

# The New Testament Writings in Multiple Contexts

# 1

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## Chapter Overview

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As you read in the Prologue, there are many different aspects of the ancient world that we could study to help us understand what we read in the New Testament. This chapter provides overviews of three such aspects: the historical context, ancient literary context, and social context of the New Testament writings. I begin with a historical overview of key events in the history of ancient Israel. Knowing the events that helped shape the writings of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament will be important for understanding many aspects of the New Testament. I then turn to a discussion of the ancient literary context of the New Testament, focusing especially on a collection of Jewish writings that influenced New Testament authors. Finally, I offer an overview of the social context of everyday life in the hierarchical Roman world.

## A History of Trauma under Imperial Rule

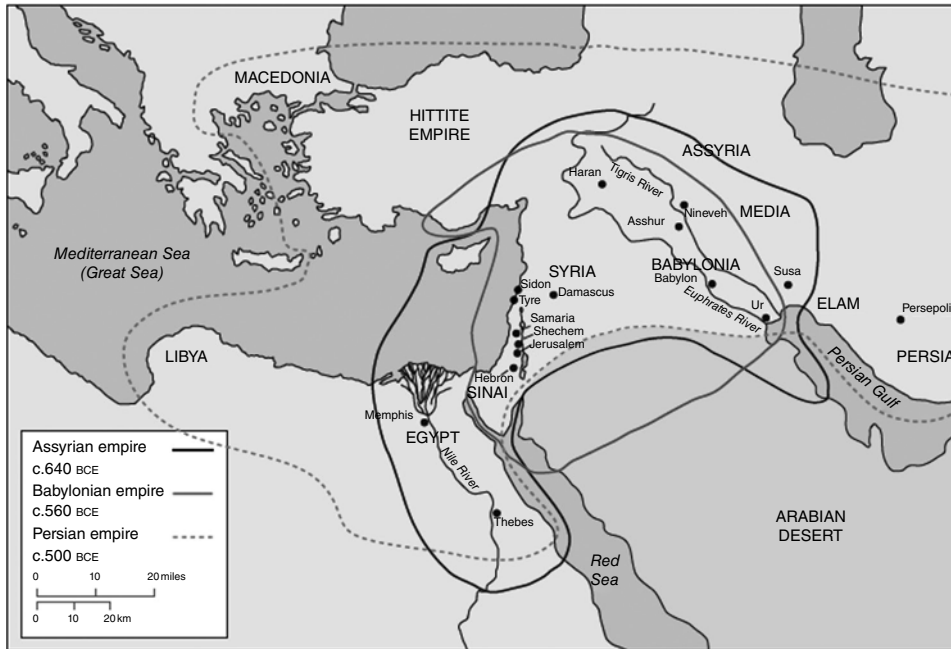
In this section, I offer a brief overview of the history of ancient Israel, which provides important context for understanding the events in the first century CE that shaped the New Testament writings. Note first, that the history of Israel is not the same as the biblical story, or the **canonical** story, as it is also called. The word **canon** refers to a collection of authoritative scriptures. The Christian canonical story begins with the creation

of the world in the book of Genesis and ends with a proclamation of a new heaven and earth in the book of Revelation. Christian theologians sometimes refer to the canonical story as a “**salvation history**.” This “history” moves from creation to sin to redemption and the anticipation of the final consummation of God’s reign. The canonical story is not history in the academic sense and not the history I discuss in what follows. Instead, studying the historical context of the Bible means learning about the historical circumstances that shaped the people and culture that produced the biblical writings.

All of the New Testament texts were written during a time of Roman imperial domination. For the Jewish people of this period, including the Jewish authors of the New Testament, the experience of Roman imperialism was simply the most recent episode in a long history of foreign domination. The detailed examination of that history is a topic for a textbook on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Nevertheless, for our study of the New Testament, we need to situate first-century CE Roman imperialism within a larger story that includes the people of Israel’s experiences of earlier imperial oppression. In the discussion below, I briefly mention the ways that this history produced writings that would later influence the New Testament. In later chapters, I explore in more detail the ways that Christ-followers relied on ancient traditions to understand their experience of Jesus.

For this purpose, I begin with the formation of an Israelite monarchy in the tenth century BCE. The book of 1 Samuel suggests that Israel’s first king, Saul, emerged as a sort of warlord or /proto-king. He rallied different tribes in the land to resist invasions from nearby city-states (1 Samuel 10–11). Following Saul, David conquered the Jebusite city of Jerusalem and made it the capital of the kingdom (2 Samuel 5). David’s son Solomon assumed the throne after David. He built a temple to Yahweh and a palace for himself (1 Kings 6–7). Solomon was the last to reign over both the northern and southern tribes. When he died, the northern tribes, dissatisfied with the treatment they experienced under Solomon, split from the south to form their own kingdom called Israel (1 Kings 12). Meanwhile, the Davidic monarchy (the line of kings descended from David) continued to reign over the southern kingdom of Judah until the sixth century BCE. A group of biblical psalms known as the “royal psalms” provide evidence of the importance of the Davidic monarchy, portraying the king as one chosen and empowered by God (see, for example, Psalm 2). Many centuries later, Christ-followers reinterpreted such royal psalms in relation to Jesus.

Meanwhile, to the northeast, the Assyrian empire was growing in strength and expanding its reach. In the eighth century BCE, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom, driving the inhabitants of Israel from their land and exiling them across the Assyrian empire. Judah survived only barely and was terrorized by Assyria and forced to pay tribute to the Assyrian king. Two centuries later, in the sixth century BCE, Judah suffered a devastating defeat by another regional superpower, the Babylonian empire. The conquering Babylonian army destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the Temple, in 586 BCE. Most of the elite, including the king, were forcibly deported to Babylon. This period, known as the **Babylonian exile**, was so pivotal to the people of Judah that biblical history is typically periodized as “pre-exile,” “exile,” and “post-exile.” Note that the genealogy of Jesus that opens the Gospel of Matthew is divided into the periods before and after the deportation to Babylon (Matt 1:11–12). Moreover, some of the biblical prophecies that spoke to the experience of exile were reinterpreted by Christ-followers as prophecies about Jesus. For example, the depiction of Israel as a suffering servant of God became an especially important image for connecting the fate of Jesus to the Jewish scriptures (see Isa 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; 52:13–53:12).



### MAP 1.1

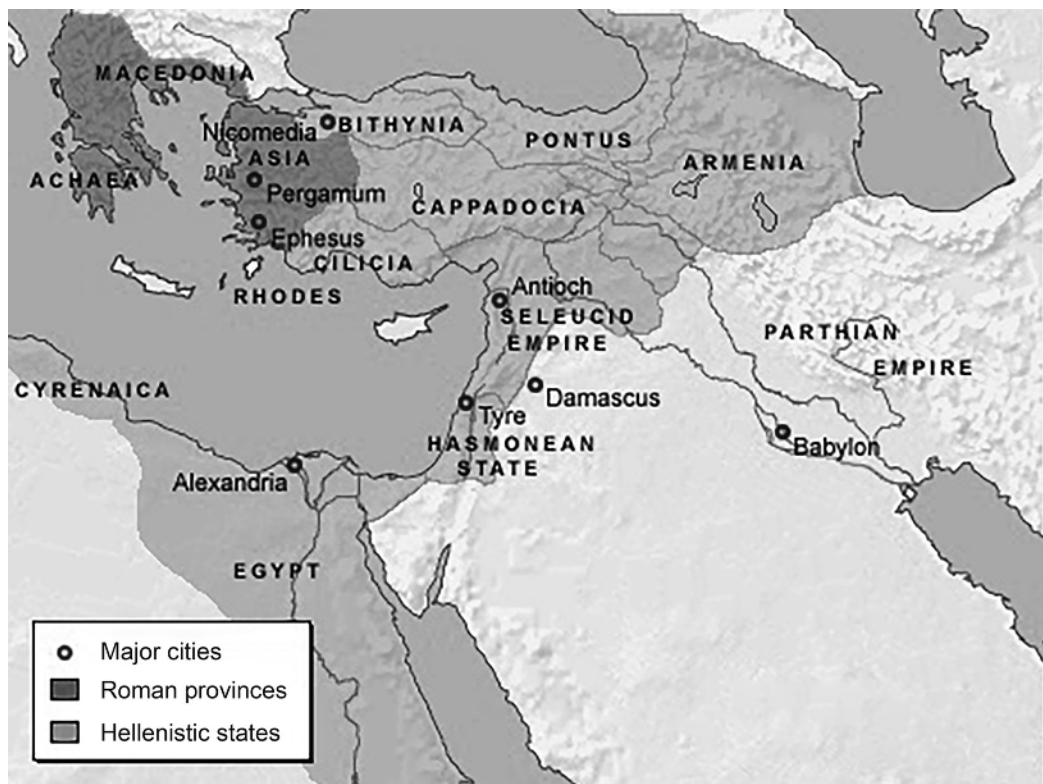
The reach of three of the major empires that dominated Israel and/or Judah: the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. Redrawn from [www.bible.ca](http://www.bible.ca), Abingdon Press, 1994.

Several decades after the Babylonian deportation, the Persian ruler, Cyrus, conquered the Babylonian empire (see Map 1.1). So began a period of Persian rule over Judah that lasted over two hundred years. Cyrus and his successors allowed the Judean exiles to return to Judah in several stages to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple and their community; it is no wonder that Cyrus is referred to as God's "**messiah**" in Isaiah 45:1 (Hebrew, "annointed one"). The prophet saw him as God's chosen liberator of the deportees. Still, although they were permitted to return, the Judeans remained under foreign rule. The designation **Second Temple period** refers to the period beginning in 515 BCE, when Persian authorization made it possible to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. The period ends in the late first century CE when this temple is destroyed by Rome.

Returning to our historical overview, the Persian empire came to an end with the conquering Greek army of Alexander the Great. Alexander and the Hellenistic rulers who came after him spread Greek culture throughout the eastern Mediterranean region. (The terms "**Hellenistic**" and "**Hellenization**" come from the Greek word *hellen*, the term that ancient Greeks used to refer to themselves.) This period of Hellenization had far-reaching consequences, one of which was the spread of a Greek dialect known as **Koine** ("common") across the region. The spread of the Greek language had a direct impact on the Bible. First, beginning in the third century BCE, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Koine Greek. This Greek translation is known as the **Septuagint**, from the Latin word for 70 (often abbreviated as **LXX**). The name of the translation comes from a legend about the production of the Greek translation. According to the story, 72 scribes were appointed by the high priest in Jerusalem to go to Alexandria in Egypt

to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek for inclusion in the famous Alexandrian library. The legend states that the translation was produced in exactly 72 days. While few scholars think this story is authentic, the translation attests to the needs of a Greek-speaking Jewish community in the Hellenistic period. The even longer-term effects of Alexander's conquest are evident in the New Testament. All of the New Testament authors wrote in Koine Greek, quoting from the Septuagint in their writings.

The introduction of Greek culture produced a new kind of imperial pressure for the Judeans living in and around Jerusalem. Because there were social, economic, and political advantages to adopting Greek culture and customs, some of the Judeans living in Jerusalem were open to the process of Hellenization. Others saw the adoption of Greek culture as a threat to the Jewish people. These differences led to internal disputes that came to a crisis when the Hellenistic Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, decided to settle the matter by forbidding Jewish practices such as circumcision and dietary regulations. His actions resulted in an armed resistance by some of the Judeans (see 1 and 2 Maccabees for two different accounts of these events). The successful "Maccabean revolt," so named after the family that led the rebellion, began a period of independent rule for the Jewish people. The Hasmonean dynasty (the descendants of the Maccabees) ruled in Jerusalem for some one hundred years, even expanding to claim some of the surrounding land (Map 1.2).



**MAP 1.2**

The Hellenistic kingdoms and the Hasmonean state around 90 BCE.

This relatively brief period of independence for the Jewish people came to an end with the occupation by Rome in 63 BCE. However, as these events require more detailed attention in terms of their relevance to the New Testament writings, I leave them for discussion in the next chapter.

## The New Testament Writings in their Ancient Literary Context

Ancient literary influences also informed the writings of the New Testament. Writing styles and genres of communication change over time, and such change can present problems for modern people attempting to understand ancient texts. Although we can read the translated words of an ancient text, we may be unaware of how those words contribute to a particular genre, how they function rhetorically in an argument, or how they convey certain moods or tones, like humor or sarcasm. Indeed, we may miss the author's meaning entirely. One contemporary example of changing literary forms and modes of communication illustrates the point: less than two decades before this textbook was written, the idea of communicating with something called a "tweet" did not exist. Since its invention in 2006, Twitter has not only become a central means of sharing information but has also encouraged the creation of new types of literature. "Twitterature" is formed by blending older poetic genres like haiku with the 140-character format of Twitter. Meanwhile, the ubiquitous hashtag has found its way into everyday speech, useful for expressing sarcasm or humor. Perhaps by the time you are reading this, the use of Twitter and hashtags is already fading in light of new media forms. Centuries from now, people might be #clueless about understanding writings from our time if they are unfamiliar with the literary practices associated with a #early2000s company called "Twitter."

So, too, we may misunderstand aspects of biblical writings if we are not familiar with first-century CE literary genres and ancient rhetorical conventions. For this reason, attention to ancient literary contexts will be part of our discussion of New Testament texts. For example, later in this book, you will learn about a rhetorical style called the diatribe that Paul used in his letter to the Romans. Similarly, I will discuss conventions of Greco-Roman biographies to help with interpreting the birth stories of Jesus. These are just two examples of how attending to ancient literary contexts and genres will help you learn more about the New Testament.

Another important part of the literary context of the New Testament concerns how the authors drew on Jewish scriptural traditions for their own writing. What Christians now call the Old Testament was simply called "the scriptures" or the "law and prophets" for Jesus and his followers (see, for example, Matt 7:12; Acts 13:15; Rom 3:21). I have already pointed to some of these scriptural influences, and we will see more in the coming chapters. Here, I want to focus on another important but less well-known collection of writings that also informed the authors of the New Testament: the Jewish literature written in Greek and Aramaic in the third to first centuries BCE. Scholars often refer to these writings as Second Temple literature because they were written in the Second Temple period. Some of these Jewish writings did not become part of the biblical canon. As I discussed in the Prologue, some are now considered deuterocanonical in the Roman Catholic church and some make up the apocrypha in Protestant denominations. Here, I will mention just a few examples of influential Second Temple texts as a way of anticipating later discussions.

The first example is a Jewish writing known as 1 Enoch, which is not included as part of any sacred canon despite its influence. The work is a good illustration of some common elements of Jewish literature from the Second Temple period. First, the writing is attributed to an ancient biblical figure, Enoch, rather than the actual ancient scribe who wrote it. This literary practice was a way of giving authority to an esteemed biblical figure and indicating that the text should be read as a continuation of the scriptural tradition. Although Enoch is mentioned only briefly in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 5:21–4), the figure captured the attention of later Jewish writers. Indeed, 1 Enoch is actually a collection of several writings from the Second Temple period that were attributed to Enoch. A second element in 1 Enoch that is common to Second Temple literature is the way it draws on, interprets, and sometimes expands biblical traditions. In this way, it shows how Jewish writers engaged with scripture to address their own contemporary contexts. The popularity of 1 Enoch is evident in the many copies of the book that were found among the scrolls discovered at a place called Qumran, an archeological site on the western shore of the Dead Sea. The authoritative status of 1 Enoch is further attested by the fact that the New Testament book of Jude contains a direct quotation from it (Jude 14–15).

The second example is not one text but a group of Jewish writings that scholars refer to as Wisdom literature. These writings praised a semi-divine figure of Wisdom (“*sophia*” in Greek, often represented as a feminine figure). One such wisdom book written during the Second Temple period is called the Wisdom of Solomon (an additional example of a pseudonymous text). Another example is a book called the Wisdom of Ben Sira (also known as Sirach or Ecclesiasticus). This is one of only a few Jewish writings in which the author identifies himself. Both of these books transmit a collection of wisdom sayings that demonstrate the elevation of the wisdom tradition in the Second Temple period. In later chapters, I will show how the personified figure of Wisdom from this literature influenced New Testament traditions about Jesus.

The most important thing to know about Jewish writings from the Second Temple period is that they contain many ideas that are centrally important to the New Testament authors but are not found in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, only in Jewish literature from the third century BCE do we find references to God’s final judgment, resurrection from the dead, the afterlife, and a coming messiah – all concepts that are central to the first- to second-century CE New Testament writers.

Some of these ideas, like speculation about an afterlife, were likely influenced by interaction with Persian and Greek cultures, yet another example of the influence of imperial conquest and cultural mingling on the development of the Bible. Finally, we should note that for the authors of the New Testament, there was likely little distinction between writings that we now designate as “biblical” versus other non-biblical Second Temple writings. These authors drew on a broad range of Jewish traditions that were important to them in understanding the significance of the figure of Jesus.

## **The New Testament Writings in their Ancient Social Context**

In this last section of the chapter, I turn to the social and economic reality of everyday life under Roman rule. Sometimes readers of the New Testament assume that it is a collection of religious writings concerned primarily with individual heavenly salvation – that is, a

benefit one receives after death. However, ancient audiences likely understood the Jesus movement's promises of restoration and salvation as relevant to their *present* lives. What follows is a brief description of the social world of the Roman empire that I will build on in later chapters.

Roman society was hierarchical. It privileged men over women, freeborn people over enslaved people, wealthy people over poor people, and Roman citizens over non-citizens. For its most elite members, family ancestry was a major factor. The "patricians," as they were called, claimed ancestral connections to the founders of Rome. Most people were commoners, or "plebians," though citizenship and wealth were still factors in their status within this group, as was a person's status as freeborn or a freedperson. Those who were formerly slaves might eventually become quite wealthy but were never afforded the same status as freeborn people. Toward the bottom of the social hierarchy were people who owned no property and worked menial jobs for pay. At the lowest end were slaves, who were legally considered property rather than people.

Such social gradations meant that one's quality of life depended on a complex combination of intersecting factors. A person might rank above someone else in one area (freeborn rather than freedperson) and below them in another area (a woman rather than a man). Accordingly, the New Testament authors show a keen awareness of social status. Note, for example, the apostle Paul's observation to the Corinthians, "Not many of you are of high birth" (1 Cor 1:26). In the Gospel of Mark, a wealthy Torah-obedient man becomes an object lesson about how difficult it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (10:17–22). Revelation offers a biting critique of Roman extravagance with a detailed list of luxurious cargo sold to Rome that concludes with "slaves – and human lives" (Rev 18:11–13). Such passages, and many others, demonstrate the relevance of economic and social status to the New Testament writers. These examples also show the importance of including an intersectional approach in New Testament interpretation. Recall that such an approach examines how multiple social categories intersect to affect one's place in social power structures.

While the idea of a social hierarchy based on family, wealth, and possessions is not a new concept for twenty-first-century readers, other aspects of the socioeconomic system of Rome may be less familiar. For example, an important element of the Roman social hierarchy was a long-standing system of patron–client relationships that operated at both the public and private levels. At the public level, a wealthy patron might sponsor a guild or religious association, or even a small city. He or she might give funds for a public building or provide public entertainment. A private patron could support an individual, whether a freedperson who had been a slave for the patron or a freeborn person of lower status. Under this arrangement, the lower-status client would be obligated to perform services for the patron in exchange for that patron's provision of funds or legal protection. The apostle Paul provides an example of such a patron–client relationship in his letter to the Romans. In the closing chapter of the letter, Paul commends a woman named Phoebe for being "a benefactor of many including myself" (Rom 16:2). This is all we know about Phoebe. Nevertheless, this intriguing reference points to the existence of patron–client relationships among Christ-followers, in this case between Paul and a woman with enough means to provide him with support. In another example, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles prefaces both writings with a direct address to "most excellent Theophilus." This is just the way a client would refer to a patron who had sponsored his work.

Another aspect of Roman society – indeed, one that was deeply interwoven in the fabric of the ancient world – was the institution of slavery. The system of slavery was an assumed part of life in the Greco-Roman world. Past scholarship sometimes underestimated the significance of this fact because ancient slavery differed from more recent iterations of slave labor in the Americas. To be sure, there are differences between ancient slavery and the modern slave trade of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. In the Roman empire, slaves were often war prisoners or the children of war prisoners. Also, slaves in the Roman period were not all agricultural or household workers. The labor required to make Rome’s imperial expansion a profitable enterprise was enormous, requiring many types of labor from thousands, and at times, millions of slaves. Nevertheless, the dependence on slave labor to turn a profit was similar in both ancient and modern contexts. In both cases, slaves had no legal rights or recourse whatsoever. Slaveowners could do what they wished with their slaves.

References to slaves and slave owners occur frequently throughout the biblical writings. The presence of enslaved characters is not always apparent to English-language audiences because English translations often soften the Greek words *doulos* (slave) or *paidiske* (slave-girl) with the English word “servant.” Perhaps this translation choice is a way to avoid the discomfort of confronting the reality of the ancient slave culture and how deeply embedded the institution of slavery was for the New Testament writers. Here, I list just a few examples among many that could be cited to illustrate the point. Apart from references to enslaved characters (for example, the enslaved girl who identifies Peter as a disciple of Jesus, Luke 22:56), enslaved figures populate the teachings of Jesus. Especially Jesus’s short narratives, known as parables, often refer to slaves as a way to teach audiences about the kingdom of God, as in “the Kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves” (Matt 18:23). Several parables describe the violent treatment of enslaved men (for example, Mark 12:1–12 and Luke 19:12–27). An enslaved girl in the house of a Christ-follower named Mary is used in an attempt to add humor to the narrative in Acts, which was a common use of enslaved figures in Greek literature (see Acts 12:12–15). Paul’s letters are peppered with references to slaves. For example, in one letter Paul mentions a report that he received from “Chloe’s people” (in Greek, “those of Chloe,” 1 Cor 1:11). This is likely a reference to slaves owned by a Christ-follower named Chloe. Paul also writes a brief letter to a man named Philemon that seems to be advising Philemon about a slave named Onesimus. Again, these are just some of the many places where slaves play a role in the various writings that make up the New Testament.

So far, I have discussed a number of identity markers that were central to one’s place in Roman society, but I have not yet discussed the idea of religious identity. This may seem odd. Contemporary readers of the New Testament might reasonably assume that religion would be the most important category to discuss. Yet here again, we are confronted with different ways of thinking in the ancient world. The idea of religion did not exist in any form similar to how we now think of this social practice. People were not members of an institutionalized religion that was distinct from other religions, let alone distinct from other aspects of their lives. Instead, the beliefs and practices of ancient people were linked to locally specific deities and particular ethnic identities. The implications of this ancient way of conceiving of divine–human relationships will

become evident across this textbook. To note just one example as a preview of coming discussions, Paul's letters address a major debate among Jewish Christ-followers regarding the place of gentiles (non-Jews) in the Jesus movement. As we will see, the question concerns whether gentiles could be part of the movement *as gentiles*, since they were not part of ethnic kinship structure associated with the God of Israel.

## Acts 16:11–40



I conclude this chapter on the multiple contexts of the New Testament with a close look at a passage from the Acts of the Apostles. We will learn more about the book of Acts later in this textbook. Here, I focus on Acts 16:11–40 to demonstrate what it means to attend to the multiple contexts of the New Testament.

The passage relates two episodes that take place in the city of Philippi. Both episodes describe Paul's encounters with other people in the city. As you read through the passage, pay attention to how gender, ethnicity, citizenship status, patron–client relationships, and slave status factor into the narrative.

Considering the ancient literary context of the work, note that Acts 16 *tells a story* about Paul and Silas – that is, it is written in narrative form. Curiously, the narrative shifts from the use of first person “we set sail. . .” to third person; the “we” disappears at verse 19 only to resume at Acts 20:5. This intermittent use of the first person is a puzzle for interpreters of Acts that I discuss further in Chapter 10. For now, note that we are reading stories *about* Paul shaped by the author of Acts. The story begins with Paul and Silas arriving in Philippi (16:11–15). The narrator describes the place as a leading city in the Roman province of Macedonia (see Map 1.2). Philippi was also a Roman colony, which means that it was occupied and governed by Romans. Thus, the story is set in a Greek urban center under Roman control.

Paul and Silas's first action occurs on the sabbath, when they go looking for a “place to pray.” It is unclear what this phrase designates. One would expect Paul and Silas to be heading toward the local synagogue given the mention of the Sabbath. However, the author does not choose this word, despite doing so elsewhere (Acts 13:14–15; 14:1; 17:1; 18:4, 19). All we know is that Paul and Silas find women gathered in a ritual space for prayer. This sets the stage for their encounter with a woman named Lydia.

The character Lydia offers a good example of the intersecting identities that we discussed earlier in the chapter. Like Paul, she is not local to Philippi but is from Thyatira, another Greco-Roman city located in modern-day Turkey. Inscriptions from Thyatira provide evidence for this city's thriving trade in textiles and dye. Lydia's name may also provide clues about her identity. The region in which Thyatira was located was called Lydia. It may be that the name Lydia describes the woman's origin, and it could indicate her former slave status since slave names were often linked to place names. The story explicitly affirms that Lydia is a businesswoman: she sells purple cloth in Philippi. The narrator also describes Lydia as a “worshipper of God,” an expression that could mean that she is a gentile who is interested in Jewish rites. Alternatively, the term may simply signal Lydia's piety, with “god” being used in a general sense. The description of a

group of women gathered in a ritual setting more closely matches descriptions of gentile women's cultic activity in non-Jewish settings. For instance, the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis was prominent in Philippi and popular among ancient women generally.

In either case, the story goes on to depict Lydia's interest in Paul's teaching. Upon hearing it, she and her household are baptized. The mention of Lydia's household and the fact that she immediately invites Paul and Silas to stay there give the impression that she has some financial resources. Indeed, by the end of the focus text, Lydia's home has become a meeting place for Paul, Silas, and other "brothers" in Philippi (16:40). Thus, in this brief episode, we meet a woman with multiple intersecting identities. Lydia is a gentile, a businesswoman, and a devout cultic practitioner (or perhaps a synagogue attendee). She is relatively wealthy, possibly a freedwoman, is newly baptized, and becomes a host and thereby enters a patron relationship with the Christ group.

We can contrast this encounter between Paul and Lydia with the second, longer episode that is narrated in Acts 16:16–39. Again, Paul and Silas meet a woman as they are going to "the place of prayer." This time, they cross paths with a young, enslaved girl who makes money for her owners with her powers of divination. In contrast to Lydia, we learn nothing about this young woman except that she is profitable. The plot thickens when Paul becomes annoyed after hearing the young girl proclaim for many days that he and Silas are "slaves of the Most High God who preach to you a way of salvation" (16:17). In a seemingly impulsive response, Paul casts out her spirit of divination.

When the owners see their source of income slip away after the young woman loses her spirit of divination, they seek retribution through the city officials. Nevertheless, the charges that the owners bring against Paul and Silas do not focus on their economic loss. Rather, the men claim that Paul and Silas are Jews who are promoting customs that are not legal for the men to accept or practice "being Romans," as they emphasize (16:21). From out of nowhere, "the crowd" joins in the attack against Paul and Silas, apparently eager to condemn two Jewish men. In response to the unrest in the city, the officials have Paul and Silas stripped and beaten in public and then imprisoned. In this way, the story depicts the use of Roman identity within a Roman power structure to exact revenge against suspicious non-Romans.

But the story does not end there. Only *after* succumbing to this humiliating treatment, only *after* an earthquake occurs and Paul's jailer is baptized, and only *after* the magistrates order that he and Silas be secretly released, does Paul reveal that he is a Roman citizen! Paul could have mentioned this crucial detail much earlier in the story, but the narrative delay allows for the dramatic divine intervention as well as the conversion of the jailer and his household. The response from the magistrates is also quite dramatic. Without asking for proof of Paul's claim, the magistrates fearfully and quickly apologize and grant Paul's request for an escort out of the prison. What do they fear? The narrator does not make this explicit, so we should assume that the audience would understand that subjecting Roman citizens to bodily harm without a trial could endanger the magistrates' own positions; after all, they are among many expendable officials who work at the behest of the emperor. The entire episode in Philippi ends where it began, with Paul and his co-workers staying at the house of Lydia.

A close reading of Acts 16:11–40 illustrates how intersecting identities affected one's social standing and relations in the ancient first-century CE world, as they also

do in our present world. Together, these two episodes also present some uncomfortable challenges to the assumptions that a twenty-first-century reader might bring to a New Testament text. Perhaps the most disturbing is the contrast between the powerless, nameless female slave and the businesswoman, Lydia. The slave, economically exploited by her owners, is little more than a plot device. Even though she correctly divines the identity of Paul and Silas, they pay her no mind until her constant prophesying annoys Paul to the point of action. The story does not show Paul casting the spirit out of the young woman because of concern for her (nor is she consulted about the matter). He simply reacts out of irritation. Once the young woman's plot purpose is fulfilled, she disappears from the story. Indeed, Paul shows more concern for his unnamed jailer, whom he eventually baptizes (16:28–34). As we have seen, Paul also baptizes the woman of higher status, Lydia, who makes her home available to Paul and his co-workers. As Paul moves on in his journey, the narrative leaves us to imagine the Christ group in Philippi continuing to meet in Lydia's house. In this way, her role in the story comports with evidence from Paul's letters that relatively wealthy women functioned as patrons to the growing Jesus movement. In contrast, we have no idea what becomes of the enslaved woman who is no longer profitable to her owners.

Finally, the story also portrays the benefits of Roman citizenship in occupied cities in contrast to non-citizens' vulnerability to violence. In addition, it shows the susceptibility of those viewed as outsiders – in this case, those identified as Jews. The owners of the enslaved woman know how to trigger the local crowd and the civic authorities to incite violence against Paul. Meanwhile, Paul knows how to leverage his citizenship to embarrass the officials and gain his freedom.

## **Conclusion: The New Testament in a Complex World**

This chapter has introduced you to multiple ancient contexts that influenced the New Testament writings. I have moved rapidly through a review of the New Testament's historical context, I have asked you to consider the literary influences on the New Testament writers, and I have discussed the social environment of the first century CE. This is quite a lot to take in at once! Keep in mind that the goal of this chapter has been to illustrate the complexity of the world we enter when we study any ancient text, including the New Testament. We will have occasion to revisit many of the ideas I have introduced here as we study the writings themselves in the chapters to come.

Finally, the focus text offers an example of how this textbook will explore the leading male figures of the New Testament writings while also calling attention to the characters on the margins. The first part is all too easy because the legacy of white Eurocentric scholarship has always been to center figures like Paul while mostly ignoring figures like Lydia and the nameless enslaved young woman. My goal for this contemporary introduction to the New Testament is to situate this collection of ancient writings in the midst of a complex world in which all sorts of people lived and longed for a safe and full life. My hope is that doing so will offer a more fully informed way of bringing the texts into conversation with our own complex world.

## CHAPTER ONE REVIEW

- 1 Know the meaning and significance of the following terms discussed in this chapter:
  - canon/canonical
  - Babylonian exile
  - Koine
  - LXX
  - messiah
  - salvation history
  - Second Temple period
- 2 List the different empires that ruled over Israel and/or Judah. What is one example of how the trauma of imperial domination is reflected in the New Testament?
- 3 Give some examples of how Alexander's conquest played a role in how the New Testament was written.
- 4 What are some of the different contexts that influenced the writers of the New Testament?
- 5 (Focus text: Acts 16:11–40) What aspects of Acts 16:11–40 are illuminated by attention to ancient intersecting identities? How might your own intersecting identities affect your understanding of the New Testament?

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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