite dry. We have been able to tell the difference: far fewer flowers, weeds that do not grow nearly as high, and fields that turn brown much earlier. I have noticed how some streams in our area have dried up early this summer. Naturally, this has reminded me of Elijah's stay at the brook Cherith and the devastating three-year drought he announced (1 Ki. 17).

It has given me an appreciation for the vulnerability of life under such circumstances. I don't depend on last winter's rainfall for survival, but the ancient Israelites did.

3. Springtime

As far as temperature is concerned, this leaves spring and autumn as the truly lovely seasons – between cold and heat, freezing and sweating. But since spring has the added benefit of flowers blooming (everything is green, not brown), it is the season that tops them all.

In spring, especially the flowers of the pomegranate stand out

Knowing what spring can be like around the Mediterranean adds depth to this love poem:

> My beloved speaks and says to me:
> "Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
> and come away,
> for behold, the winter is past;
> the rain is over and gone.
> The flowers appear on the earth,
> the time of singing has come,
> and the voice of the turtledove
> is heard in our land.
> The fig tree ripens its figs,
> and the vines are in blossom;
> they give forth fragrance. (Song 2:10-13; ESV)

4. Withered Grass

Summer being what it is around here, it is clear that life is tough on grass and other herbs, especially when growing on less favourable places like rooftops. This supplied the biblical authors with a graphic illustration for the brevity and the vulnerability of life:

> All flesh is grass,
> and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
> The grass withers, the flower fades
> when the breath of the Lord blows on it. (Is. 40:6b-7a; ESV)

> …like grass on the housetops,
> blighted before it is grown. (Is. 37:27; ESV)

Eroded hills: rounded forms, sparse vegetation (no trees), and carved shape

5. Dust in the Wind

With the drought and the withering comes the dust. It is an ever-present reality in summer. An unpaved road goes by our house, and every car that drives by throws up a cloud of dust. Of course, in biblical Israel, no cars drove by. But the wind will do just fine to get the same effect.

The dry summers also increase the risk of erosion, especially when trees have been cut down and the mountain slopes are overgrazed by flocks of sheep and goats. This has happened all around the Mediterranean, which used to be an area with a lot of forests. Once the forest is cut and the topsoil has washed away, it is pretty much gone forever, leaving carved and barren hillsides as evidence of human mismanagement.

6. Cypress and Oak

The Mediterranean oak tree is quite different from oak trees in the north. For one, it is an evergreen and does not drop its leaves in the fall. In addition, its leaves have a very different shape. They are smaller and relatively thick and leathery, obviously an adaptation to the dry and hot summers. Younger trees have leaves edged with mean spikes. It is only the acorns that tell us these are oak trees: the seeds are similar to the ones in the north.

The cypress is also an evergreen but belongs to the conifers, like pine trees. Nowadays it is especially valued for its decorative shape (think Toscana) and as a hedge plant.

It is often not easy to translate the names of trees and other plants in the Bible. It is therefore not entirely certain that “cypress” or “oak” in our Bible always refers to either one of those trees. What is clear, however, is that both trees were valued, and not just because of the wood.

Young oak tree

Mediterranean oak trees: this is where the wedding took place

They both provide shade and shelter against the heat, a priceless asset in the Mediterranean summer. I once attended a wedding in early summer, mid-afternoon. The ceremony took

place outside, on the field. It was not a particularly warm day, but was it still burning hot on that field. Fortunately, we gathered under a small group of large oak trees. This made all the difference. With a slight breeze, it was actually pleasant, very different from a few meters out.

Wild rose: pretty in spring, but impenetrable all year round

In “the heat of the day” (see Abraham below), such trees are worth their weight in gold:

> So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord. (Gen. 13:18; ESV)
>
> And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. (Gen. 18:1; ESV)

7. Thorns and Thistles

> Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
> instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
> and it shall make a name for the Lord,
> an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. (Is. 55:13; ESV)

As Isaiah 55:13 indicates, the opposite of the cypress and other desirable trees are thorns and thistles. They visually sum up the effect of sin and the curse that came with the fall.

The Mediterranean flora seems to include an above-average array of thistles and other plants with thorns. These thistles can grow big and mean. When a field is no longer cultivated, it is these kinds of plants that take over. They can make a field all but impenetrable. This, of course, is what happened when a country was depopulated, as after the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC and with the Babylonian exile. Isaiah was therefore not exaggerating when he wrote:

> In that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. With bow and arrows, a man will come there, for all the land will be briers and thorns. And as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not come there for fear of briers and thorns, but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread. (Is. 7:23-25; ESV)

8. Olive Trees

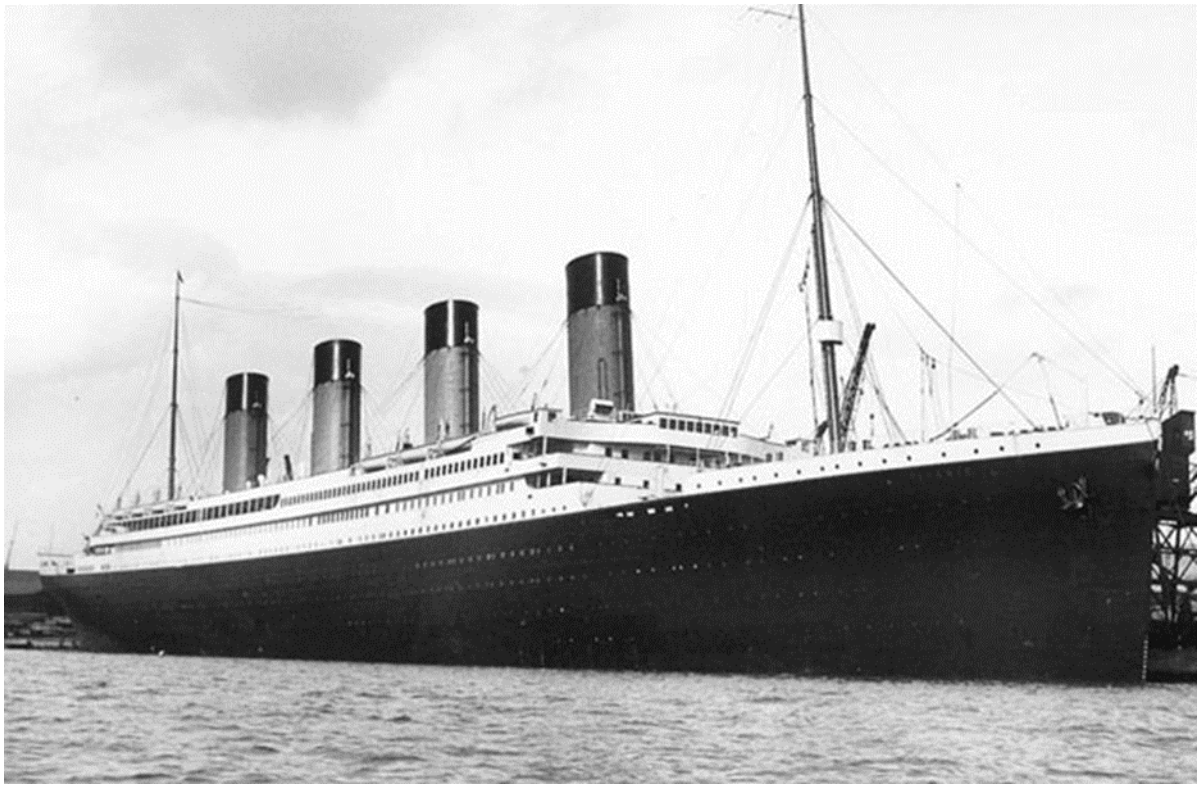
Last but not least I have to write about olive trees. They are everywhere in the south of Spain. In fact, Spain is the world’s largest producer of olives. One reason they are so ubiquitous here is that they can grow and produce fruit without watering or irrigation. Another reason is that people seem to value producing their own oil. Many families own a small plot with olive trees. They put in a lot of time and effort to prune their trees and restrain weeds so that water and minerals go to the olive trees instead.

The oil is people’s pride. Our neighbour and landlord scoffs at the oil that is sold in stores. Not at the cheap stuff, mind you, but the virgin extra. He won’t have it; only the pure and truly coldly pressed oil from the local mill is good enough for him.

Nothing in the Bible suggests that the Israelites were so peculiar about their oil, but it obviously was an important staple. In addition, it provided fuel for lamps.

Usually, branches of highly productive kinds are grafted into the stronger but less productive trunks of wild olive trees. This is, of course, the background for Paul’s illustration in Romans 11: Gentile believers as branches grafted into the olive tree. The unusual thing about the illustration is that Paul turns it on its head. They are branches of the wild olive tree grafted in into the cultivated olive tree – something no farmer would ever do. It provides the Gentile Christians in Rome with a graphic illustration as to why they should not pridefully despise their Jewish brethren.

4. Who Is "I" in Romans 7? And: A Fresh Look at Romans 1-8 (October 2014)



Source: RMS Titanic at Southampton, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Titanic_Sn1912.jpg, Public Domain

Paul's epistle to the Romans is a book I taught quite a bit during my early years in the School of Biblical Studies, but not much at all in later years. In the course of a school, one cannot, alas!, teach every great book in the Bible oneself; other staff want their share of teaching, and even the most passionate teacher at some point runs out of energy. (For those intermediate years I had to make do with books like Revelation and Isaiah; not bad either.)

Over the past several years, however, I am getting asked again to teach Romans. My relative absence during the years in between enabled me to take a fresh look once I started to prepare for these lectures, which provided me with some valuable insights and the fresh understanding to be shared below.

Subject

So: in this chapters, I share new insights I have gained into Romans 1-8, with a special focus on Chapter 7 and the poor "wretched man" Paul refers to there. This new look (not perspective; this is not about the so-called "New Perspective" on Paul) at Romans really helps to make sense of what Paul is doing in these chapters.

Before I continue, I should give credit to Ben Witherington's commentary on Romans, since quite a bit of what follows was triggered by this book.[7] However, it has been some years since I read it; this is my own version of his ideas.

A Classic Structure of Romans 1-8

A fairly standard way of looking at Romans 1-8 is as follows:

- Introduction to the letter (Rom. 1:1-17)
- The human problem: all have sinned (Rom. 1:18-3:20)
- **Justification** by faith: the solution, with Abraham as an illustration (Rom. 3:21-4:25)
- Chapter 5… ???
- **Sanctification**: delivered from sin (Rom. 6)
- **Sanctification**: delivered from the law (Rom. 7)
- **Sanctification**: by the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-17)
- **Glorification** (Rom. 8:18-39)

Chapter 5 sits a bit uneasy in this structure: Is it about reconciliation as distinct from justification? Does the Adam passage repeat some of the same material from a different angle? Does Paul want to broaden the scope by moving from Abraham to Adam (thus placing the people of Israel into the same troubled boat as the rest of humanity? How do the two halves of the chapter fit together??? Is Paul rambling in this chapter, as some preachers do, until he figures out (in Chapter 6) where he wants to go with his argument? By no means! (as we will see).

Besides defining the structure of the book as moving from problem to solution, it is also very much a topical perspective. It virtually reduces these chapters to a systematic theology by Paul: this is his soteriology, a systematic theologian might say, that is, Paul's understanding of salvation (from the Greek word *sōtēria*, salvation).

The problem with this structure is not that it is wrong, but that it leaves so much out; that is why I used the word *reduces*. It removes the historical flesh and bones of the biblical story, leaving us with a handful of fairly abstract ideas. This is certainly not how Paul starts off in Romans 1:2-3 ("promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh"; ESV). Neither does it do justice to how he continues.

A Different Structure for Romans 1-8

Another, more positive feature of the structure above is that it lets Romans 1-8 end with a resounding climax in the second half of Chapter 8. But it is not the only such climax in these chapters. There is an earlier one in the first half of Chapter 5. Let's take it as a possible cue that these chapters should actually be divided into two parallel parts, each ending with a climax, and see where that takes us:

- Introduction to the letter (Rom. 1:1-17)
- **Part 1 (Rom. 1:18-5:11)**
  - All have sinned: the human problem and how Israel failed to solve it (Rom. 1:18-3:20)

[7] Ben Witherington III (2004), *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

    - How the promise to and through Abraham has been fulfilled: the solution (Rom. 3:21-4:25)
    - The first climax (Rom. 5:1-11)
- **Part 2 (Rom. 5:12-8:39)**
    - We are all in Adam: the human problem (Rom. 5:12-21)
    - Crucified and raised with Christ: the solution (Rom. 6)
    - Israel under the law: how Israel (and morality) failed to solve the problem (Rom. 7)
    - Life in the Spirit: the solution (Rom. 8:1-17)
    - The second climax (Rom. 8:18-39)

Notice that this structure splits Chapter 5 into two units so that we no longer have two awkward halves that do not fit together. In addition, it makes it look like Paul covered the same ground (define the problem, then present the solution) twice.

Really?

But do we really have two parallel climaxes in these chapters? You may want to pause here to read and compare Romans 5:1-11 with Romans 8:18-39 yourself (it is a worthwhile exercise), but here are the similarities I noticed:

- Both passages refer to **glory** and **hope** and focus on the **future** (Rom. 5:3-5; Rom. 8:18, 20, 24-25).
- In doing this, both affirm the **absolute security** we have in or because of Christ (expressed by the "much more" in Rom. 5:9-10 and pretty much everything in Rom. 8:29-39).
- Both refer to present **tribulations** and **suffering** (Rom. 5:3; Rom. 8:18, 35).
- Both speak of **perseverance**; in light of the future glory, this is the necessary and logical response to tribulation (Rom. 5:3; Rom. 8:25).
- In both passages, **the Spirit** is present, presumably to help in this (Rom. 5:5; Rom. 8:23, 26-27).
- In both passages the above has everything to do with the fact that **Christ died for us** (Rom. 5:6-10; Rom. 8:32).
- This, in turn, is because of **God's love** (Rom. 5:5, 8; Rom. 8:39).

Taken together, this is too much to be a coincidence. Obviously, Paul wants us to understand that his argument comes in two parallel parts, covering the same ground twice, even if in different words and images. Why this second look and what differentiates it from the first?

In Adam, in Christ: The Underlying Framework of Romans 6-8

Foundational for the second part of Romans 1-8 is what Paul puts down in the final verses of Chapter 5: the contrast between Adam and Christ. Even though Paul will not refer explicitly to Adam again, and even though he does not even use the phrase "in Adam" in Romans at all (it's only in 1 Cor. 15:22), it is this contrast between "in Adam" and "in Christ" that shapes the remaining chapters of Part 2.

"In Adam" opens a new angle on the predicament for which the gospel is the solution: sin is not just an individual problem consisting of bad choices that we might solve by promising to make better choices from now on. Sin is a power that won't let us go. Sin is a tyrant that has all of humanity in an iron-clad grip, leaving death as the only possible outcome.

At this point, it is important to know that Paul is writing this letter to a group of house churches in Rome in which Jewish and Gentile believers are not getting along very well. Paul has more

reasons to turn to Adam and our common humanity than theological interests. Paul's aim in Romans is not only to present "his" gospel; it is also to restore mutual acceptance and appreciation between these two groups. To this end, he needs to confront both Jewish and Gentile pride. One way he does this is by pointing out they are both in the same boat, and this boat, "in Adam," is a total shipwreck rapidly heading for the bottom of the sea: the original Titanic.[8]

Although this is relevant to both Jewish and Gentile readers in Rome, it does have one special application specifically for the first group. Crucial is not whether one is "in Abraham"; in fact, this is not a category at all. Decisive is whether one is in Adam or in Christ. By default, everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, is born in Adam. And if in Adam, then under the power of sin, without any prospect of escape. This is where Jews fare no better than Gentiles.

It explains why the remedy in Romans 6 needs to be so drastic. It is not enough that Christ died for us; we also need to die with him. This is the only way out. We must exit the old humanity and enter the new humanity through death and resurrection as made visible in baptism.

Who Is Paul Talking about in Romans 7?

At this point, we are able to take a fresh look at Chapter 7, especially at the identity of the person speaking as "I" starting in verse 7. Quite a few different solutions have been proposed, too many to cover them all, but here are a few possibilities.

1. Paul as a Christian. Since Paul writes in the "I"-form, it would make sense to think he is speaking about himself. The question then becomes whether this is Paul before or after his conversion to Christ.

The latter interpretation, although widespread, can be excluded, because as early as Romans 7:6 Paul states (literally) "we were released" from the law (past tense). In Romans 8 Paul will explain in more detail how this works. But we already know the basic answer: out of Adam, into Christ; crucified and raised with him. So Chapter 7 and 8 continue the "in Adam" and "in Christ" framework established in chapter 5 and applied to sin in Chapter 6.

This is not to deny that a Christian may still struggle with sin, but this is simply not what Paul is writing about. So whoever Paul is speaking about, the experience is before Christ, not after (or in) Christ.

2. Paul before his conversion. Although Paul may have struggled with certain parts of the law in his pre-Christian life, it is not clear that he is referring to this here. Since Paul grew up with the law, there would not really have been a time when he was "without the law", after which "the commandment came" (Rom. 7:9). And does this really match the picture we get of Paul elsewhere as a zealot for the law, apparently not suffering from any self-doubt worth mentioning?

3. Adam or humanity. For this reason, and because of the prominent place of Adam in chapter 5, others have thought that Paul is here identifying with Adam or perhaps with all of humanity. At least Adam was indeed without a commandment initially, and there are certainly some

[8] I hasten to add: God has brought, so to say, a second Titanic alongside the sinking one, and is not just saving individuals, but in a very real sense the ship itself. In the end, you may find those who would not accept rescue at the bottom of the sea, but the ship itself (the human project) will have been saved and transformed, sailing happily along in new, eternal waters, now truly indestructible and unsinkable. However, from a theological perspective, apart from Christ the human project after Adam was as doomed as the Titanic after it hit the iceberg.

echoes of the Genesis story in this passage. Perhaps Paul starts off as Adam and from Romans 7:14 onwards voices a universal human experience.[9]

At the same time, the very commandment that Paul uses, "you shall not covet" (Rom. 7:7), does not fit the prohibition in Genesis 3. Besides, he refers to "the law" here and not only to one commandment. Therefore, although there are echoes of Adam in this chapter, he is not really the person speaking here.

4. The people of Israel under the law. For this reason, I think Paul has the people of Israel in mind (at least in verse 7-13) and speaks as a representative of the nation, an impersonation. In the context of Israel, it makes sense that there was a time without the law; then the commandment came, at Mount Sinai. Even though this commandment was in and of itself an instrument of life, the presence of sin in Israel prevented it from having this effect. Instead, the commandment brought death.

There was one positive and useful outcome: it brought out into the open the very sinfulness of sin, its whole ugly face, leaving no illusion as to its true nature. It also demonstrated our inability as humans to save – or improve – ourselves.

And this is where Adam comes in again: Paul describes the historical experience of Israel with the law as a replay of Adam's fall, with sin playing the role of the serpent. Israel was supposed to be the solution to Adam's sin, the agent to bring God's salvation to the world, but ironically repeated Adam's fall, since sin proved too strong and cunning an opponent.

Pagan Philosophers Knew This Too

It is difficult to decide whether from verse 14 on Paul is still impersonating Israel. More likely he has switched to speaking as a representative of the whole human race; the shift from past to present tense in verse 14 indicates something has changed. At this point, in the second half of Chapter 7, the Jewish dilemma does not differ much from that of the Gentiles, at least of those Gentiles who subscribe to higher standards of morality. Paul's "I" is voicing a universal human experience, not a merely Jewish one. Pagan philosophers of Paul's world had been aware of this. Some of their statements sound a lot like the dilemma Paul voices in Romans 7:

> For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do that I practice. (Rom. 7:19, New King James Version)
>
> Desire persuades me one way, reason another. I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse. (Ovid, Metamorphoses 7:22-21)
>
> What I wish, I do not do, and what I do not wish, I do (Epictetus, Dissertationes 2.26.4)

As before, this leaves Jews and Gentiles in exactly the same boat: "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24, New King James Version). Well, by now we know the answer.

This is where Paul's exposition turns out to be eminently practical. Neither the law nor ethics suffice to turn us into better people. Effort isn't wrong. But if we have tried and failed, try harder rarely is the solution. The road to moral improvement is not to try harder, but to reckon ourselves dead to sin and to live according to the Spirit.

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[9] This is Ben Witherington's view: in Rom. 7:7-13 Adam speaks and in Rom. 7:14-25 (a representative of) humanity speaks; http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2012/12/19/the-sbl-in-chicago-a-potpourri-of-things-part-one/ (see the second half of this blogpost)

5. The Emperor's New Clothes: The Imperial Cult in the Roman Empire (November 2014)

Source: Till Niermann, Augustus of Prima Porta, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Statue-Augustus.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0

Things I Am Learning from N. T. Wright's Colossal Book on Paul, Part 1

I started to read *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*[10] during the Christmas break and now, more than 10 months later, I am still at it. But I am learning a lot on the way, and this month I want to start sharing some of this with you. I expect there will be a few more instalments next year.

Paul and the Faithfulness of God is the fourth volume in Wright's series on *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Together, these volumes present an understanding of how

[10] N. T. Wright (2003), *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

Christianity and the church began (therefore "Christian Origins"). According to Wright, an important part of the explanation is how the early Christians "redefined" the one God of Jewish monotheism to somehow incorporate Jesus and the Holy Spirit while remaining ferociously monotheistic nevertheless (therefore "and the Question of God").

To put this fourth volume in context:

- The first volume was titled *The New Testament and the People of God*, appeared in **1992** (yes, that is 22 years ago), and counts *535* pages, which seemed thick at the time. It presents a theoretical framework for the series and seeks to understand first-century – or better, Second Temple – Judaism and early Christianity through the lens of worldview.
- The second volume, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, was published five years later, in **1997**. It is an attempt to understand Jesus historically within this setting of Second Temple Judaism, demonstrating that what he did, said, and believed about himself makes sense in this context. The book counts **741** pages, and that is without saying a word about what followed after the crucifixion.
- Originally, this subject, the resurrection, was to be the concluding chapter of Volume 2. However, the second volume had already grown rather bulky, and the author believed that he had enoughmaterial to justify an additional, previously unplanned short volume on the resurrection. This original idea must have run out of control, because *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, which appeared in **2003**, counts **817** pages. Yes, this "brief" extra volume turned out to be the largest in the series – up to this point.
- 10 long years passed by, in which N. T. Wright published many shorter books (the man writes faster than I can read), until finally, in November **2013**, the long-awaited sequel on Paul and his theology came out, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Its size – hold on to your seat – is **1700** pages. No wonder it took 10 years to complete, and no wonder I am not coming to the end of it.

In this chapter, I look at the subject of the emperor cult and the imperial ideology that increasingly marked Rome. The emperor acquired a new status reminding me of a fairy tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes".[11] In this fairy tale, the new clothes are entirely imaginary. In the end, the emperor goes out naked, although no one wants to admit this. The new identity of the emperor in Rome was likewise an illusion: he was no more divine than any other human being.

The emperor cult played a significant role in the setting of the New Testament, not just as the occasion for the book of Revelation, but also as an important factor giving shape to other parts of the New Testament as well – more so then I realised before reading the relevant chapters in Wright's book.

Before diving in, I should make this disclaimer: N. T. Wright's views on Paul and his theology are in parts controversial among evangelicals. To give just one larger example: he insists on translating "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:17) as "the [covenant] faithfulness of God" (as in the title of his book). This controversy is not what I am dealing with. The question here is not: did N. T. Wright get the NT right? (Sorry, I couldn't resist that.) I am not writing a critique of his book and I am not going to discuss the so-called New Perspective on Paul, at least not

[11] I am assuming you are familiar with it, but if need be, you can read it here: http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html.

now. It is worth pointing out that more often than not he is in disagreement with other representatives of the New Perspective, and he is certainly the most evangelical voice among them. Rather than focus on points where he fails to convince me (although there are such points), I will be sharing positive insights and new information I am taking away from this book.

Who Is Like Caesar? And Who Can Make War against Him!? (Cf. Rev. 13:4b)

When the writing of the New Testament came to an end, presumably with Revelation, emperor worship was not yet being enforced. However, soon enough it would be, even if not consistently. Domitian, the ruling emperor from AD 81 until 96, on occasion described himself as *Dominus et Deus*, Lord and God – a sign of things to come. Revelation was given, among other reasons, as a prophetic word to warn and strengthen the church in facing this threat. It is especially the image of the beast in Revelation 13 that brings out the ugly and demonic reality that Rome was becoming.

This much is relatively obvious and unsurprising. Conventional wisdom has it that this kind of emperor worship was particularly strong in the East of the Roman Empire, but that in the West, especially in Rome itself, the emperors initially held back, with the exception of madmen like Caligula. In first-century Rome, the emperor did not become divine until after his death.

It is at this point that Wright's portrayal of the world in which Paul lived, especially the evolving self-understanding of the Roman Empire, adds significant depth and some correction. The problem is our Western mindset, shaped by the Enlightenment to think in mutually exclusive and clearly separated categories such as "human" and "divine".

This is not how people in the ancient world thought. To them, the boundary between the categories of "human" and "divine" was permeable. Gods could choose to walk and perhaps live among mortals. Certainly, their offspring could. And humans, although this was rare, could rise to divine status. This is what happened to Julius Caesar and a number of his successors after their death. In fact, there was a gradient or scale moving from the human through intermediate categories to the gods of the Olympus; there were various possibilities in between.

A second crucial consideration is that one did not have to make overt claims. There were more subtle ways to hint at the true nature of the emperor and the empire. This is why I now realise it makes more sense to speak of emperor *cult* than of emperor *worship*; the latter term is too narrow and specific to cover everything that was going on, including in the West. Here are a few examples.

- When Octavian, better known to us as Emperor Augustus, became the sole ruler of Rome in 27 BC, "Augustus" was one of the titles he received. It means "exalted one". How exalted exactly is left open, but the ambiguity makes one wonder.
- The picture above shows a well-known statue of Octavian, displaying him as a military leader. The statue is laden with symbolism, some of it suggesting more-than-human. The emperor is barefoot, for instance, the way outstanding heroes or gods, but not ordinary humans, were put on display. And that little creature at his feet is Cupid, a son of Venus. It brought to expression the claim that the family of Octavian descended from this goddess as well. Other emperors took it further. One statue of Claudius makes him look like Jupiter, Rome's supreme god, complete with Jupiter's eagle (9864; here and elsewhere, these numbers refer to the location in the Kindle version of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*).

- Since Julius Caesar, his adopted father, was divinized after his death, Augustus could logically and legitimately present himself as the "son of the divinized", which he did for instance on coins. The expression stops short of claiming divinity for Augustus since he is neither a god nor the son of a god, but it comes close. It suggests a manner of closeness to the divine without explicitly claiming divinity. The implication is that Augustus was more than a mere human.
- Coins were an important means of propaganda. After all, there was no TV and no printing, and there were therefore very few pictures for people to look at. As N. T. Wright reminds us, coins "were the only mass medium in the ancient world" (8959). "Accustomed as we are to seeing human faces on coins, we might forget that it was only in the time of Julius Caesar that the Romans began to portray living human beings numismatically, and Augustus developed this strikingly, with his own portrait variously displayed, not least in the guise of a god" (8964-68).

This illustrates we are dealing with a sliding scale. If Augustus was not a god yet, he was certainly on the way to divine status, and already closer to the divine than mere mortals.

Outside of Rome, there was less reticence to treat emperors as divine. This was obviously true for the East, where rulers had been understood as in some sense divine for centuries. Here, the earliest temples for living emperors were built, starting with Pergamum in 29 BC; strictly speaking, Augustus wasn't even emperor yet.

Particularly striking is an inscription that has been found in the Roman province of Asia dating back to 9 BC (quoted in 9585-9610). In it, a number of cities decide and decree a change in the calendar. From this point on, the year was to begin with the birthday of Emperor Augustus, which had been "the beginning of glad tidings" (Greek: *euangelia*). In the decree, Augustus is hailed as a god, but also as "a savior who brought war to an end and set all things in order". This hardly describes an ordinary human being.

Although less known (it came as a surprise to me to read this), this move toward a cult revolving around the emperor was not limited to the East. Surprising is how early altars to Augustus were erected in the West: in Lyons in France in 10 BC, and probably even earlier in Spain, in 19 BC (9332, 9524). Again, this is not quite the same as saying that the emperor is a god, but it comes close.

Imperial Ideology

Intricately linked with the position and status of the emperor was the story that Rome had begun to tell about itself. I am referring to the imperial ideology constructed to justify Rome's rule of the world. In part, it was being spread through statues, coins, and other non-verbal and symbolic means. But it was also a real story, put into words by some of Rome's greatest poets, especially Virgil (70-19 BC).

In this narrative, Rome's long history was retold as a story that from its beginning had a higher purpose. For long stretches of time, it seemed that Rome would not rise to the challenge, that it would fail to fulfil its destiny. This was especially true for the decades before Augustus came to the throne since this was a century marked by civil wars. As it turned out, it was darkest just before the sun rose. With Augustus, Rome was at long last fulfilling its divinely ordained destiny of bringing justice, peace, and prosperity to the whole world, initiating an enduring golden age that was the long-awaited climax of its history:

> The empire used every available means in art, architecture, literature and culture in general – everything from tiny coins to the rebuilding of entire city centres – to communicate to the Roman people near and far the message that Augustus's rise to power was the great new moment for which Rome, and indeed the whole world, had been waiting. (8887-89)

Increasingly the emperor became the central symbol around which the empire was organized. His cult unified the empire. And the underlying narrative functioned as the imperial ideology, eloquently asserting Rome's right to power.

It was the only such narrative at the time, with one exception: that of Israel, of which most Jews likewise believed that it would end with a worldwide kingdom of justice and peace, but centred on Jerusalem, not Rome. In the understanding of Paul and a few thousand other Jews, this kingdom had already been established with Jesus as the king. Therefore, in his view, the narrative that Rome had constructed about itself bringing justice and peace to the world was, to paraphrase N. T. Wright, the parody of which Israel's narrative and the gospel were the true version (10046, 36070, 36749).

Imperial Critique

There could be no doubt about a Jewish and Christian rejection of this parody. In light of the Asian decree instituting a new calendar quoted above, the beginning of the gospel of Mark turns out to be politically subversive:

> The beginning of the gospel [as in the Asian inscription, the Greek word *euangelion* is used] of Jesus Christ [literally "anointed one", but essentially meaning "king"], the Son of God [an imperial title]. (Mk. 1:1; ESV)

Knowing this background information, there are other parts of the New Testament that may also imply a critique of this emperor-centred ideology. To ascribe to Jesus the title "Lord" or "the name above all names" (Phil. 2:9) was not merely a spiritual or theological claim. When Paul speaks of the "coming" of Jesus, using the Greek word *parousia*, he is again using emperor language. The word denotes *presence* or *arrival*. In the case of the emperor or a high official, it could be used for a visit or for their return home. In other words, we could understand it as *royal visit* or *royal presence*. In addition, the word could also be used for a visit or the appearance of a god (29152ff).

This helps us to understand that strange occurrence announced in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, better known as the rapture. Notice in verse 15 that the event is the royal arrival, the *parousia*. (Already this makes clear how absurd the idea of a "secret" rapture is, according to which Jesus first returns invisibly to collect his church, just before the Great Tribulation and years before he returns to earth visibly. The emperor would not travel alone and he would not, evading all attention, attempt to sneak into one of his cities in secret.)

As part of this royal arrival, those "who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17; ESV). This statement reflects how cities would honour and welcome the emperor or his representative at his *parousia*: their leading citizens would go out to meet him, not to camp in the field, but to then turn around to accompany him as he entered the city. Since Jesus comes down from heaven, we have to go up, not out; not to float in the air for all eternity (or even for seven years), but to accompany him on his return and arrival. How literal all of this will take place is an open question, but the point is clear: the one whose arrival is here described is the true ruler of the world.

This Earth Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Them

Augustus, Lord, son of God, saviour of the world, *Dominus et Deus*…: titles like these make up the emperor's new clothes. In Revelation 13 John draws a caricature in which the emperor (and every ruler making similar claims) is portrayed not as a god, but as a beast with "blasphemous names on its heads" (Rev 13:1; ESV): the very titles just cited. The true ruler and saviour of the world is the Lamb, God's anointed king and Messiah. The beast is therefore nothing but a counterfeit lamb, a pseudo-Messiah, falsely promising peace and salvation through its political structures and world domination.

In the original fairy tale, a little boy speaks out what everybody is thinking: "The emperor hasn't got anything on!" Revelation is John's (and God's) way of saying: the emperor isn't wearing any clothes! He is not a god at all!

The state or human government is never the answer to the structural ailments that have befallen our world. If it claims or pretends to be, this is a recipe for disaster and something to which the church cannot submit. As N. T. Wright points out,

> There cannot, in the last analysis, be two parallel eschatological narratives of world domination. Either the history of Rome provides the true story, with Christian faith content to shelter, as a 'permitted religion', under its banner. Or the history of Israel, climaxing in the crucified and risen Messiah, must be seen as the true story, with that of Rome, however much under the overarching divine providence, as at best a distorted parody of the truth. (36067)

If Augustus, Nero, and Domitian would have had a chance to read Paul's letters, they would not have been amused. Emperors don't like to be told they are not wearing any clothes.

As a result, those embracing the Messiah's story face a double challenge. One is persecution by those committed to enforcing rival stories. The other is the temptation to turn the gospel into a mirror image of those stories, into another imperial ideology, seeking to subdue the world with Caesar's tools: fire and iron.

But this is the kingdom of the Lamb, not of the dragon. Caesar's tools won't do; the kingdom of God is not an empire.

6. A Fresh Look at Old Letters: Socio-Rhetorical Criticism (April 2015)

Source: Office.com, licence free

With this subject, I am taking you along on my own recent learning experience. Socio-rhetorical criticism is a relatively new approach in biblical studies, and I have taken some time to get to know it better. Admittedly, the term "criticism" is unfortunate, because of its negative connotation in everyday language. No such negative bias is necessarily implied in the various forms of criticism used in the study of the Bible such as source criticism or redaction criticism. The term "assessment" or "analysis" would therefore have been more appropriate, but I am afraid it is too late to change this. We are dealing with an analysis of the text from a particular angle, in this case, a social and rhetorical one.

The social angle. This is not quite the same as taking the historical background of the document into account, although there is significant overlap. In general, history tends more toward 'big events' and important people. The social science perspective, on the other hand, is interested in how life works (or worked) on all levels of society. Since we are looking at the past, this can also be called social history, which makes clear it has this more specialised interest.

The rhetorical angle. Rhetorical skill was highly valued in the ancient world and treated as a veritable science. There were clear rules and principles defining how one did rhetoric well (more on this later). Learning these was a crucial part of a higher education. It is increasingly recognized that the New Testament contains many examples of the use of classical rhetorical devices. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and the NT writers were certainly out to persuade their audience; in this, they did not hesitate to use the rhetorical means they knew.

Since rhetoric was such an important aspect of social life in the ancient world, it makes sense to combine the two: socio-rhetorical.

The oral angle. To these two we can add the oral aspect. An estimated 80-90% of the population was not able to read; they needed someone to read to them.[12] Written texts were not meant to be read in private anyway, but to be read out loud and often in public. They were the next best thing to being present and speaking one's mind in person: "They are mostly surrogates for oral communication."[13] They are "oral texts," which "is not an oxymoron," that is, not a combination of contradictory elements .[14] This is especially true for Paul's letters; they had to replace the apostle when he could not speak to his audience directly.

Letters of the length that Paul wrote were actually quite rare at the time. They have more in common with the practice of public speaking and rhetoric than with the first-century practice of letter writing. As Witherington points out, this is even truer for 1 John and Hebrews, which are not letters at all, but written sermons.[15] The closest we get outside of the Bible is the letters of Cicero, written in the first century BC. Whereas rhetoric already was an ancient art at that time, Cicero's literary letters appear to have been an innovation: like most biblical letters, they, too, do not fit the normal mold. Again, "letter" is not the right category; what we are dealing with in both cases looks more like written speeches.

To be fair, at the beginning and the end of most biblical letters we do find those elements that were typical for ancient letters. But what happens in between the opening and the closing remarks, that is, in the body of the letter, has little or nothing to do with ancient letter writing, but everything with ancient rhetoric (with the exception of a few 'real' letters, such as 2nd and 3rd John). A phrase like "I want you to know" or "I appeal to you" would be a familiar introduction used in rhetoric, but not in letter writing,[16] to give just two indications that rhetoric is the better category for what we are looking at in these so-called 'letters'.

In our day and age, Paul might have made a recording, done a YouTube video, or used a platform for web conferencing. Instead, he had to make do with letters, preferably letters he could send through a trusted person or co-worker. The carrier of a letter would presumably also be the one to present it, orally, to its recipients. In this case, it made a big difference if Paul could have clarified the content and given instructions to the carrier on how to present it or at least on what he meant. This would almost be a necessity considering this:

> A standard letter in Greek would have no separation of words, sentences, paragraphs, or the like; little or no punctuation; and all capital letters. Thus, for example, imagine having to sort out a document that began as follows:
>
> PAULASERVANTOFCHRISTJESUSCALLEDTOBEANAPOSTLEANDSETAPARTFORTHEGOSPELOFGOD.

[12] Ben Witherington III (2009), *What's in the Word: Rethinking the Socio-Rhetorical Character of the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press), 7.
[13] Ibid., 4; see also Ben Witherington III (19 Dec. 2012), "The SBL in Chicago – A Potpourri of Things – Part One", http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2012/12/19/the-sbl-in-chicago-a-potpourri-of-things-part-one/ (retrieved 22 Dec. 2014) and Rev. 1:1-3.
[14] Witherington (19 Dec. 2012), "The SBL in Chicago".
[15] Witherington (2009), *What's in the Word* , 10.
[16] So Witherington (19 Dec. 2012), "The SBL in Chicago".

> The only way to decipher such a collection of letters was to sound them out – out loud![17]
>
> The letters we find in the NT are mostly far longer than secular letters of their era. Actually, they are *not mainly letters*, although they have epistolary openings and closings sometimes. They are discourses, homilies, and rhetorical speeches of various sorts that the creators could not deliver personally to a particular audience, so instead, they sent a surrogate to proclaim them. These documents would not be handed to just anyone. From what we can tell, Paul expected one of his co-workers, such as Timothy, Titus, or Phoebe, to go and orally deliver the contents of the document in a rhetorically effective manner. This would have been almost a necessity because the document would come without division of words or punctuation, so only someone skilled in reading such seamless prose in *scriptum continuum*—indeed, one who *already knew* the contents of the document—could place the emphases in the right places so as to communicate the message effectively.[18]

Paul the Rhetorician

In spite of Paul's denial of using rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and the Corinthian complaint about Paul's poor rhetorical skills as reflected in 2 Corinthians, he seems to have been an excellent rhetorician. He frequently makes use of rhetorical devices in his letters, first and foremost in Romans and – ironically – in the Corinthian epistles. He must have held back on the use of rhetoric while in Corinth in order to distinguish himself and his message from travelling teachers of wisdom and rhetoric, often of a more dubious kind. But in his writings, he shows himself a master of the art.

Paul grew up in just the right place for this. The Greek geographer Strabo (ca. 63 BC-AD 24) notes that the inhabitants of Tarsus displayed great love for learning and education, surpassing Athens and Alexandria in this respect; several well-known Stoic philosophers were natives of Tarsus (Strabo, *Geography* 14.5.13-14).

In the previous chapter, I wrote on Romans 7 and Paul's use of impersonation: although he speaks in the I-form, this is not his personal experience, but that of the Israelites coming under the law at Mount Sinai. It is easy to miss this when you are just reading the text, but a good presenter (for Romans, it was actually a woman, Phoebe) could have made it very clear that she was stepping into a role, not speaking for or as the author, but as someone else. Since the use of impersonation was not unusual in first-century rhetoric, Paul's original audience would have been equipped to pick up what was happening.

Something similar applies to Paul's frequent use of rhetorical questions in Romans (I counted roughly 75 questions in the book) and his providing answers to imagined opponents, who on occasion speak back to him (e.g. Rom. 2:1; 6:1; 9:18-21) – all established ploys in the rhetoric of the day (the technical term would have been *diatribe*), and ploys that would gain tremendously by being skilfully presented by a performer.

Ancient Rhetoric

So far, we have noted rhetorical questions, diatribe, impersonation and other micro-level elements of ancient rhetoric. The influence of rhetorical theory and practice is also visible in

[17] Witherington (2009), *What's in the Word* , 8.
[18] Ibid., 9.

structure, on the macro level. So let's take a brief look at the main points of ancient rhetorical theory.

According to the theory, there were three kinds or branches of rhetoric:

- **Forensic** rhetoric focused on the past. Its aim was to come to a verdict. Its main use was therefore in the courtroom. For this reason, it is less relevant to biblical studies.
- **Deliberative** rhetoric focused on the future. Its objective was to come to a judgment or decision. In other words, a particular course of action would be its aim. This matches the aim of many New Testament letters.
- **Epideictic** rhetoric presents praise or blame and is at home on occasions like funerals, anniversaries, birthdays, official receptions, and festivals. Examples in the New Testament include Ephesians, 1st Corinthians 13, 1st Thessalonians, and Hebrews 11.

In order to be persuasive, three things were deemed important:

- **Logos**: the appeal to logic, using arguments and illustrations.
- **Pathos**: the appeal to the emotions. Arousing or appealing to emotions was particularly important towards the end, when it came to summing up the argument.
- **Ethos** means something close to character. It involves moral authority, expertise, and competency *as perceived by the audience*. For this reason, it was important to establish one's authority and build rapport with the audience right from the start, something that Paul usually does in his letters

It was common to distinguish six parts or components in the structure of a speech. They are known by their Latin names. All of these can be identified in various New Testament documents:

- **Exordium**: the introduction. Here, it is important to establish rapport with the audience as well as one's authority. It is also the place to introduce or hint at the main themes. This is of course precisely what Paul does at the beginning of all his letters. For an example, see 1st Corinthians 1:5-9.
- **Narratio**: statement of the facts, often in the form of narrative. For an example, see 1st Corinthians 1:11-17
- **Propositio**: the thesis. An outstanding example is Romans 1:16f, which follows the narratio in the preceding verses and sums up what Paul will argue. See also 1st Corinthians 1:10 (ESV), "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."
- **Probatio** (also confirmatio): evidence and arguments. This is where the appeal to logic plays the main role. We find it in the body or main part of Paul's letters.
- **Refutatio**: counterarguments. The speaker identifies alternatives and seeks to disprove them. This element is not always present. In Romans, it appears on several occasions spread out through the letter.
- **Peroratio**: the conclusion. This includes recapitulation of the argument and an appeal to the emotions.

By the way, I have focused on Paul here, but probably the most brilliant piece of rhetoric in the New Testament is the letter to the Hebrews. It displays quite a few elements of the art. For one, its main part brilliantly applies the technique of *synkrisis*, making one's point through a detailed comparison of one thing with another.

The study of ancient rhetoric is not merely of academic interest; it can make a real contribution to biblical studies, and it can make a real difference. Witness this final quote:

> We could have avoided dealing with all of those long and lugubrious arguments about how those two letters [meant are Ephesians and Colossians] couldn't possibly be by Paul because they sound different, have different sentence structures, use different vocabulary and so on had someone paid attention to the fact that these letters are written according to the style of Asiatic rhetoric, the most verbose and hyperbolic form of first century rhetoric. This was entirely appropriate since Paul was writing to the very region where such a rhetorical style was most popular and had originated— the province of Asia. Paul as a skillful rhetorician was able to vary his style according to the audience, and he does so in these documents. Twenty-six line long sentences with lots of adjectives and even some redundancies are no problem in Asiatic rhetoric, as anyone who has read the verbose Nimrud dag stele, in praise of a ruler, will know. As Luke Johnson has said in various of his commentaries, changing of style was a common rhetorical tactic to be persuasive to differing audiences. It's not a matter of different authors. It's a matter of flexibility in rhetoric.[19]

[19] Witherington (19 Dec. 2012), "The SBL in Chicago".

7. Disentangling the Knot of 1 John (May 2015)

Source: chuckyoufarlie3, "tree bark with knot", http://chuckyoufarlie3.deviantart.com/art/tree-bark-with-knot-279124480, CC BY 3.0

1 John is one of the strangest books in the New Testament. For one, it is called an epistle in most Bible versions, but nothing about the book suggests that it is indeed a letter. Simply compare the beginning and end of 1 John with one of Paul's letters. You will notice that it does not contain a single one of the structural elements that we know from other documents considered letters in the New Testament, such as author, recipients, and benediction. If anything, it is more like a word of instruction or exhortation, not unlike Hebrews. Apart from the concluding verses, Hebrews likewise lacks all structural indicators that we expect to find in an ancient letter.

In addition, 1 John appears to lack any progression of thought and shows very little structure. Instead, John circles around a limited number of topics, adding statement upon statement seemingly without any particular order. It is a bit like a handful of dry sand: no obvious coherence or shape. (If John would have handed this in as a paper for one of my classes, I am not sure it would have earned him a passing grade. Yes, I realise the limitation is on my side, but it illustrates the point.)

In my experience, this book makes for frustrating reading. I would much prefer an orderly and logical presentation that moves from A through B to Z. This is one reason I have not often taught the epistles of John. Even though the language used in 1 John is delightfully simple, once you start to think about what it says, the text turns out to be a hard nut to crack. The

paradox of 1 John is that it is almost simplistic and enigmatic at the same time. At least that is how I have experienced the book. It contains wonderful statements, but they don't seem to build an argument.

Over the past one and a half years I have been given a second chance with 1 John through the opportunity to teach the book in two different schools. This forced me to wrestle once again with John's way of thinking. As a result, I am finally beginning to understand it better.

In what follows, I will first discuss some of the historical background because it helps us to see where John is coming from, or rather what he is coming against. After this, I will share what I have come to understand about how this book works. I have to formulate this cautiously since it is a work in process; I am certainly not close to being done with 1 John!

Historical Background

It is not hard to see in 1 John that the author is coming against a group of people who do not care about sin (they may even think they are without sin) and who do not care about love. They also do not believe certain things about Jesus, and this may well be the root cause of their deficient behaviour. The following three verses present the clearest picture of their beliefs:

> Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. (1 John 2:22; cf. 1 John 5:1; ESV)
>
> By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. (1 John 4:2f; ESV)
>
> This is he who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. (1 John 5:6; ESV)

From church history and from the church fathers we know a bit more about the circumstances in the area where John was active. There were two new belief systems that arose around that time. One is called Docetism and the other is linked with the name of Cerinthus (sometimes called "Cerinthianism", which at times is considered a subtype of Docetism).

Docetism derives from the Greek word *dokein*, *to seem* or *to appear*. The divine could not possibly defile or pollute itself by taking on human flesh and becoming part of the material world. Neither could the divine suffer or die. Jesus therefore merely appeared to be human, but in reality, he was not human, or only in a special and restricted sense.

Cerinthus claimed that Jesus had been a normal human being. The heavenly Christ had descended on him in baptism in the form of a dove. In other words, he separated Jesus from Christ. Just before the crucifixion, Christ had departed from Jesus, because the divine redeemer could not possibly taste death, leaving the human Jesus to die on the cross.

The error inherent in this kind of position is serious indeed. Jesus Christ cannot redeem what he did not become. Besides, it marks the material world as inferior or worse, contrary to the biblical view of creation as good.

Scholars disagree whether John is reacting to one or the other of these two heresies, or whether he is perhaps dealing with both at the same time. It certainly seems that 1 John 4:2f (quoted above) fits Docetism and that 1 John 2:22 fits the views of Cerinthus.

1 John 5:6 could go with either: the Docetists believed Jesus had been baptized (the water) but did not die (the blood), whereas Cerinthus taught Christ left Jesus before he died, so he also affirmed water but not blood.

Format

So far the historical background; so what have I discovered through my renewed engagement with 1 John? My approach to studying the book has been to categorize the statements and see if I can rearrange the ideas in the book in such a way that a larger message or plot emerges. So what did I come up with?

I noticed that many statements take one of four forms:

- It begins with "if" (approximately 9)
- It includes "who": he who, everyone who, no one who, whoever (approximately 25)
- It includes "we know" (approximately 13)
- It begins with "by this" (approximately 9)

This makes for a formidable number of statements that enable the reader to determine whether something or someone is one or the other. In other words, a significant part of this book consists of tests. It has long been recognized that these tests predominantly deal with three areas:

- Truth: right belief or doctrine
- Love: of God and of the brethren
- Morality: right behaviour

Two Carrying Pillars

It has also stood out to many readers that the book contains two direct statements about God that are short and simple, but tremendously profound. In English each statement counts only three one-syllable words:

- God is light (1 John 1:5)
- God is love (1 John 4:8, 16)

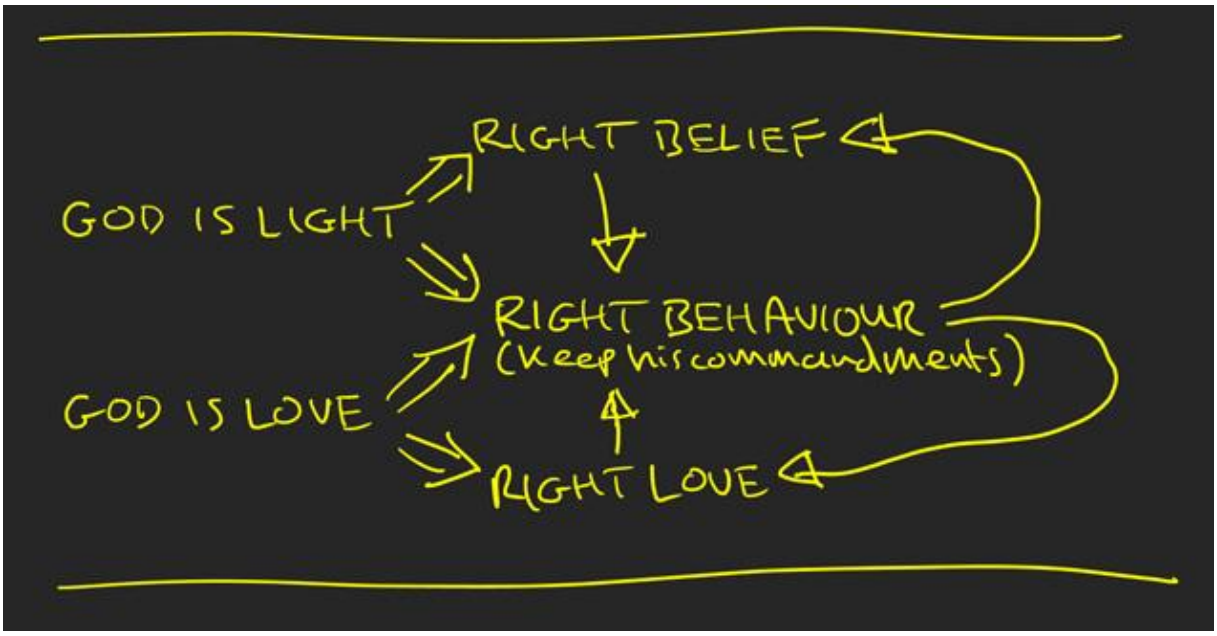
Virtually everything else in the book flows from these two foundational statements. Think about it: are we able to come up with a more profound statement about God than these two?

The two even make for some sort of a structural divide in the book. "God is light" dominates the first part of the book; "God is love" fulfils a similar role in the second half of the book. This does not establish a clear structure, first, because the two themes overlap in chapter 3, and second, because the topical cluster of truth, deceivers, and discernment, which fits more readily with "God is light", continues to pop up in the second half of the book.

A Structure of Ideas, Not of Blocks of Material

The structure of the book therefore is circular, not linear. John jumps back and forth between his main centres of interest, circling and spiralling around them, until he has covered them from more or less every side.

This kind of structure cannot be captured in the sort of diagram or horizontal chart that is so helpful with many other books in the Bible. Instead, the structure of the book is a structure of ideas, not of blocks of material. We therefore need a structural diagram of the main ideas in the book. The twofold "God is …" statement gives us a place to start. Let's combine this with the three types of tests that John includes:



This diagram sums up the core of the book. It also shows how the main themes relate to each other. Not only do they flow from the two foundational statements about God, they also flow from each other. In the end, the three tests are closely linked, inseparably so: you cannot have or fulfil one without the others. Let's look at this little more in detail.

Right behaviour means to keep his commandments. This flows from knowing God and being in the light, as well as from loving God: if we know God, if we are in the light as he is light, if we love him, then we will keep his commandments (see for instance 1 John 5:1-3). This is the consequence of right belief and right love.

At the same time, to keep his commandments means to believe in his son and to practice love:

> And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. (1 John 3:23; ESV)
>
> And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:21 ESV)

Right belief and right love include and are expressed by keeping his commandments; his commandments are to believe and to walk in love. This is profoundly circular!

I still struggle with the logic of John; I don't find it easy to wrap my brain around it. But in the process, I have developed a deep appreciation for this statement of what it means to walk with God. Or in John's terms, to know and to walk in the truth.

8. Paul in Three Words (November 2015)

This chapter was the third and last issue in a series on N. T. Wright's colossal book on Paul, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, published in 2013. I take a look at the big picture of Paul's theology as Wright summarizes it in this book. It is emphatically not a critique of the book; I limit myself to things I am taking with me from reading it. But for the record and lest anyone suspects me of being a Wright worshipper: I do not accept everything N. T. Wright writes. There are things I disagree with, some of them major, such as a few of his redefinitions or retranslations of words:

- *The faith of Christ as the faithfulness of Christ*
- *Justification as covenant membership*
- *The righteousness of God as the faithfulness of God (to his covenant)*

But this is a different subject, not covered here.

Things I Am Learning from N. T. Wright's Colossal Book on Paul, Part 3

Paul summarized in three words!? Generations of theologians have wrestled their brains out with Paul's thought, and now we are able to summarize all of this in just three words? I don't blame you if you are sceptical but give N. T. Wright a chance: he thinks he can do it, even though it takes him 1700 pages to accomplish this.

This is probably my longest issue to date. But once you take into account that it covers about half of Wright's 1700 pages, it does not seem so long anymore, does it?

This is how Wright goes about it. His book on Paul begins with a description of Paul's worlds (plural: the Jewish world of faith, the Greek world of philosophy, the pagan world of religion, and the Roman world of empire). It continues with a breakdown of Paul's worldview. Following this, Wright presents an analysis of Paul's theology, organized around three words. He offers one excruciatingly long chapter for each of the three. (It may perhaps be possible to summarize the theology in three words, but this does not mean there is nothing more to say after this – a thesis for which Wright's 1700 pages of hefty prose provide conclusive evidence.) Without further ado, here are the three words:

- **Monotheism**
- **Election**
- **Eschatology**

That Paul's theology can be summarized in these three words is not entirely accurate. These three summarize Jewish faith at the time of Jesus. This is the shortest possible summary of what Jews believed. That they can also be used to sum up Paul's theology demonstrates the extent to which, as N. T. Wright does not tire of saying, Paul remained a deeply Jewish thinker. However, in order to adequately summarize Paul's new take on Jewish theology, one thing needs to be added: Paul reimagined and redefined each of these three in the light of the Christ event that had just taken place.

I will quickly summarize the Jewish perspective on these three and then move on to Paul's redefinition of them.

Monotheism

There is only one God. This was the most foundational conviction of the vast majority of Jews living in the first century AD. It does not necessarily mean that other gods were entirely

fictional beings; they were often considered to be a front or cover for demonic powers. It does mean that whatever else they might be, they were certainly not gods.

This pillar of Jewish faith finds expression in the equally foundational confession of faith that Jews prayed every day, the *Shema*, named after its first word in Hebrew ("hear"):

> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut. 6:4-5; ESV)

By referring to "your God", the *Shema* implies the next foundation stone of Israel's faith.

Election

Yahweh was Israel's God because he had chosen them to be his people. If you know anything about the Old Testament, it is bound to include this: Israel was God's people, his special possession out of all the nations of the earth. The Jewish Bible is the story of this special relationship.

Eschatology

In case you are not familiar with this word: in theology, it denotes the study of final events ("the end") and the ultimate destiny of everything. It was typically Jewish to not only have an understanding of ultimate purpose (life is not meaningless or cyclical) but also to consider it central to the faith. We find this eschatology most clearly expressed in the prophets: Yahweh will come and set the world right. First-century Jewish faith was full of hope.

So what did Paul do with all this? Since I will focus on his renewed and transformed monotheism, I will present his take in reverse order.

Eschatology Redefined (Chapter 11)

Part of the way Israel's eschatology is redefined, not just by Paul but throughout the entire New Testament, is something you are most likely familiar with. A significant element of fulfilment is introduced, centred on Jesus.

At the same time, there remain significant elements that are not yet fulfilled. God's righteous rule over creation has been inaugurated, but not yet completed. Jesus had been raised from the dead, but no one else. The day of the Lord, that is the day of Yahweh, has now also become the day of Christ. It is part of what still awaits its fulfilment.

It should not have come as a surprise, but to many Jews it did, that this salvation and God's purpose for the cosmos includes all nations, not just Israel. Indeed, it concerns all of creation, reconciled to God through Christ and now waiting for its liberation from decay.

There is much more to it than this (enough to fill that very long chapter in Wright's book), but this is at the core.

Election Redefined (Chapter 10)

This point is more controversial. For one, the church for a long time took this to mean it had simply replaced Israel in the divine plan; a completely new circle had been drawn to mark God's people. This is not quite how Paul puts it (to put it mildly). But neither will it do to simply state, "Israel is God's people", as if the coming of Jesus makes no difference for who is in the circle.

When it comes to election, here is what needs to be taken into consideration. Israel had not been chosen for its own sake, but for a task, a mission. The whole point of Abraham's calling was to be the counterpart and answer to Adam: to undo humanity's fall. As the Old Testament

makes clear, Israel had failed to fulfil that mission, because it was itself part of Adamic humanity; Adam lived as much in every Israelite as in the rest of us. So Israel could not itself be the solution. But it would still be part of the process of bringing the solution about: by bringing the Saviour into the world. Who then took over the mission. In more than one way Jesus took the place of Israel. He fulfilled its mission.

This has consequences for that category "the people of God" (or descendants of Abraham). The circle is drawn much more widely, as Gentile believers are included in the election of Israel. As the circle is redrawn around Christ, not Torah, the criterion for inclusion changes too (or does it? it probably has been by faith all along, even in the OT). Membership is based on faith in Jesus (or, as Wright sees it, on the faithfulness of Jesus in fulfilling the mission), not works of the law.

One way this redefined election shows: Paul and other NT writers do not hesitate to take titles and promises specifically given to Israel in the OT and apply them to Gentile believers (e.g. Gal. 4:26-28 and 1 Pet. 2:9-10, to mention just two).

Monotheism Redefined (Chapter 9)

Even more radical is Paul's breath-taking reimagining of the Jewish God. Here is Paul's response to the Corinthian logic that "there is no God but one", therefore idols do not exist, and there can be no harm in visiting an idol's temple:

> Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one". For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords" – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:4-6; ESV)

We won't go into the faulty logic of the Corinthians and Paul's counterargument against feasting in temples. Rather, let's notice the echoes of the *Shema* both in the Corinthian claim and in Paul's response:

- There is no God but one.
- There is one God, the source and purpose of our existence.
- There is one Lord, the means and mediator of creation and sustainer of our existence.

Keep in mind that "Lord" is what Jews at the time would have read wherever their Bible included the divine name YHWH. Paul has rephrased the Shema to make room in it for the one Lord, Jesus, right next to God the Father. The fitting response, to love God, has been transformed in "for whom we exist." This is only one example of Paul's amazingly high view of Jesus.

It should be emphasized that Paul and the early Christians remained staunch monotheists. Had Paul been accused of bi- or tritheism, he would no doubt have responded with an adamant denial: "By no means!"

When did this belief first emerge? And how did he and others come up with such a seemingly counterintuitive understanding of the one God?

When Did This Start?

It used to be common in critical scholarship to think that the belief that Jesus was divine was a late development. It was not what the earliest Christians, all Jews, had believed. It only developed after Christianity spread to pagan areas outside of Israel, where the idea of a human becoming god, even if not an everyday occurrence, was certainly thinkable. In this view, Jesus (or rather Christian beliefs about him) only gradually evolved from a Jewish Messiah to the second person of the Trinity. At its worst, Jesus's divine status becomes an invention of the church, certainly not something Jesus had actually believed about himself.

Nowadays it is more acceptable again to argue that a "high Christology" existed quite early. This is not to say that we find trinitarian theology in the early church, but we do find something that understandably enabled its development and in fact implied it.

Let me give a few more examples of this early and high view of Jesus.

- "Jesus is Lord!" This title implies the divine name Yahweh since, as pointed out, "Lord" was used to replace it. The Greek word translated *Lord* in our Bible appears all over the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, to refer to God. In the NT, it often refers to Jesus.
- OT quotations that refer to God, not to the Messiah, are nevertheless used to say something about Jesus (e.g. Rom. 10:13; Phil. 2:10f).
- Jesus was believed to be present with his people the way Yahweh in the OT had been present with Israel.
- Jesus was revered as Lord in a way that would be totally inappropriate for any other human. He was prayed to and worshipped (obviously in Revelation, but also as early as Acts 7:59f; cf. 1 Cor. 1:2 and, again, Rom. 10:9-13, where "the Lord" has to refer to Jesus).
- Already in the earliest NT documents, we find God and Jesus side by side; together, they are the source of grace and peace, which surely could only come from God himself (James 1:1; Galatians 1:1-3).

Paul has to argue at length against Gentile believers receiving circumcision. But when it comes to seeing Jesus as co-equal with God, there seems to be no need to argue. As N. T. Wright points out and as the examples just listed illustrate, he can simply take this point for granted. It was not contested. So how did the early Christians come to such a startling understanding of Jesus?

Where Did the Early Christians Get This Idea?

The answer is not that Jesus had told them he was God's son. He had indeed told them this of course, but it would not in and of itself have led the disciples to see him as the second person of the Trinity or even as divine. It was first and foremost a messianic title, going back to 2 Samuel 7. Besides, Israel itself is called God's son in the OT. So claiming this title did not necessarily make Jesus God.

It did not flow out of the personification of wisdom we find in the book of Proverbs (especially Prov. 8f). It did not develop from a differentiation between God and his word, similar to that between God and his spirit. Both ideas were picked up later to give words to the nature of Jesus, but this came as part of a reflection after the fact had already been established (see Colossians 1 for wisdom-in-creation parallels and John 1 for Jesus as the Logos of God); it does not appear that they were the original trigger.

As N. T. Wright points out early on in Chapter 9 of his book, we should keep in mind that for first-century Jews and Christians alike monotheism was not metaphysical speculation on the inner constitution of God, God in the abstract, so to say, or God as a supreme being. It was first and foremost a concrete and practical belief that one God, not many, would decide where things would go. The Jewish story was always a story about the God they had encountered (and hoped to encounter again) in real life. It was all about the one God who had manifested himself repeatedly in the concrete events of history. This is a more flexible doctrine, as doctrines go, than for instance Islamic monotheism or the unmoved mover of Aristotle.

But none of this explains the radical revision of God embraced by early Christianity. N. T. Wright argues that three things had to come together for the early Christians to begin to see Jesus as included in the divine identity (Chapter 9, sections 1 and 2):

1. God had promised that he would do certain things, and the early Christians believed Jesus had done them. This included salvation, the second exodus, and the return of Yahweh to Zion. God had not simply done them through Jesus; he had done them as Jesus. So what did this tell them about who Jesus was!? Perhaps the best OT passage to illustrate this is Isaiah 40:3-5 (ESV):

> A voice cries:
> "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
> make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
> …
> And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
> and all flesh shall see it together,
> for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

These verses introduce Isaiah's vision of coming salvation in chapter 40-66. Remarkably, they are quoted at the beginning of each of the four gospels (Mt. 3:3, Mk. 1:3, Lk. 3:4, and John 1:23). And how did this happen? How did God appear in the cities of Judah (Is. 40:9)? You know the answer.

2. Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah. His crucifixion seemed to prove that he was not. But then came the resurrection. It was followed by his ascension into heaven. This served to vindicate Jesus. Obviously, he was the Messiah after all, and he was now Lord of all (Mt. 28:18).

3. The disciples continued to experience Jesus as being present with them in a special and powerful way. Indeed, this could only be understood as the divine presence. Perhaps this experience of the exalted Lord in prayer and worship did more than anything else to establish the identity of Jesus as God. Jews, who would not worship any other God even if their lives were at stake, found themselves worshipping Jesus; that says it all.

Suddenly, OT scriptures and statements by Jesus could be understood in an entirely different light. He was indeed the son of God in a sense that neither David nor Solomon nor any other human king had ever been or could be. He was the divine wisdom and the Word made flesh. It makes perfect sense that these convinced monotheists did not hesitate to see Jesus as in some way part of God, as included in the divine identity, as Wright puts it. After everything Jesus had done and everything that had happened to him, most notably the resurrection, there could not be any doubt about it.

Interestingly, something similar happened in the disciples' understanding of the divine spirit. The OT prophets had promised that God would rebuild his temple and would return to dwell

in it (e.g. Ezek. 37). This had now happened, but in a startlingly unexpected way: the new temple was made of people indwelt by the divine spirit. So again, the way God was present with his people now was as the Spirit of God. This Spirit was at the same time also the Spirit of God's son (Gal. 4:6) and the Spirit of the Messiah (Rom. 8:9).

At this point, even though no one is saying, "Trinity", they sure are implying it.

The early Christians and especially Paul therefore had to rethink their monotheism around the divine identity of both Jesus and the Spirit of God. The evidence of their experience with Jesus and of God was so overwhelming that it could not be any other way. There was one Lord, one Spirit, one God and Father of all (Eph. 4:4-6). God was one, and God was Jesus, and God was the Spirit. And vice versa. It is a breath-taking revision, leading, not to a different God, but to a God known more deeply.

So there is Paul for you, in three words: monotheism, election, eschatology – a partnership of the Father, Jesus, and the divine Spirit working for and through his people toward his ultimate purpose.

9. Sennacherib (March 2018)

Source: Mike Peel (www.mikepeel.net; 12 Sept. 2010), Assyrian slingers in action. Assyrian, about 700-692 BC. From Nineveh, South-West Palace. WA 124775, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lachish_Relief,_British_Museum_12.jpg, CC BY-SA 4.0

Probably no event in the Old Testament is as well documented as Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 BC. The Bible itself gives us three accounts: 2 Kings 18:13-19:36, Isaiah 36-37, and 2 Chronicles 32:1-23. In addition, we have several versions of Sennacherib's own report on the event, plus reliefs carved out in stone that show in gruesome detail how his army went about besieging and storming the city of Lachish, and what it did it to its population afterwards.

A number of these reliefs are on display in the British Museum. They are well worth a visit. Alternatively, have a look at this article with numerous photographs showing details of the relief: *http://etc.ancient.eu/photos/siege-lachish-reliefs-british-museum/*.

The relative wealth of material does not make it easier to determine what, exactly, really happened. There are contradictions and tensions between the biblical and Assyrian versions. And even within the biblical accounts, it is difficult to see how some of the pieces fit together. I have been working on a study guide for the book of Isaiah and ran into a recent dissertation by Nazek Khalid Matty dealing with the invasion.[20] With his help, I decided to take a fresh look at the accounts in Kings and Isaiah.

I will start with some background information on Sennacherib, including his own statement on the invasion of Judah and his dealings with Hezekiah. This will show us two main points of conflict between Sennacherib's version and the Bible. After proposing a solution, I will turn to the account in 2 Kings and to the question why Sennacherib left and returned to Nineveh. The answer is not as obvious as it may appear and has been another point of contention among interpreters.

Sennacherib at War

During its history, the Assyrian empire had incorporated many smaller city-states and kingdoms. These were expected to make substantial yearly tribute payments. This burden made it attractive to try and break free from the empire, even though the Assyrians were ruthless and brutal in their suppression of revolts. Still, revolts were frequent, especially when a new king ascended to the throne. This is what happened in 705 BC, when Sennacherib succeeded his father, Sargon, as king.

Before he became king, Sennacherib had administrated the empire while his father, Sargon, took care of military campaigns. Sennacherib had not been involved in any campaign himself, so no one expected much of him as a military leader. This turned out to be a fatal mistake.

Sennacherib proved to be a capable leader of the army. His first campaign in 703 BC took him to Babylon, where Merodach-baladan had seized power (the latter makes an appearance in 2 Kings 20:12 and Isaiah 39:1, sending an embassy to Hezekiah). Two years later, in 701 BC, Sennacherib turned his attention to the rebellious nations in the west of his empire. With the encouragement of Egypt (Assyria's main rival in the west), the city-states of Tyre and Sidon, the Philistines, Judah, and others had rebelled against Assyrian rule. Sennacherib first dealt with Tyre and Sidon, defeated the Egyptians and the Philistines further south, and then invaded Judah.

We should not misread the biblical accounts of this attack. It was a devastating affair. Yes, Jerusalem was gloriously saved, but much of the rest of Judah was ravaged and destroyed. This is how Isaiah described the effect of the invasion:

> Your country lies desolate;
> your cities are burned with fire;
> in your very presence
> foreigners devour your land;
> it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.
> And the daughter of Zion is left
> like a booth in a vineyard,
> like a lodge in a cucumber field,

[20] Nazek Khalid Matty (2016), *Sennacherib's Campaign against Judah and Jerusalem in 701 B.C.: A Historical Reconstruction*. *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft: Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, Vol. 487* (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter).

like a besieged city.
If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we should have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah. (Is. 1:7-9; ESV)

And this is the campaign in Sennacherib's own words:

> As for Hezekiah the Judahite, who did not submit to my yoke: forty-six of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small towns in their area, which were without number, by levelling with battering-rams and by bringing up siege-engines, and by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels, and breeches, I besieged and took them. 200,150 people, great and small, male and female, horses, mules, asses, camels, cattle and sheep without number, I brought away from them and counted as spoil. (Hezekiah) himself, like a caged bird I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city. I threw up earthworks against him – the one coming out of the city-gate, I turned back to his misery. His cities, which I had despoiled, I cut off from his land, and to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Silli-bêl, king of Gaza, I gave (them). And thus I diminished his land. I added to the former tribute, and I laid upon him the surrender of their land and impost – gifts for my majesty. As for Hezekiah, the terrifying splendour of my majesty overcame him, and the Arabs and his mercenary troops which he had brought in to strengthen Jerusalem, his royal city, deserted him. In addition to the thirty talents of gold and eight hundred talents of silver, gems, antimony, jewels, large carnelians, ivory-inlaid couches, ivory-inlaid chairs, elephant hides, elephant tusks, ebony, boxwood, all kinds of valuable treasures, as well as his daughters, his harem, his male and female musicians, which he had brought after me to Nineveh, my royal city. To pay tribute and to accept servitude, he dispatched his messengers.[21]

If you have never read this text before, you may be especially surprised about two things. Sennacherib's report does not admit defeat but claims success. And it asserts that Hezekiah sent him a substantial tribute to Nineveh. The biblical account, at least in 2 Kings 18:4-6, does speak of a tribute but seems to place it at the beginning of the invasion, before Sennacherib's departure, and in Lachish, not Nineveh. The two main questions are, therefore:

1. Was Sennacherib defeated or not?
2. When and where did Sennacherib receive a tribute from Hezekiah?

Victory or Defeat?

Even without further background information, the first question is not so hard to answer. Sennacherib's account is propaganda. He puts as positive spin on the events as he can. His silence speaks louder than his words. Why does Sennacherib not tell us that he took Jerusalem and its king? Why did he merely lock up him "like a bird in a cage"?

Matty's dissertation confirms these doubts about Sennacherib's version. Matty took a comprehensive look at all the campaigns of Sennacherib as presented in official inscriptions, not just the one against Judah. This enabled Matty to establish what was "normal" or "typical" in such campaigns and to determine what was "abnormal" in Sennacherib's report about Hezekiah and Jerusalem.

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[21] Quoted in K. C. Hanson (2007), *Sennacherib Prism: Column Three*, http://www.kchanson.com/ANCDOCS/meso/sennprism3.html (retrieved 21 Jan. 2018).

It was certainly not normal to leave a defeated king in his city and in power. On other occasions, Sennacherib makes very clear that the king submitted to him in person. Usually, this king was not permitted to live but was executed and replaced.

That Sennacherib's "victory" over Hezekiah was not quite the success Sennacherib is trying to sell it for is also shown by the highly unusual tribute payment. It is too large to be a normal yearly payment. Such large, one-time tributes were paid as an expression of surrender or submission. But in such cases, the submitting king always presented himself in person to offer the tribute and show his submission. He would either come out of his city, welcome the Assyrian king into his palace, or be obligated to travel to Nineveh and present himself in person there. It was intended to be a humiliating experience that would make sure the submitting king would not forget his place. Hezekiah's tribute was apparently presented and accepted without Hezekiah's personal appearance – another compromise by the Assyrian king.

While none of this proves the biblical account of divine deliverance (Is. 37:36), it certainly does not conflict with it and provides indirect confirmation.

The Tribute

This does, of course, not yet explained the tribute or clarify when and where it was presented. This is how the book of Kings speaks of the tribute:

> In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. And Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, "I have done wrong; withdraw from me. Whatever you impose on me I will bear." And the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the LORD and from the doorposts that Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria sent the Tartan, the Rab-saris, and the Rabshakeh with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. (2 Ki. 18:13-17a; ESV)

It is often assumed that Hezekiah paid this tribute to persuade Sennacherib to discontinue his attack. In that case, of course, Hezekiah paid entirely in vain. How can we explain or reconcile the accounts of Kings and Sennacherib?

- One option is that there were two tribute payments. This would remove the conflict, but it is unlikely. Hezekiah was already stretched to pay once; how could he have paid such a hefty sum again after the invasion had devastated his kingdom and its economy?
- It might be that Sennacherib misrepresents the time and the place of the payment. It is hard to see, however, why he would do this; different from his spin on what he managed to do to Hezekiah, it does not place him in a better light.
- It could be that Sennacherib is correct on this point. We should notice what the biblical text does not say. Negotiations began in Lachish, but we are not told when and where the tribute was paid.

The only time reference is "at that time" (verse 16). This is vague and imprecise. Notice that verse 13 is a general statement and summarizes the entire campaign in Judah: around that

time, Hezekiah paid a tribute. And notice the parallel use of the phrase in 2 Kings 20:12 (ESV; emphasis added):

> *At that time* Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that Hezekiah had been sick.

This is also vague and rather broad. Was this before or after the attack (it can hardly have been during the invasion)? It is usually assumed that it preceded the attack because Merodach-baladan was pushed out of Babylon in 703 BC. "At that time" is therefore a phrase with some flexibility built in. We should also notice 2 Kings 19:37: Sennacherib was killed by two of his sons. In the biblical text, it sounds like this took place shortly after the campaign. But it happened in 681 BC, about 20 years later. (Still bad enough, to be murdered by your own children.)

Clearly, the account in Kings is not interested in detailed chronology.

Taken together, this leaves open the possibility that the tribute payment, while perhaps initiated at the start of the attack, was finalised afterwards.

Interestingly, although the account in Isaiah 36 and 37 is almost word for word identical to the one in Kings, 2 Kings 18:14-16 is missing in Isaiah. Did Isaiah delete these verses? Did Kings insert them? It is hard to know, but in the latter case, the tribute episode may have been added from another source.

All of this leaves us with two questions:

Why does Kings place the tribute verses at the beginning? Perhaps because they illuminate the reason for the invasion. In the passage right before it (2 Kings 18:9-12), we read of another Assyrian invasion, by King Shalmaneser, who invaded the kingdom of Israel, besieged Samaria, and took its people into captivity – because they had disobeyed God. This is not the reason for the invasion by Sennacherib. Sennacherib comes, not because Hezekiah has rebelled against God, but because he rebelled against the Assyrian king. 2 Kings 18:7 even implies this was one of the positives about Hezekiah. Hezekiah's admission, "I have done wrong" (18:14), does not relate to God but to Sennacherib.

Why would Hezekiah still pay after Sennacherib left? Matty argues that the Assyrian army was not destroyed in its entirety. Since it had been campaigning in more than one location at the same time, one or more camps may have survived. A continuing Assyrian presence in Judah or nearby would pose a threat. There was a chance that Sennacherib would return to finish what he had started. To prevent this, the tribute was paid, so Matty, and as it turned out, it effectively ended the threat.

Why Did Sennacherib Return to Nineveh?

You may think the answer is obvious: because his army was destroyed. But again, the text does not explicitly state this:

> And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh. (2 Ki. 19:35-36; ESV)

Event B (Sennacherib departed) followed event A (destruction of the Assyrian army). That does not necessarily mean that B is caused by A. It might be, but this is not certain. Other explanations have been offered. There are four options:

1. The tribute persuaded Sennacherib to call it a day. Not likely, as nothing in the text points this way (nothing suggests the tribute was paid or promised just before Sennacherib left).
2. According to Isaiah's prophecy, Sennacherib would leave because of a rumour he would hear: "Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumour and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land" (2 Ki. 19:7; ESV). More on this option below.
3. The king of Egypt (strictly speaking, the text refers to "Cush" or Nubia rather than Egypt) came up for an attack: "Now the king heard concerning Tirhakah king of Cush, 'Behold, he has set out to fight against you'" (2 Ki. 19:9; ESV). There are those who argue that this is why Sennacherib left.
4. The destruction of the army. Most likely, this played a role, but in Isaiah's prophecy, it is the rumour, not the destruction of the army, that will make Sennacherib leave.

Matty concludes that the rumour (option 2) was the real reason for Sennacherib's return. Many interpreters argue that this rumour is the report on the Egyptian approach (in this view, option 2 and 3 are identical), but Matty argues against this. The text does not state this. An Egyptian attempt to meddle with the campaign would hardly have been a surprise. And it would not have been too worrisome, seeing the weakness of the Egyptian involvement so far. In the words of the Rabshakeh, Egypt was a "broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it" (2 Ki. 18:21; ESV).

But above all, an Egyptian attack would be a bad reason (and a bad moment) to leave. One can accuse Sennacherib of many things, but he was not a coward. If any rumour could have moved Sennacherib to leave, so Matty, it would be one about renewed troubles in Babylon – a place close to home and of greater importance to Assyria than either Jerusalem or Egypt. This would indeed justify going home.

Throughout his life, Babylon proved particularly cumbersome to Sennacherib. His first campaign, in 703 BC, dealt with Babylon, and he had to come back twice, in 700 (the year after Judah!) and in 689. At the end of this third campaign, he completely erased Babylon to the ground. This may be the background of Isaiah 21.

It was to no avail. 75 years later, Babylon would rise to overthrow Assyria. Forever.

10. Who Wrote the Fourth Gospel? (January 2017)

Source: Brown (1852-6), Jesus Washing Peter's Feet, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jesus_washing_Peter%27s_feet.jpg, Public Domain

John's gospel is not a book I have taught often. Without giving it much thought, I have usually assumed that the "John" of its title must be the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, one of the inner circle of Jesus' 12 disciples. After all, this is what the Church Fathers, the early leaders and theologians of the church, believed. At least most of them. Or so I thought. Richard Bauckham is giving me reasons to reconsider. Who really is the author of the fourth Gospel?

External Evidence

When it comes to issues like the authorship of a book, we distinguish between internal and external evidence. **Internal evidence** is what we find in the book itself; **external evidence** is all the information we may derive from other sources. These "other sources" are often different books of the Bible or extrabiblical documents, for the New Testament especially the writings of the Church Fathers.

For the gospel of John, one bit of external evidence is readily accessible: its title. The gospel titles are not part of the original documents, but they are very old, probably almost as old as the gospels themselves. This means that the link between the fourth gospel and John is ancient. Besides, no other name was ever linked with this gospel. However, this does not answer the question fully. John was a common name. Which John are we talking about? This is where it starts getting interesting.

Papias (ca. 60-130)

The oldest external evidence that we have comes from Papias. Papias lived in the Roman province of Asia and eventually became Bishop of Hierapolis. According to a later Church

Father, Irenaeus (who died ca. 202), Papias had been a hearer of John (yes, here, too, the question is which John).

Papias had first- and second-hand information on the apostles and the authorship of the four gospels. In fact, he himself claimed that he deliberately questioned those who had known Jesus or had heard from the apostles directly to gather reliable information:

> And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on the elders arrived, I made enquiries about the words of the elders – what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and John the Elder, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from the books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.[22]

This is a famous quotation that establishes a real possibility that there were two Johns, both disciples and eyewitnesses of Jesus. After all, the name John appears twice, once in a list of apostles and once identified as "John the Elder", together with Aristion, a disciple who is not one of the Twelve. The church historian Eusebius (260/265-339/340) certainly understood Papias in this way and adds that both Johns had ministered in Asia and that each had his tomb in Ephesus.[23]

It is important to notice the difference in verb tenses in the passage just quoted. Papias enquired about what the apostles "had said" and what Aristion and John the Elder "were saying" – they were still active when Papias enquired.

If there were indeed two Johns in Ephesus, who of them wrote the gospel: John the Apostle or John the Elder? Whoever wrote the gospel probably also wrote the epistles of John. It is worth noting that in two of John's letters the author identifies himself simply as "the elder". But this alone can hardly be conclusive.

Polycrates (ca. 130-196)

There is another early voice from the same region: Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, and therefore in a position to know which John did what. In a dispute about the correct date for the Easter celebration, Polycrates wrote a letter to Rome in which he states:

> For indeed in Asia great luminaries have fallen asleep, such as shall rise again on the day of the Lord's appearing, when he comes with the glory from heaven to seek out all his saints: to wit, Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who has fallen asleep in Hierapolis, [as have] also his two daughters who grew old in virginity, and his other daughter who lived in the Holy Spirit and rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, [there is] John too, he who leant back on the Lord's breast, who was a priest, wearing the sacerdotal plate … , both martyr … and teacher. He has fallen asleep at Ephesus.[24]

That this John "leant back on the Lord's breast" suggests that Polycrates identifies him as the author of the gospel. The reference to the priestly plate is strange because it suggests that this John had functioned as high priest at some point, the only one who would ever wear this plate.

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[22] Quoted in Richard Bauckham (2012), "Papias and the Gospels", http://austingrad.edu/images/SBL/Papias%20and%20the%20gospels.pdf (retrieved 1 November 2017).

[23] Eusebius, Book III, Chapter 39, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250103.htm.

[24] Quoted in Richard Bauckham (2007), *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 37.

Whatever the truth behind this (Bauckham goes at some length to give an explanation[25]), nothing suggests that John the Apostle had any priestly connection.

Even more important is the remarkable and fascinating omission. Polycrates does not identify "his" John as one of the Twelve or as an apostle, even though it would have fortified his position if he had been able to claim John the Apostle as one of his sources. Instead, the Ephesian John is presented as a witness and a teacher, and the disciple reclining in the bosom of Jesus – but not as the son of Zebedee.

Irenaeus (120/140-ca. 202)

Irenaeus is often referred to as the church father who clearly identified John the Apostle as the author of the fourth gospel. To be sure, Irenaeus does state that John wrote the gospel and that he did it in Ephesus. But which John? Richard Bauckham's analysis of all the relevant Information[26] shows that the many references to John in Irenaeus are surprisingly ambiguous and inconclusive.

Bauckham concludes his investigation:

> This gives the Asian tradition that the beloved disciple who wrote the Fourth Gospel was John the Elder a right to be taken very seriously.[27]

But… Wait!

…Isn't it the *apostle* John who appears in the gospel of John as the beloved disciple? Isn't he the one who reclined at the breast of Jesus during the Last Supper? Since only the Twelve were with Jesus at the Last Supper, how could this John be anyone else? Wasn't it John who stood at the cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and took her into his home at the word of Jesus? And wasn't it John, appearing together with Peter in the last chapter of this gospel, of whom Jesus said, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" (John 21:23; ESV)?

Well, look for yourself. Of whom are these things said in the gospel of John? I found it a fascinating study; none of it was quite as I remembered it.

Internal Evidence

John 21:2. Where is John in the gospel of John? We now turn to the internal evidence. Remarkably, his name does not appear. Neither do the sons of Zebedee, with one exception. This single reference to the sons of Zebedee in the entire gospel is in John 21:2. This verse includes a list of seven (no doubt the number is significant) who went fishing:

> Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together.

John 21:20-24. Obviously, one of these seven also is "the disciple whom Jesus loved". John 21:20-24 is conclusive evidence that this beloved disciple is the author of the fourth gospel. These verses also suggest that the first readers of this gospel knew who this was: he was one of them; this gospel is not anonymous. But which one of the seven is the beloved disciple? Since he identifies himself elsewhere as disciple, it seems likely that he is one of the two anonymous disciples, not one of the sons of Zebedee.

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[25] Ibid., 41-50.
[26] Ibid., 70f.
[27] Ibid., 72.

John 13:23. The author does make a few appearances earlier in the book. It is sometimes thought that the nameless disciple in John 1:35-40 is the author. If not, he first becomes visible in John 13:23, during the Last Supper, where he is reclining at the breast of Jesus. Is it conceivable that a disciple, not one of the Twelve, would be present at the Last Supper? Yes, it is, especially if this person would be the owner of the house where Jesus celebrated or his son. After all, the other gospels only state that Jesus *came* with the Twelve, not that there were only the Twelve with him at the table.

John 18:15-16. "Another disciple … who was known to the high priest" enables Peter to enter the house of the high priest, where Peter betrays Jesus. It is likely that this is again the beloved disciple, but would John the son of Zebedee have such relationships in Jerusalem?

John 19:26-27. Next, we find the beloved disciple at the cross, in John 19:26-27. It is at a word of Jesus that "from that hour the disciple took her [Mary] to his own home." It is unlikely that John the son of Zebedee or his family would have owned a home in Jerusalem. The family business was located at the sea of Galilee. The beloved disciple, however, appears to have been a resident of Jerusalem. This would explain a noticeable characteristic of his gospel: so much of it takes place in or near Jerusalem, not in Galilee or elsewhere.

John 19:35. When Jesus is pierced by the spear of a Roman soldier, leading to a flow of blood and water, we read:

> He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe.

Clearly, this is the author again. But who of the disciples was present at the cross? None are named (not in the other gospels either), except for some of the women – and the disciple whom Jesus loved (and who took Mary into this home).

John 20:1-10. After the resurrection, we find the disciple at the empty grave with Peter.

All of this eminently qualifies the author to be a witness (and therefore a gospel writer), but it does not reveal him to be John the son of Zebedee. None of it comes close to proving that this is John the Apostle.

On the contrary, the evidence points away from him. Somehow, unwittingly, I ascribed all of the above to the apostle John, but he is never mentioned in these references. Bauckham has a point. It is worth repeating his conclusion:

> This gives the Asian tradition that the beloved disciple who wrote the Fourth Gospel was John the Elder a right to be taken very seriously.[28]

Quite apart from this question of authorship, I see a far more valuable takeaway from this exercise. It leaves me wondering: What is it like to be a disciple whom Jesus loves?

On my reading list: Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

[28] Ibid., 72.

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