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Adoptionism: The view that Jesus was not divine, but a flesh-and-blood human being who had been adopted at baptism to be God’s son.

Aeons: In Gnostic myth, divine beings who are offspring of the one true, unknowable God.

Alexander the Great: The great military leader of Macedonia (356–323 B.C.E.) whose armies conquered much of the eastern Mediterranean and who was responsible for the spread of Greek culture (Hellenism) throughout the lands he conquered.

Amanuensis: A personal scribe or secretary, who wrote (e.g., personal letters) from dictation.

Antiochus Epiphanes: The Syrian monarch who attempted to force the Jews of Palestine to adopt Greek culture, leading to the Maccabean revolt in 167 B.C.E.

Antitheses: Literally, “contrary statements,” used as a technical term to designate six sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21–48), in which he states a Jewish law (“You have heard it said . . .”) and then sets his own interpretation over it (“But I say to you . . .”).

Apocalypse: A literary genre in which an author, usually pseudonymous, reports symbolic dreams or visions, given or interpreted through an angelic mediator, which reveal the heavenly mysteries that can make sense of earthly realities.

Apocalypticism: A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians that maintained that the present age is controlled by forces of evil, but that these will be destroyed at the end of time when God intervenes in history to bring in his kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

Apocrypha: A Greek term meaning, literally, “hidden things,” used of books on the fringe of the Jewish or Christian canons of Scripture. The Jewish Apocrypha comprises books found in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Bible, including 1 and 2 Maccabees and 4 Ezra.

Apollonius of Tyana: A pagan philosopher and holy man of the first century C.E., reported to do miracles and to deliver divinely inspired teachings, a man believed by some of his followers to be a son of God.

Apology: A reasoned explanation and justification of one’s beliefs and/or practices, from a Greek word meaning “defense.”

Apostle: Generally, one who is commissioned to perform a task, from a Greek word meaning “sent”; in early Christianity, the term was used to designate special emissaries of the faith who were understood to be representatives of Christ. See also Disciple.

Apostolic Fathers: A collection of noncanonical writings penned by proto-orthodox Christians of the second century who were traditionally thought to have been followers of the apostles; some of these works were considered Scripture in parts of the early church.

Apostolic Succession: The proto-orthodox claim that leaders of the major churches had been appointed by the successors of the apostles themselves, so that their authority could be traced back to Jesus’ hand-chosen followers.

Asclepius: A popular Greek god known in particular for his ability to heal the sick.

Associations, Voluntary: In the Greco-Roman world, privately organized small groups of people who shared common interests and met periodically to socialize, enjoy a common meal, and conduct business; two of the best-known types were trade associations (comprised of members of the same profession) and burial societies.
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Athanasius: An influential fourth-century church father and bishop of the large and important church in Alexandria, Egypt. Athanasius was the first church writer to list our twenty-seven New Testament books (and only those books) as forming the canon.

Atonement: The doctrine that indicates how a person who is condemned by sin can be placed in a right standing before God by means of a sacrifice. In traditional Christian teaching, it is Christ's death that brings atonement.

Augurs: A group of pagan priests in Rome who could interpret the will of the gods by “taking the auspices.” See also Auspicy.

Augustus, Caesar: See Octavian.

Auspicy: A form of divination in which specially appointed priests could determine the will of the gods by observing the flight patterns or eating habits of birds. See also Divination.

Autograph: The original manuscript of a literary text, from a Greek word meaning “the writing itself.”

Baptism: From the Greek term bapto, which means “to immerse.” The earliest Christian practice of baptism in water appears to have been an initiation rite (it was a ritual that one underwent when joining the Christian community); it probably derived from the practice of John the Baptist, who baptized Jews, including Jesus, in anticipation of the imminent arrival of the end of this age and the coming of the Kingdom of God. (Jewish cleansing rituals were repeated as the need arose; John’s baptism, like the Christians’ later, appears to have been a one-time occurrence.) Later Christians assigned other meanings to the rite: the apostle Paul, for example, saw it as the mystical act of dying with Christ to sin. See Participationist Model.

Beatitudes: A Latin word meaning, literally, “blessings,” used as a technical term for the sayings of Jesus that begin “Blessed are the . . . ,” Matt 5:3–12.

B.C.E. / C.E.: Abbreviations for “before the Common Era” and the “Common Era” respectively, used as exact equivalents of the Christian designations “before Christ” (B.C.) and “anno domini” (A.D., a Latin phrase meaning “year of our Lord”).

Beloved Disciple: Nickname for the “disciple whom Jesus loved” in the Gospel of John, who plays a prominent role in the Passion narrative but is never named. Older tradition identified him as John the son of Zebedee and claimed that it was he who wrote the Gospel.

Biography (ancient): A literary genre consisting of a narrative of an individual’s life, often within a chronological framework, employing numerous subgenres (such as sayings, speeches, anecdotes, and conflict stories) so as to reflect important aspects of his or her character, principally for purposes of instruction, exhortation, or propaganda.

Bishop: Translation of a Greek term, episkopos, which literally means “overseer.” Early in the history of the Christian church, bishops were the leaders who had oversight of the life of the community.

Caiaphas: The Jewish high priest at the time of Jesus’ death.

Canon: From a Greek word meaning “ruler” or “straight edge.” The term came to designate any recognized collection of texts; the canon of the New Testament is thus the collection of books that Christians accept as authoritative.

Catholic: From a Greek word meaning “universal” or “general,” used of the New Testament epistles James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude, and sometimes Hebrews (the “Catholic” epistles) to differentiate them from the letters of Paul.

Charismatic communities: Communities of believers that were led not by appointed leaders but by the Spirit of God, which had bestowed a particular gift (Greek: charisma), useful for the functioning of the entire group, upon each member of the community. According to Paul (see 1 Corinthians 12–14), the gifts (charismata) included such abilities as teaching, preaching, healing, prophesying, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, and so on.

Chief priests: The leaders of the priests in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Many of them would have been actively involved in the Sanhedrin; their ultimate leader was the High Priest.

Christ: See Messiah.

Christology: Any teaching about the nature of Christ. See also Adoptionism; Docetism.

Clement of Rome: One of the early leaders (“bishops”) of the church of Rome, around 95 C.E., who is the traditional author of the noncanonical book 1 Clement.

Comparative Method: A method used to study a literary text by noting its similarities to and differences from other, related, texts, whether or not any of these other texts was used as a source for the text in question.

Constantine: Roman emperor in the early fourth century, the first emperor to convert to Christianity. Constantine’s
conversion played a highly significant role in the spread of Christianity, as it moved from being a persecuted minority religion to becoming the powerful majority religion of the entire empire.

**Contextual Method:** A method used to study a literary text first by determining its social and historical context and then using that context to help explain the text’s meaning.

**Contextual Credibility, Criterion of:** One of the criteria commonly used by scholars to establish historically reliable material; with respect to the historical Jesus, the criterion maintains that if a saying or deed of Jesus cannot be credibly fit into his own first-century Palestinian context, then it cannot be regarded as authentic.

**Cosmos:** The Greek word for “world.”

**Covenant:** An agreement or treaty between two social or political parties that have come to terms; used by ancient Jews in reference to the pact that God made to protect and preserve them as his chosen people in exchange for their devotion and adherence to his law.

**Cult:** Shortened form of cultus deorum, a Latin phrase that literally means “care of the gods,” generally used of any set of religious practices of worship. In pagan religions, these normally involved acts of sacrifice and prayer.

**Cynics:** Greco-Roman philosophers, commonly portrayed as street preachers who harangued their audiences and urged them to find truth freedom by being liberated from all social conventions. The Cynics’ decision to live “according to nature” with none of the niceties of life led their opponents to call them “dogs” (in Greek, cynes).

**Daimonia:** Category of divine beings in the Greco-Roman world. Daimonia were widely thought to be less powerful than the gods but far more powerful than humans and capable of influencing human lives.

**Day of Atonement:** In Hebrew, Yom Kippur, the one day of the year when the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple, first to sacrifice an animal to atone for his own sins, and then another animal to atone for the sins of the people of Israel.

**Deacon:** A Greek word that literally means “one who ministers.” In the early church deacons were Christian church leaders given the responsibility of tending to the physical needs of the community (e.g., through the distribution of alms).

**Dead Sea Scrolls:** Ancient Jewish writings discovered in several caves near the northwest edge of the Dead Sea, widely thought to have been produced by a group of apocalyptically minded Essenes who lived in a monastic-like community from Maccabean times through the Jewish War of 66–70 C.E. See also Essenes; Qumran.

**Demeter:** The Greek and Roman goddess of grain, worshiped in a prominent mystery cult in Eleusis, Greece. See also Persephone.

**Demiurge:** Literally “Maker,” a term used in Gnostic texts to designate the powerful (but inferior) deity that created the world.

**Deutero-Pauline Epistles:** The letters of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, which have a “secondary” (Deutero) standing in the Pauline corpus because scholars debate whether they were written by Paul.

**Diaspora:** Greek for “dispersion,” a term that refers to the dispersion of Jews away from Palestine into other parts of the Mediterranean, beginning with the Babylonian conquests in the sixth century B.C.E.

**Diatesseron:** A “Gospel harmony” produced by the mid-second-century Syrian Christian Tatian, who took the Four Gospels and combined their stories into one long narrative (Diattesseron literally means “through the four”: this then is the one long narrative told through the four accounts).

**Diatribe:** A rhetorical device used by Greek and Latin authors, including the apostle Paul, in which an imaginary opponent raises objections to one’s views only to be answered successfully, so as to move an argument forward. (Paul uses the diatribe, for example, in his letter to the Romans.)

**Disciple:** A follower, one who is “taught” (as opposed to an apostle, one who is “sent” as an emissary).

**Dissimilarity, Criterion of:** One of the criteria commonly used by scholars to establish historically reliable material; the criterion maintains that if a saying or deed of Jesus does not coincide with (or works against) the agenda of the early Christians, it is more likely to be authentic.

**Divination:** Any practice used to ascertain the will of the gods. See also Auspicy; Extispicy.

**Docetism:** The view that Jesus was not a human being but only appeared to be, from a Greek word meaning “to seem” or “to appear.”

**Domitian:** Roman emperor from 81 to 96 C.E.; most scholars believe he was the emperor when the book of Revelation, and its attack on the Roman empire, was composed.
Firstfruits of the Resurrection: A phrase used by the apostle Paul to refer to Jesus as the first one to be raised from the dead. It is an agricultural image referring to the celebration held at the end of the first day of the harvest, in anticipation of going out to bring in the rest of the crops (the next day). If Jesus is the “firstfruits,” then the rest of the resurrection (i.e., everyone else’s resurrection) will happen very soon.

Fourth Philosophy: A group of Jews that Josephus mentions but leaves unnamed, characterized by their insistence on violent opposition to the foreign domination of the Promised Land. See also Sicarii; Zealots.

Four-Source Hypothesis: A solution to the “Synoptic Problem” which maintains that there are four sources that lie behind the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke: (1) Mark was the source for much of the narrative of Matthew and Luke; (2) Q was the source for the sayings found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark; (3) M provided the material found only in Matthew’s Gospel; and (4) L provided the material found only in Luke.

Fulfillment Citations: A literary device used by Matthew in which he states that something experienced or done by Jesus “fulfilled” what was spoken of by a Hebrew prophet in Scripture.

Gamaliel: A famous rabbi of first-century C.E. Judaism.

Gematria: Jewish method of interpreting a word on the basis of the numerical value of its letters (in both Greek and Hebrew, the letters of the alphabet also serve as numerals.)

General History: A genre of ancient literature that traced the significant events in the history of a people to show how their character (as a people) was established. Examples of the genre include Josephus’s Antiquities of the Jews and the Acts of the Apostles.

Genius: A man’s guardian spirit (that of a woman was called Iuno).

Genre: A “genre” is a kind of literature with specific literary features; in the modern world, for example, there are short stories, novels, and limerick poems (each with their own distinctive features); in the ancient world there were biographies, epic poems, general histories—and many other genres. The major genres of the New Testament are Gospels (which are most like religious biographies), Acts (most like general histories), epistles, and apocalypses.

Gentile: A Jewish designation for a non-Jew.

Gnosticism: A group of ancient religions, some of them closely related to Christianity, that maintained that
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elements of the divine had become entrapped in this evil world of matter and could be released only when they acquired the secret gnosis (Greek for “knowledge”) of who they were and of how they could escape. Gnosis was generally thought to be brought by an emissary of the divine realm.

Golden Rule: Found in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, this is Jesus’ saying that you should “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” A similar teaching can be found in a range of pagan and Jewish ethical teachers both before and after Jesus.

gospel: When this word is not capitalized, it refers not to a book but to the proclamation of the “good news” (from the Greek word euaggelion) of Christ’s salvation (e.g., the gospel of Paul is his message, not a book that he used).

Gospel: When this word is capitalized, it refers to a literary genre: a written account of the “good news” brought by Jesus Christ, including episodes involving his words and/or deeds (e.g., the Gospel of Luke or of Peter).

Gospel Harmony: Any literary attempt to take several Gospels and combine them into a longer, more complete Gospel, by incorporating the various accounts into one, such as Tatian’s Diatesseron.

Greco-Roman World: The lands (and culture) around the Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great to the Emperor Constantine, roughly 300 B.C.E. to 300 C.E. (see also box 3.2).

Hanina ben Dosa: A well-known Galilean rabbi of the first century, who was reputed to have done miracles comparable to those of Jesus.

Haran: In Roman religion, a specially trained priest skilled in the practice of extispicy.

Hasmoneans: An alternative name for the Maccabeans, the family of Jewish priests that began the revolt against Syria in 167 B.C.E. and that ruled Israel prior to the Roman conquest of 63 B.C.E.

Hellenization: The spread of Greek language and culture (Hellenism) throughout the Mediterranean, starting with the conquests of Alexander the Great.

Heracleon: Gnostic living around 170 C.E. who wrote a commentary on the Gospel of John, the first known to have been written by a Christian on any part of the Bible.

Heresy: Any worldview or set of beliefs deemed by those in power to be deviant, from a Greek word meaning “choice” (because “heretics” have “chosen” to deviate from the “truth”). See also Orthodoxy.

Herod Antipas: Son of Herod the Great, and ruler of Galilee from 4 to 39 C.E.; this is the Herod who executed John the Baptist and who was involved with the trial of Jesus according to the Gospel of Luke (and the Gospel of Peter).

Herod the Great: Ruler of all of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea (and so, “King of the Jews”) from 40 to 4 B.C.E.; this Herod was allegedly ruling when Jesus was born, and is known in Christian history for killing all the baby boys of Bethlehem in an attempt to destroy the infant Jesus (based on the account in Matthew).

Herodians: A group of Jewish leaders, according to the Gospel of Mark, who were allegedly allied closely with the family of Herod and were thought, therefore, to be collaborators with the Romans.

High Priest: Prior to 70 C.E., the highest-ranking authority in Judaism when there was no Jewish king, in charge of the operation of the Jerusalem Temple and its priests. See also Sadducees; Sanhedrin.

Historiography: The literary reconstruction of historical events; the writing of history; and the study and analysis of historical narrative.

Holy of Holies: The innermost part of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, which was completely empty, but in which God’s presence on earth was believed to dwell. No one could enter this room except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, to make a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

Honi the “Circle-Drawer”: A first-century B.C.E. Galilean who was reputed to have done miracles and had experiences similar to those of Jesus.

House Churches: For centuries Christian communities did not meet in buildings specially built for the purpose, but in private homes. Often it was the owner of the home who was the leader of the church. Such communities, which met for worship, instruction, fellowship, and the celebration of rituals such as baptism and eucharist, are known as house churches.

“I Am” Sayings: A group of sayings found only in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus identifies himself. In some of the sayings he speaks in metaphor (“I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life”), and other times he identifies himself simply by saying “I am”—a possible reference to the name of God from Exodus 3 (“Before Abraham was, I am”; John 8:58).

Ialdabaoth: In Gnostic texts, the name of the creator God (i.e., the “Demiurge”).
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Ignatius: Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch, Syria in the early second century. He was arrested by the Roman authorities for Christian activities and sent to Rome in order to be thrown to the wild beasts in the arena. On his journey to martyrdom, he wrote seven letters, which still survive. These letters are included among the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

Independent Attestation, Criterion of: One of the criteria commonly used by scholars to establish historically reliable material; with respect to the historical Jesus, the criterion maintains that if a saying or deed of Jesus is attested independently by more than one source, it is more likely to be authentic.

Insula: Ancient apartment buildings in which the ground floor was used for shops and businesses, and the upper floors for residences. The apostle Paul evidently set up his (leather goods?) business and stayed, then, in insula in the various towns he evangelized.

Irenaeus: Famous proto-orthodox church father and “heresiologist” (i.e., “heresy-hunter”) of the second century, whose five-volume work, Against Heresies, written around 180 C.E., is a major source of information for Gnostic and other “heretical” groups.

Isis: Egyptian goddess worshiped in mystery cults throughout the Roman world.

Jesus, Son of Ananias: A Palestinian Jew (discussed by Josephus) who, like Jesus of Nazareth, was an apocalyptic preacher of the coming end of the age; like Jesus he was arrested and prosecuted for his revolutionary proclamation, although he was not executed for his crimes. He was inadvertently killed during the siege of Jerusalem in the first Jewish Revolt of 66–70 C.E.

Johannine Community: The community of Christians in which the Gospel of John and the Johannine epistles were written. We do not know where the community was located, but we can reconstruct some of its history using the socio-historical method.

Josephus: First-century Jewish historian, appointed court historian by the Roman emperor Vespasian, whose works The Jewish War and The Antiquities of the Jews are principal resources for information about life in first-century Palestine.

Judaizer: A Christian who insists that followers of Jesus need to keep (all or parts of) the Jewish Law in order to have a right standing before God (a view held, for example, by Paul’s opponents in Galatia).

Judas Maccabeus: Jewish patriot who led the family responsible for spearheading the Maccabean revolt. See also Hasmoneans.

Judicial Model: One of the two principal ways that Paul understood or conceptualized the relationship between Christ’s death and salvation. According to this model, salvation is comparable to a legal decision, in which God, who is both lawmaker and judge, treats humans as “not guilty” for committing acts of transgression (sins) against his law—even though they are guilty—because Jesus’ death has been accepted as a payment. See also Participationist Model.

Justification by Faith: The doctrine found in Paul’s letters (see Judicial Model), that a person is “made right” (justified) with God by trusting in the effects of Christ’s death, rather than by doing the works prescribed by the Jewish Law.

Justin Martyr: One of the earliest “apologists,” Justin lived in Rome in the mid-second century.

Kingdom of God: In the teachings of Jesus, the Kingdom of God (or God’s Reign) appears to refer to an actual kingdom that will come to earth to replace the wicked kingdoms that are now in control of affairs, and of God’s people, here. This would be a utopian kingdom where truth, peace, and justice were restored; it would be ruled by God’s anointed (i.e., the messiah).

L: A document (or documents, written or oral) that no longer survives, but that evidently provided Luke with traditions that are not found in Matthew or Mark. See also Four-Source Hypothesis.

Lares: Household deities commonly worshiped in homes throughout the Roman world, thought to protect the home and its inhabitants, and often identified with the spirits of the family’s ancestors.

Law: See Torah.

Letter: See Epistle.

Literary-Historical Method: A method used to study a literary text by asking how its genre text functioned in its historical context and by exploring, then, its historical meaning (i.e., seeing how its meaning would have been understood to its earliest readers) in light of its literary characteristics.

M: A document (or documents, written or oral) that no longer survives, but that evidently provided Matthew with traditions that are not found in Mark or Luke. See also Four-Source Hypothesis.

Maccabean Revolt: The Jewish uprising against the Syrians and their king, Antiochus Epiphanes, starting in 167 B.C.E., in protest against the forced imposition of Hellenistic culture and the proscription of Jewish practices such as circumcision. See also Hasmoneans.
Magic: A term that is notoriously hard to define, “magic” usually refers to religious practices that are not sanctioned by society at large or by the community in which they are found. Sometimes magic is referred to as the “dark side” of religion, involving sacred activities and words that are socially marginalized.

Manuscript: Any handwritten copy of a literary text.

Marcion: A second-century Christian scholar and evangelist, later labeled a heretic for his docetic Christology and his belief in two Gods—the harsh legalistic God of the Jews and the merciful loving God of Jesus—views that he claimed to have found in the writings of Paul.

Marcus Aurelius: Roman emperor from 161 to 80 C.E., best known for his writings of Stoic philosophy, but known in Christian sources for ruling when some of the most violent persecutions against Christians occurred.

Markan Priority: The view that Mark was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written and was one of the sources used by Matthew and Luke.

Martyr: From the Greek word martus which literally means “witness.” Christian martyrs are those who “bear witness” to Christ even to the point of death.

Melchizedek: A shadowy figure first mentioned in Genesis 14, as a king to whom Abraham, the father of the Jews, paid tithes from his spoils of battle. Later Christians, such as the author of Hebrews, understood Melchizedek to be a prefiguration of Christ, who was greater than all things Jewish (and hence worshiped by the father of the Jews).


Messiah: From a Hebrew word that literally means “anointed one,” translated into Greek as Christos, from which derives our English word Christ. In the first century C.E., there was a wide range of expectations about whom this anointed one might be, some Jews anticipating a future warrior king like David, others a cosmic redeemer from heaven, others an authoritative priest, and still others a powerful spokesperson from God like Moses.

Messianic Secret: This is a technical term used for one of the intriguing literary features of the Gospel of Mark, which is that even though Jesus is shown to be the Messiah, he tries to keep his identity a secret (e.g., by silencing those who recognize him and by hushing up the reports of his miracles).

Mishnah: A collection of oral traditions passed on by generations of Jewish rabbis who saw themselves as the descendants of the Pharisees, finally put into writing around 200 C.E. See also Talmud.

Mithras: A Persian deity worshiped in a mystery cult spread throughout the Roman world.

Monotheism: The belief that there is only one God (sometimes distinguished from “henotheism,” which acknowledges that other gods exist, but insists that only one is to be worshiped).

Muratorian Fragment: A fragmentary text discovered in the eighteenth century, named after its Italian discoverer, Muratori, which contains, in Latin, a list of Christian books that its author considered canonical; the canon is usually considered to have been produced in the late second century, in or around Rome.

Mystery Cults: A group of Greco-Roman religions that focused on the devotees’ individual needs both in this life and in life after death, so named because their initiation rituals and cultic practices involved the disclosure of hidden things that were to be kept secret from outsiders.

Nag Hammadi: Village in upper (southern) Egypt, near the place where a collection of Gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, were discovered in 1945.

Nero: Roman emperor from 54 to 68 C.E. It was under his reign that both Peter and Paul were allegedly martyred in Rome, as part of his persecution of Christians for the fire that destroyed much of the city (the Roman historian Tacitus indicates that Nero himself was responsible for the fire).

Novel: Ancient genre of literature. Novels in the Greek and Roman worlds were fictionalized narratives that normally told of the tragic separation of lovers and of the various mishaps they experienced in their attempts to become reunited. Novels typically included stories of travels, shipwrecks, piracy, banditry, enslavement, and persecution; they typically contained dialogues, speeches, and private letters. Some scholars have argued that the book of Acts is very much like an ancient novel.

Octavian: The first Roman emperor, 27 B.C.E.–14 C.E. Octavian was the great-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar, and a great general who brought unity to Rome after it had experienced prolonged and bloody civil wars. Early in his reign Octavian assumed the name “Caesar Augustus,” which means something like “most revered emperor.”

Oracle: A sacred place where the gods answered questions brought by their worshipers to the resident holy person—
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a priest or, more commonly, a priestess—who would often deliver the divine response out of a trance-like state; the term can also refer to the divine answer itself.

Origen: A Christian philosopher and theologian from early-third-century Alexandria, Egypt, who wrote one of the best known Christian apologies.

Orthodoxy: From the Greek, literally meaning “right opinion”; a term used to designate a worldview or set of beliefs acknowledged to be true by the majority of those in power. See also Heresy.

Paganism: Any of the polytheistic religions of the Greco-Roman world, an umbrella term for ancient Mediterranean religions other than Judaism and Christianity.

Papyrus: A reed-like plant that grows principally around the Nile, whose stalk was used for the manufacture of a paper-like writing surface in antiquity.

Parousia: A Greek word meaning “presence” or “coming,” used as a technical term to refer to the Second Coming of Jesus in judgment at the end of time.

Participationist Model: One of the two principal ways that Paul understood or conceptualized the relationship between Christ’s death and salvation. This model understood sin to be a cosmic force that enslaved people; salvation (liberation from bondage) came by participating in Christ’s death through baptism. See also Judicial Model.

Passover: The most important and widely celebrated annual festival of Jews in Roman times, commemorating the exodus from Egypt.

Pastoral Epistles: New Testament letters that Paul allegedly wrote to two pastors, Timothy (1 and 2 Timothy) and Titus, concerning their pastoral duties.

Pauline Corpus: All of the letters of the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul, including the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral Epistles.

Penates: Household deities commonly worshiped throughout the Roman world, thought to protect the pantry and foodstuffs in the home.

Pentateuch: Literally, the “five scrolls” in Greek, a term used to designate the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Torah or the Law of Moses.

Pentecost: A Jewish agricultural festival, celebrated fifty days after the feast of the Passover, from the Greek word for fifty (pentakosia).

Perpetua: An upper-class Christian woman of Carthage, North Africa, who along with her slave Felicitas was martyred by being thrown to the wild beasts in 203 C.E.; we have an account of their martyrdom that includes a diary allegedly from Perpetua’s own hand.

Persephone: Daughter of the Greek goddess Demeter, reported to have been abducted to the underworld by Hades but allowed to return to life every year to be reunited temporarily with her grieving mother; also known as Kore.

Pesher: An ancient Jewish way of interpreting Scripture, used commonly in the commentaries from the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which a text was explained as having its fulfillment in persons or events of the present day.

Pharisees: A Jewish sect, which may have originated during the Maccabean period, that emphasized strict adherence to the purity laws set forth in the Torah. See also Mishnah.

Philo: A famous Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria Egypt in the first century, who saw the Jewish Scriptures as completely compatible with the insights of Greek philosophy and worked to interpret them accordingly.

Philosophy: In the Roman world of the New Testament, philosophy (which literally means “love of wisdom”) involved trying to understand the world and humans’ place in it, so as to promote individual happiness through proper behavior and right thinking. Leading philosophical schools at the time were the Epicureans, Platonists, Stoics, and Cynics.

Plato: Famous Greek philosopher from fourth-century B.C.E. Athens, many of whose ideas—including the tension between the realms of matters and spirit—influenced Christian thinkers in the early centuries of the church.

Pliny the Younger: Roman aristocrat who ruled the province of Bithynia-Pontus in the early second century C.E., and whose correspondence with the emperor Trajan contains the earliest reference to Christ in a pagan source.

Plutarch: Famous philosopher, historian, and biographer of the second century (46–120 C.E.), known particularly for his essays on moral philosophy and the biographies he wrote of famous Greek and Roman men.

Polycarp: Bishop of Smyrna in the first half of the second century, and one of the best known of the early proto-orthodox leaders. In addition to a letter written to him by Ignatius, we have a letter written by him to
the church in Philippi, and an allegedly eyewitness account of his martyrdom in the arena at Smyrna around 155 C.E.

Polytheism: The belief that there are many gods, a belief that lies at the heart of all of the ancient pagan religions.

Pontius Pilate: Roman aristocrat who served as the governor of Judea from 26 to 36 C.E., and who was responsible for ordering Jesus’ crucifixion.

Presbyter: From a Greek word that literally means “elder.” The term came to apply not only to older men, but in particular to the leaders of the Christian churches who were principally in charge of spiritual (as opposed to material) affairs (contrast “deacon”); eventually the lead presbyter came to be known as the “overseer” (i.e., the bishop).

Prescript: The formal beginning of an epistle, normally including the names of the sender and addressees, a greeting, and often a prayer or wish for good health.

Prophet: In ancient Israelite religion, a prophet was a person who delivered God’s message to his people; eventually the term came to refer to writers who produced literary accounts of God’s word (prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah). In Christian circles prophets were those who spoke God’s message in the community’s services of worship, possibly, on occasion, in a state of ecstasy.

Proto-orthodox Christianity: A form of Christianity endorsed by some Christians of the second and third centuries (including the Apostolic Fathers), which promoted doctrines that were declared “orthodox” in the fourth and later centuries by the victorious Christian party, in opposition to such groups as the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the Gnostics.

Pseudepigrapha: From the Greek, literally meaning “false writings” and commonly referring to ancient non-canonical Jewish and Christian literary texts, many of which were written pseudonymously.

Pseudonymity: The practice of writing under a fictitious name, evident in a large number of pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings from antiquity.

Q: The source used by both Matthew and Luke for the stories they share, principally sayings, that are not found in Mark; from the German word Quelle, “source.” The document no longer exists, but can be reconstructed on the basis of Matthew and Luke.

Qumran: Place near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1946, evidently home to the group of Essenes who had used the Scrolls as part of their library.

Redaction criticism: The study of how authors modified or edited (i.e., redacted) their sources in view of their own vested interests and concerns.

Resident Aliens: In the Roman empire, persons who took up permanent residence in a place that was not their original home and in which they did not enjoy the benefits of citizenship.

Resurrection: The doctrine originally devised within circles of apocalyptic Judaism which maintained that at the end of the present age those who had died would be brought back to life in order to face judgment: either torment for those opposed to God or reward for those who sided with God. The earliest Christians believed that Jesus had been raised, and concluded therefore that the end of the age had already begun (see “First Fruits of the Resurrection”). In Christian apocalyptic thought it was believed that the rewards and punishments in the future resurrection would hinge on one’s relationship to Christ, as either a believer or nonbeliever.

Rhetoric: The art of persuasion; in the Greco-Roman world, this involved training in the construction and analysis of argumentation and was the principal subject of higher education.

Roman Empire: All of the lands conquered by Rome and ruled, ultimately, by the Roman emperor, starting with Caesar Augustus in 27 B.C.E.; prior to that, Rome was a republic ruled by the Senate (see also box 3.3).

Sadducees: A Jewish party associated with the Temple cult and the Jewish priests who ran it, comprising principally the Jewish aristocracy in Judea. The party leader, the High Priest, served as the highest ranking local official and chief liaison with the Roman governor.

Samaritans: Inhabitants of Samaria, located between Galilee and Judea, considered by some Jews to be apostates and half-breeds, since their lineage could be traced back to intermarriages between Jews and pagan peoples several centuries before the New Testament period.

Sanhedrin: A council of Jewish leaders headed by the High Priest, which played an advisory role in matters of religious and civil policy.

Scribes, Christian: Literate Christians responsible for copying sacred scripture.

Scribes, Jewish: Highly educated experts in Jewish Law (and possibly its copyists) during the Greco-Roman period.

Scripta Continuo: The ancient practice of writing without using spaces to separate words.
Secessionists: Members of the Johannine community who, according to the author of 1 John, had "seceded" (i.e., left) the community to form a community of their own. 1 John, which calls these people "antichrists," suggests that they had adopted a docetic Christology, not allowing that Christ was fully human.

Self-definition: Term used in the social sciences to indicate the ways a social group understands itself in terms of the beliefs, rituals, practices, worldviews, shared experiences, and so on that bind it together as a group and that differentiate it from those who are not in the group.

Senators: The highest-ranking members of the Roman aristocracy, comprising the wealthiest men of Rome, responsible for governing the vast Roman bureaucracy during the republic and still active and highly visible during the time of the empire.

Seneca: Probably the greatest Roman philosopher of the second half of the first century C.E. and tutor to the young Nero, later thought to have entered into a prolonged correspondence with the apostle Paul.

Sepphoris: One of the two major Greek cities in Galilee, just four miles from Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. Scholars debate whether Jesus was influenced by the culture of Sepphoris or if, indeed, he ever went there.

Septuagint: The translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, so named because of a tradition that seventy (Latin: septuaginta) Jewish scholars had produced it.

Sermon on the Mount: The sermon found only in Matthew 5–7, which preserves many of the best-known sayings of Jesus (including Matthew’s form of the Beatitudes, the antitheses, and the Lord’s Prayer).

Sicarii: A Latin term meaning, literally, “daggermen,” a designation for a group of first-century Jews responsible for the assassination of Jewish aristocrats thought to have collaborated with the Romans. See also Fourth Philosophy.

Signs Source: A document, which no longer survives, thought by many scholars to have been used as one of the sources of Jesus’ ministry in the Fourth Gospel; it reputedly narrated a number of the miraculous deeds of Jesus.

Simon Magus: Mysterious figure first named in Acts 8 (called there simply “Simon”) who was able to perform magical deeds (hence the sobriquet “Magus”) and who was thought to be in competition with the apostles for followers. Later Christians insisted that Simon Magus tried to wrest converts from the apostles by doing magical deeds to convince them of his own power. One later noncanonical text, the Acts of Peter, narrates a series of miracle-working contests between Peter and Simon Magus (Peter, of course, wins). Starting in the second century, Christian heresy-hunters claimed that Simon Magus was the first Gnostic.

Socio-Historical Method: A method used to study a literary text that seeks to reconstruct the social history of the community that lay behind it.

Songs of the Suffering Servant: A set of four poems or songs found in Isaiah 40–55, in which the prophet speaks of a “Servant of the Lord” who suffers for the sake of the people of God. Jewish interpreters typically understood this to refer to the Jews who were sent into exile to Babylon; later Christians claimed that the passages referred to a suffering messiah, Jesus. (The term “messiah” is not used in these passages.)

Son of God: In most Greco-Roman circles, the designation of a person born to a god, able to perform miraculous deeds and/or to convey superhuman teachings; in Jewish circles, the designation of persons chosen to stand in a special relationship with the God of Israel, including the ancient Jewish kings.

Son of Man: A term whose meaning is much disputed among modern scholars, used in some ancient apocalyptic texts to refer to a cosmic judge sent from heaven at the end of time.

Sophia: In Gnostic mythology, the final (female) aeon who fell from the divine realm, leading to the birth of the Demiurge (Ialdabaoth), who then created the material world as a place to imprison her.

Stoics: Greco-Roman philosophers who urged people to understand the way the world worked and to live in accordance with it, letting nothing outside of themselves affect their internal state of well-being.


Superapostles: In 2 Corinthians, a group of Paul’s opponents who were rhetorically proficient and able to do spectacular deeds, who claimed that their remarkable abilities demonstrated that they, rather than Paul, were the true representatives of Christ.

Superstition: In the ancient world, superstition was understood by the highly educated upper classes as an excessive fear of the gods that drove a person to be excessively scrupulous in trying to avoid their displeasure.

Synagogue: Jewish place of worship and prayer, from a Greek word that literally means “being brought together.”
Synoptic Gospels: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which narrate so many of the same stories that they can be placed side by side in parallel columns and so “be seen together” (the literal meaning of “synoptic”).

Synoptic Problem: The problem of explaining the similarities and differences between the three Synoptic Gospels. See also Markan Priority; Q.

Tacitus: Roman historian of the early second century C.E., whose multivolume work The Annals of Rome provides substantial information about Roman history from the beginning down to his own time.

Talmud: The great collection of ancient Jewish traditions that comprises the Mishnah and the later commentaries on the Mishnah, called the Gemarah. There are two collections of the Talmud, one made in Palestine during the early fifth century C.E. and the other in Babylon perhaps a century later. The Babylonian Talmud is generally considered the more authoritative.

Tarsus: City in southeast Asia Minor (modern Turkey) that, according to Acts, was home to the Apostle Paul. The city was known as one of the great philosophical centers in the Roman empire, leading some scholars to suspect that Luke located Paul there in order to further his credentials (Paul never mentions his hometown in his letters).

Temple: In pagan circles, a temple was any holy place devoted to one or more divine beings where sacrifices could be made in accordance with established religious principles. For Judaism there was only one legitimate Temple, the one in Jerusalem, an enormous complex that contained the holy sanctuary and, within it, the Holy of Holies, where God’s presence on earth was believed to dwell.

Tertullian: A brilliant and acerbic Christian author from the late second and early third century. Tertullian, who was from North Africa and wrote in Latin, is one of the best-known early Christian apologists.

Textual Criticism: An academic discipline that seeks to establish the original wording of a text based on the surviving manuscripts.

Thecla: A (legendary) female disciple of Paul whose adventures are narrated in the novel-like work of the second century, The Acts of Paul and Thecla.

Thematic Method: A method used to study a literary text by isolating its leading ideas, or themes, and exploring them, seeing how they are developed in the text, so as to understand the author’s overarching emphases.

Theophilus: The person to whom “Luke” addressed both of his volumes, the Gospel and the book of Acts. Scholars debate whether Theophilus was a real person—possibly a highly placed Roman administrator—or whether the name was instead symbolic. It literally means either “beloved of God” or “lover of God.” If symbolic, it would refer to the Christian individuals or communities who were the author’s intended audience.

Thyestes: (1) A first-century Jewish apocalyptic prophet (mentioned by Josephus) who predicted the parting of the Jordan River and, evidently, the re-conquest of the Promised Land by the chosen people. (2) An early Gnostic Christian, allegedly the disciple of Paul and the teacher of Valentinus.

Thucydides: Famous historian of Athens in the fifth century B.C.E., best known for his account of the twenty-seven-year Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. Thucydides’ account, like those of other Greek historians after him, contained a large number of speeches, which he frankly admitted to have composed himself as appropriate for the occasion (cf. the speeches in Acts in the New Testament).

Tiberius: The second Roman emperor, succeeding Caesar Augustus, and ruling 14–37 C.E. It was under his rule that Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate.

Torah: A Hebrew word that means “guidance” or “direction,” but that is usually translated “law.” As a technical term it designates either the Law of God given to Moses or the first five books of the Jewish Bible that Moses was traditionally thought to have written—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Tradition: Any doctrine, idea, practice, or custom that has been handed down from one person to another.

Trajan: Roman emperor from 98 to 117 C.E., known, in part, through his correspondence with Pliny the Younger.

Two Ways: The doctrine found in the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas that people must choose between two ways of living, the way of life (or light) and the way of death (or darkness).

Undisputed Pauline Epistles: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon—letters that scholars overwhelmingly judge to be have been written by Paul. See also Deutero-Pauline Epistles; Pastoral Epistles.

Valentinus: Second-century Gnostic Christian who traced his intellectual lineage through his teacher Theudas back to the apostle Paul.
Glossary of Terms

**Vicarious Suffering:** The notion that one person's suffering occurs in the place of or for the sake of another.

**“We” passages:** Term used to describe a set of four passages in the book of Acts in which the author stops speaking in the third person about what Paul and his companions (“they”) were doing, and speaks instead in the first person about what “we” were doing. Some scholars take these passages as evidence that the author of Luke-Acts was a companion of Paul; others believe that in these passages the author of Luke-Acts has utilized a travel narrative as a source (much as he utilized other sources, such as Mark and Q, for his Gospel).

**Zealots:** A group of Galilean Jews who fled to Jerusalem during the uprising against Rome in 66–70 C.E., who overthrew the reigning aristocracy in the city and urged violent resistance to the bitter end. See also Fourth Philosophy.