

merely an exhibition of the mental and verbal agility of the orator, as this client complains concerning his hired counsel:

I lost a little pig and a cow and a nanny-goat, and on account of them you received your little fee, Meneclēs [a lawyer]. But what have I to do with Othryades, or the three-hundred from Thermopylae? My suit is against Eutychedes, so how can the Xerxes and the Spartans help me? I beg of you, mention my name just for the sake of good form!<sup>40</sup>

These conditions created an optimal environment for the revival of an ancient and controversial form of oratory which, in its original manifestation, aroused the ire of Plato himself: sophistry.

## THE SECOND SOPHISTIC

PHILOSOPHY

Hubbard

The sophists of Plato's day (fifth-century B.C.E. Athens) were teachers of rhetoric and argumentation who trained young men for a career in politics. Many were itinerant, collecting fees for their services from the students they gathered around them. They were extremely popular and could attain great wealth. Plato's objections to the sophists, usually placed on the lips of his teacher, Socrates, were numerous.<sup>41</sup> He mocked their pretensions to wisdom (the Greek word for *sophist* is derived from Greek word meaning "wise"),<sup>42</sup> he ridiculed their choice of verbose speechifying over dialectical debate,<sup>43</sup> and he was appalled at their practice of charging fees for their "wisdom."<sup>44</sup> Yet Plato's most fundamental objection was their employment of oratory not in pursuit of justice and truth but in order to please the crowd, line their own pockets, and enhance their reputation.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, if Plato can be trusted, the sophistic orators of his day did not need to be convinced of the truth of the position they were advancing or even possess in-depth knowledge of their subject matter. Their sole concern was to persuade, and so their knowledge need not extend beyond discovering the necessary means of persuasion. Plato, however, believed that all speech should aim at "nurturing the soul"<sup>46</sup> and that the speaker should be motivated not by what is expedient but by what is "pleasing to the gods."<sup>47</sup> Anything short of this, reasoned the great philosopher, is the blind leading the blind.<sup>48</sup>

ALAS, WE LEARN OUR LESSONS, NOT FOR LIFE, BUT FOR THE LECTURE-ROOM.

SENECA

SOCRATES: IF A SPEECH IS TO BE GOOD, MUST NOT THE MIND OF THE SPEAKER KNOW THE TRUTH ABOUT THE MATTERS OF WHICH HE IS TO SPEAK? PHAEDRUS: ON THAT POINT, SOCRATES, I HAVE HEARD THAT ONE WHO IS TO BE AN ORATOR DOES NOT NEED TO KNOW WHAT IS REALLY JUST, BUT WHAT WOULD SEEM JUST TO THE CROWD.

PLATO

Although roughly five centuries had passed between the sophists of ancient Greece and the sophists of first-century Rome, little had changed in terms of their manners and methods, nor had they managed to gain the respect of the high-minded philosophers.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the opinion of establishment philosophy mattered little to the sophists when compared with the adoration of the masses who flocked to admire their florid oratorical arrangements. This sophistic renaissance has come to be known as "the second-sophistic," a designation originally given by Philostratus in his third-century biographical work, *Lives of the Sophists*.<sup>50</sup> The popularity of sophists and other virtuoso orators in the ancient world would be comparable to movie stars or pop-music icons in the modern world. Indeed, Dio Chrysostom lumps entertainers and sophists together when he speaks of the crowds that hang about "sophists, flute-players, and choir-masters."<sup>51</sup> Philo's contemptuous description of "the vast number of those called sophists" who were "winning the admiration of city after city . . . drawing nearly the whole world to honor them for their crafty argumentation"<sup>52</sup> betrays more than professional resentment; it reveals a society fixated on rhetorical prowess and beguiled by expert practitioners of the art.

It is difficult to fully appreciate the reputation, wealth, and power of those orators who were at the top of their profession. Marcus Aper, himself a highly sought-after courtroom pleader, speaks with authority when he says, "It is impossible to imagine [any career] richer in advantages, more splendid in its prospects, more attractive in fame at home, more illustrious in celebrity throughout our whole empire and all the world."<sup>53</sup> Lucian's tongue-in-cheek advice to the aspiring orator hardly overstates the matter: "Just see how many who were previously nobodies have come to be accounted men of standing, millionaires, even gentlemen, because of their eloquence."<sup>54</sup> Philostratus corroborates this appraisal as he recounts intercity rivalry over local sophists, statuary erected in honor of prominent orators, political appointments and embassies awarded to sophists,

REJOICE THAT A THOUSAND EYES SURVEY YOU AS YOU SPEAK.

HORACE

YOU HAVE SO MANY DELIGHTFUL SPECTACLES TO BEHOLD: ORATORS, WRITERS, POETS, AND, LIKE GORGEOUS PEACOCKS, SOPHISTS IN GREAT NUMBERS, MEN WHO ARE LIFTED ALOFT AS ON WINGS BY THEIR FAME AND THEIR DISCIPLES.

\*DIO CHRYSOSTOM

and especially the cozy relationships that often existed between sophists and emperors. In one story, the emperor Trajan turns to Dio Chrysostom and gushes, "I do not understand what you are saying, but I love you as myself!"<sup>55</sup> Even the sophist Favorinus's infamous quarrel with the emperor Hadrian only under-

scores the influence and impact of this man in the inner precincts of power in the Roman world.<sup>56</sup>

The crowds that would attend the declamations of notable orators and sophists, cooing their approval and shouting "How divine!" or "Spoken like a god!"<sup>57</sup> reinforced the speaker's high opinion of himself and provided vivid proof of the voracious appetite of the general public for the verbal delicacies these rhetoricians served up. Lucius Apuleius, scanning the eager faces of a packed theater in Carthage, begins his declamation by modestly observing, "You have come in such numbers to hear me that I feel I ought to congratulate Carthage for possessing so many friends of learning among her citizens!"<sup>58</sup>

As Lucius Apuleius too perfectly illustrates, the dotting throngs, the heady political connections, the celebrity status, and the red-carpet treatment so inflated the ego of the orator that conceit became an occupational hazard of sophistry. Such was Apuleius's confidence that he could assume that there must be many among his listeners who either envied him or hated him because "there are always those who prefer to abuse rather than imitate persons better than themselves."<sup>59</sup> Not that Lucius Apuleius was overly concerned about his detractors: "It is not that I lack praise," he informs his audience, "for my glory has long bloomed fresh and bright."<sup>60</sup> Lucius's boasting was hardly atypical, as Favorinus's speech to the Corinthians illustrates. After discovering that a statue the Corinthians had erected in honor of his eloquence had been removed, Favorinus reminds the Corinthians of his superior lineage, athletic prowess, wisdom, and eloquence, and concludes, "Ought [I] not have a bronze statue here in Corinth? Yes! And in every city!"<sup>61</sup> Aelius Aristides, in defending oratory against its most formidable ancient critic, Plato, compared orators to rulers and concludes, "All rulers are by nature superior to those beneath them."<sup>62</sup> No wonder that Philostratus, in a rare moment of unpartisan candor, labels the entire sophistic vocation "a profession prone to egotism and arrogance."<sup>63</sup> This was the verdict of many philosophers and social critics who were utterly baffled at the appeal of these pretentious showmen.

GIVEN BY GREAT  
HERODES ATTICUS,  
[AN ORATOR] PREEMI-  
NENT ABOVE OTHERS,  
WHO HAD ATTAINED  
THE PEAK OF EVERY  
KIND OF EXCELLENCE  
... FAMOUS AMONG  
THEHELLENES AND  
FURTHERMORE A SON  
[OF GREECE] GREATER  
THAN THEM ALL, THE  
FLOWER OF ACHAIA.

\*INSCRIPTION, CORINTH

THE SERIOUS STUDENT  
SHOULD REGARD FLOW-  
ERY, LAVISH LANGUAGE  
AND THEATRICAL AND  
SPECTACULAR SUBJECT  
MATTER AS THE DO-  
MAIN OF DILETTANTES  
AND SOPHISTS, AND  
STEER CLEAR OF IT.

PLUTARCH

## THE PHILOSOPHIC CRITIQUE OF SOPHISTRY

As noted earlier, the feud between philosophy and rhetoric was at least as old as Plato, yet the main lines of the battle had changed remarkably little in the

BY JUPITER! ONE MAN  
ACTUALLY ASKS TO READ  
PLATO, NOT IN ORDER  
TO BETTER HIS LIFE, BUT  
TO DECK OUT HIS DIC-  
TION AND STYLE—NOT  
TO GAIN IN DISCRETION  
BUT IN PRETTINESS!

AULUS GELLIUS

intervening centuries. The essential philosophic criticism of sophistry and sophistic-styled oratory as practiced in the first and second century was its orientation toward the superficial and the ephemeral. Its practitioners were more concerned with hearing the applause of the audience than improving the character of the audience; their declamations had become the ultimate example of form dominating over content. In the words of Persius, so much oratory was simply "frothy inflated stuff, like an old bough smothered under the weight of its bloated bark!"<sup>64</sup>

### *Impression versus Impact*

Epictetus, a stoic philosopher and younger contemporary of Paul, was one voice among many conscientious objectors to sophistic oratory as merely a public display of the orator's vanity. In a discourse entitled "For Those Who Read and Discuss for Display," Epictetus decries those who have perfected "the art of selecting trivial phrases . . . who recite them gracefully, and then in the midst of the delivery shout out, 'There are not many people who can follow this, by your lives, I swear it!'"<sup>65</sup> Knowing full well, however, that verbal communication was the stock in trade of both the sophist and the philosopher, Epictetus enjoined his students to continually inquire of themselves whenever they addressed a crowd, "Do I wish to do good, or to be praised?"<sup>66</sup>

JUST LOOK AT OUR  
BUDDING ORATORS . . .  
BRAIDING THE HAIR, RE-  
FINING THE VOICE TILL  
IT IS AS CARESSING AS  
A WOMAN'S, COMPET-  
ING IN BODILY SOFTNESS  
WITH WOMEN, BEAU-  
TIFYING THEMSELVES  
WITH FILTHY FINERIES.

SENECA THE ELDER

The philosopher, Epictetus argues, is like a physician, and his lecture room is a hospital: "You should not walk out of it in pleasure, but in pain."<sup>67</sup> Far from marveling over the cleverness of the speaker, the listener should leave examining his own soul, convinced of his "evil plight" and "self-conceit,"<sup>68</sup> saying to himself, "I must not act like this any longer!"<sup>69</sup> With delicious mockery Epictetus lampoons these cheap peddlers of eloquence who compete with each other for the attention of the crowds and with every rehearsed intonation and contrived emotion implore their listeners, "Just praise me . . . cry out to me 'Bravo!'"

or 'Marvelous!'"<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Aelius Aristides is remembered as one "who could not control his anger against those who did not applaud his lectures."<sup>71</sup> Epictetus urges his students to soberly weigh their motives: "When you are in such a state as this, gaping for men to praise you and counting the number of your audience, is it your wish to do good to others?"<sup>72</sup>

This shameless craving for admiration led to the practice of hiring, as Pliny calls them, "bravo-callers," who, for a fee, would attend their patron's lecture and applaud on cue.<sup>73</sup> The philosopher, however, cares nothing for the approval of the masses, insists Epictetus; on the contrary, he scorns their applause.<sup>74</sup> His sole aim is "to show to the individual, as well as to the crowd, the warring inconsistency in which they are floundering. . . . For they want what leads to happiness, but they are looking in the wrong place."<sup>75</sup>

Equally disturbing to Epictetus and many others was the flamboyant manner of dress and meticulous personal grooming that was so in vogue among the sophists. Epictetus addresses the issue in a lecture entitled "On Personal Adornment."<sup>76</sup> Here he describes a young orator from Corinth who was "elaborately dressed . . . and whose attire in general was highly embellished."<sup>77</sup> Flashy jewelry and a perfect coif completed his ensemble, that was draped over skin plucked of any bodily hair.<sup>78</sup> Obsessive attention to appearances was not confined to the ranks of the sophists but was prevalent among orators generally, who daily faced the scrutiny of the watching public. In Tacitus's *Dialogue on Oratory*, a work discussing the declining standards of first-century oratory, Vipstanus Messala advises, "It is better for an orator to wear drab clothing than to glitter in multi-colored and gaudy attire . . . which is adopted by many of the speakers of our age."<sup>79</sup> Lucian's tongue-in-cheek checklist of what one needed to become a truly successful orator is summarized in the exhortation, "First of all, you must pay especial attention to outward appearance."<sup>80</sup> As for the particulars of Lucian's guide to fashion chic:

Let your clothing be gaily-colored, or else white, a fabric of Tarentine manufacture, so that your body will show through; and wear either high Attic sandals of the kind that women wear, with many slits, or else Sicyonian boots, trimmed with strips of white felt.<sup>81</sup>

Lucius Apuleius's portrayal of Apollo as the ideal orator is the look to which many aspired: "a fair and smooth body . . . his hair smoothed and plastered into tufts and curls that fall about his brow . . . eloquent in prose or verse."<sup>82</sup> No wonder that Dio Chrysostom could caricature the lot as "gorgeous peacocks,"<sup>83</sup>

"YOU ARE A THIEF!" SAYS  
THE ACCUSED TO [THE  
ORATOR] PEDIUS. HOW  
DOES PEDIUS REPLY? HE  
BALANCES THE CHARGES  
AGAINST EACH OTHER  
IN SMOOTH ANTITHE-  
SES, AND IS PRAISED FOR  
HIS ARTISTIC TROPES . . .

PERSIUS

and Juvenal could ask without fear of being gainsaid, "When is eloquence ever found under a shabby coat?"<sup>84</sup> Indeed, it was the plain garb of the philosopher that distinguished him from the sophist, which is why the prosecutor in Apuleius's trial for sorcery disputed his claim to be a philosopher—he looked too good!<sup>85</sup>

### *Form versus Content*

THOSE WHO DO COME  
BEFORE YOU CLAIMING  
TO BE MEN OF CULTURE  
DECLAIM SPEECHES  
INTENDED MERELY FOR  
DISPLAY—AND STU-  
PID ONES TO BOOT.

\*DIO CHRYSOSTOM

orations might be construed as socially or morally beneficial,<sup>87</sup> and at least four of them could be accurately entitled "In Praise of Me."<sup>88</sup>

The sophist's addiction to the approval of the crowds resulted in syrupy orations confectioned to please the adolescent tastes of the crowds, with more attention given to style than to substance. Philostratus's candid assessment of the sophist Antipater as one who "let the rhythmic effects of his style dissipate the vigor of his ideas"<sup>89</sup> identifies a problem endemic to the profession.

SO THERE FLARED UP  
AMONG THE SOPH-  
ISTS THAT USELESS AND  
SUPERFLUOUS "WISDOM"  
OF THEIRS—IN THEIR  
OWN OPINION INVIN-  
CIBLE—THOSE CLEVER  
BAFFLING ABSURD  
REPLIES AND PERPLEX-  
ING MAZY QUERIES.

LUCIAN

of the delivery and abandon their critical faculties.<sup>92</sup> In lamenting the popularity of sophistry over philosophy, Plutarch complains that the naïve and undis-

to hear them. More often than not, however, their orations were merely "the jingle of empty words,"<sup>86</sup> pleasing to the ear but of little ultimate consequence. Consider, for example, the twenty-six partial orations of Lucius Apuleius that have survived in his *Florida* (Latin for "flowery"). This corpus includes such meaningful themes as "Ode to a Wayside Shrine," "In Praise of a Theatet," "The Beauty of the Parrot," and "A Eulogy for the Proconsul." Only two of these twenty-six

Tacitus, recording the criticism of Messala, warns against "the style which is being adopted by many speakers . . . with its idle redundancy of words, its meaningless phrases and license of expression, imitates the art of the actor."<sup>90</sup> This is certainly what Pseudo-Plutarch had in mind in advising, "One should always be careful to avoid the theatrical and melodramatic style . . . and avoid triviality and vulgarity in style."<sup>91</sup>

The concern underlying much of this criticism is well articulated by Pliny, who recognized that even intelligent listeners can be "seduced by the pleasures of the ear" and the "charm and skill"

cerning "do not keep in view the life, the actions, and the conduct of a man who follows philosophy, but rate as matters for commendation points of style, phrasing, and a fine delivery—whether it be useful or useless."<sup>93</sup> The potential for self-serving manipulation was a real danger in Plutarch's view, especially as "most sophists not only use words to conceal their thoughts, but they so sweeten their voice by certain harmonious modulations and softenings and rhythmic cadences to ravish away and transport their hearers."<sup>94</sup> The sophists' use of "words to conceal their thoughts" highlights another common objection to sophistry, and one which constitutes the chief legacy of its ancient practitioners: trickery and deceit.

### *Duplicity versus Sincerity*

One contemporary dictionary defines sophistry as "plausible but fallacious argumentation" and a sophist as "one skilled in elaborate and devious argumentation."<sup>95</sup> The harshly negative overtones of contemporary usage are rooted in the historical reality of sophists as those who delighted in convoluted and crafty reasoning. In fact, trickery and guile could, arguably, be considered the defining characteristics of first-century sophistry, so much so that by the second century the orator Titus Castricius considered deception a professional prerogative:

It is the orator's privilege to make statements that are untrue, daring, crafty, deceptive and sophistical, provided they have some semblance of truth and can by any artifice be made to insinuate themselves into the minds of the persons who are to be influenced.<sup>96</sup>

The criticism of sophists as intellectual charlatans who relied more on williness than wisdom is so widespread in the ancient sources it hardly needs to be established.<sup>97</sup> No one, however, was more vociferous in voicing this complaint than Philo, Paul's contemporary in Alexandria. Not unlike the dictionary entry above, Philo defines a sophist as "one who labors to devise what is persuasive for establishing a false opinion"<sup>98</sup> and sophistry as "studying the art of words in opposition to truth."<sup>99</sup>

### *Philo and the Sophists*

The sophists in Philo's writings are emblematic of everything amiss in the world. They are hypocrites who preach virtue while practicing vice,<sup>100</sup> they are quarrelsome and contradict one another,<sup>101</sup> they are verbal exhibitionists who

FOR THE NAME "AMORIT-  
TES" MEANS "TALKERS,"  
BEING A SYMBOL OF  
THOSE WHO TALK TOO  
MUCH. THEIR LEADER  
IS THE LECTURER OR  
SOPHIST, SKILLED AT  
SEARCHING AFTER  
VERBAL ARTIFICES,  
BY WHICH THOSE  
WHO TRANSGRESS  
THE BOUNDARIES OF  
TRUTH ARE DECEIVED.

PHILO

HE NEVER WENT TO  
SCHOOL, BUT I EDU-  
CATED HIM BY SENDING  
HIM AROUND TO  
THE PHILOSOPHERS  
HANGING ABOUT  
IN THE MARKET.

PETRONIUS

parade their knowledge when, in fact, they know little.<sup>102</sup> The irony of the sophists for Philo is that, although their name means "wisdom," they embody its opposite.<sup>103</sup> The sophists provide for Philo a convenient cipher representing all the antagonists of the Jewish Scriptures: Ishmael, Baalam, the Amorites, the Egyptian sorcerers, and even the serpent in the garden.<sup>104</sup>

Yet for all this, Philo's most consistent criticism of the Alexandrian sophists is deceit and trickery, especially evidenced by their crafty argumentation. The "sophistries of deceitful speech"<sup>105</sup> is a Philonic refrain that quickly begins to grate. The sophist is a "lover of disputations" whose arguments are designed only "to deceive and perplex people."<sup>106</sup> Not only in Alexandria, but "everywhere," sophists "annoy the ears of those whom they meet by discussing with minute accuracy, and expounding precisely all expressions of a double and ambiguous character."<sup>107</sup> As one who "rejoices in disputatious arguments", the reasoning of the sophist is characterized by the "adulteration of the truth."<sup>108</sup> So vile were the sophists to Philo that he could include sophistry without comment in his catalog of vices relating to dishonesty: "deceit, cajolery, trickery, *sophistry*, pretence, and hypocrisy."<sup>109</sup>

While many more texts could be adduced to illustrate Philo's disdain for all things sophistic, we needn't belabor the point. One might argue that Philo's histrionics represent an idiosyncratic obsession that borders on sensationalism. Perhaps. It remains true, however, that the portrayal of the sophists in the surviving literature is overwhelmingly negative, and Philo's somewhat cartoonish caricature finds numerous echoes in other first- and second-century writers.

## PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS

Philosophy was born in Greece, and the cities in which Paul lived, worked, and traveled to and from had rich philosophic traditions and significant opportunities for advanced study in all the major schools of philosophy. The picture painted by the writers of the period is that of the philosopher as a familiar figure in the markets, squares, and public life of town and city. The crowded lecture halls, the streetcorner cynics, together with the abundance of philosophic pretenders, provided ample fodder for the satirists and gave rise to such proverbial sarcasm as recorded by Lucian: "It would be easier for a man to fall into a boat without hitting a plank than for his eye to miss a philosopher wherever he looks."<sup>110</sup> Luke's portrayal of Paul debating with Stoics and Epicureans in Athens (Acts 17:18) allows us a glimpse at what was probably a routine feature of Paul's public ministry.

The philosophical schools prominent in the first century represented complex systems of cosmology, religion, logic, and ethics, and each had a long and venerable history, beginning in the classical age, developing through the Hellenistic period, and continuing into the Roman era.<sup>111</sup> Two important developments, however, should be noted with respect to philosophy in the first century. First, the rise of peripatetic Cynic and Stoic philosophers, along with the popularity of sophists, led to the diffusion and democratization of philosophical concepts, themes, and terminology vis-à-vis the masses. Philosophical discourse was no longer confined to the aristocratic academies of Athens but could be heard in the porticoes of local temples. Second, while the accessibility of philosophy broadened, the focus of philosophy narrowed. The speculative cosmological theories of the various schools remained as dogmatic tenets, but ethics—the attainment of virtue and the avoidance of vice—became the dominant concern of Roman-era philosophers. As it trickled down to the common folk, philosophy grew more practical and utilitarian, becoming virtually absorbed with “how to live rightly.”<sup>112</sup> It is crucial to remember that in the first century questions concerning how one ought to live were not the domain of organized religion and its priestly caste but of philosophers:

For only through philosophy and in company with philosophy it is possible to attain knowledge of what is honorable and what is shameful, what is just and what is unjust, what, in brief, is to be chosen and what is to be avoided, how a man must bear himself in his relations with the gods, with his parents, with his elders, with the laws, with strangers, with those in authority, with friends, with women, with children, with servants.<sup>113</sup>

The religions of the Greco-Roman world offered instruction on how to avoid and appease the wrath of the gods and how to win their favor, but it was philosophy that determined “the boundaries of good and evil.”<sup>114</sup> Philosophers became spiritual directors who guided the neophyte in moral progress.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, philosophy could be defined by no less a luminary than Musonius Rufus as “training in nobility of character, and nothing else.”<sup>116</sup> One contemporary scholar uses the word “therapeutic” to summarize the goals of philosophy in the Roman era,<sup>117</sup> and this is a fair description of so much of what first-century

JULIUS EUTECNIUS, NATIVE OF LAODICIA . . . WHEN HE ADDRESSED THE GAULS PERSUASION FLOWED FROM HIS TONGUE. HE CIRCULATED AMONG VARIOUS RACES, HE KNEW MANY PEOPLE AND AFFORDED TRAINING TO THE SOUL AMONG THEM.  
INSCRIPTION, GAUL

AND THOSE FOLLOWING ME OFTEN LISTENED TO ME DISCUSSING PATIENT ENDURANCE . . . AND MANY INVITED ME TO DINNER . . . BUT I ONLY DINED WITH THOSE IN NEED OF THERAPY.  
CYNIC EPISTLES

philosophers were doing. In many respects, they were the ancient equivalent of our self-help gurus—physicians of the soul promising happiness to all who enrolled in their program. Seneca's words to Lucilius, his friend, disciple, and pupil, illustrate well the all too familiar message of these spiritual guides:

The path to which I am leading you is not different from that on which your nature leads you; you were born to such conduct as I describe. Hence there is all the more reason why you should increase and beautify the good that is in you.<sup>118</sup>

IT LOOKS AS IF THE  
NOTABLE MEN OF THE  
FORUM ARE LINING UP  
IN GREAT NUMBERS  
TO SEE THIS STOIC.

\*LUCIAN

What follows is a brief outline of the major schools of philosophy prominent in the first century, focusing only on issues important for understanding the intellectual milieu of the first century and particular NT contexts. Subsequent chapters will explore the social setting of philosophers and the influence of the philosophical schools on a variety of issues—marriage, slavery, ethics.

### *Stoicism*

Stoicism was probably the most influential philosophical school of the first and second centuries. It derived its name from the painted porch (*stoa poikile*) in Athens where its founder, Zeno, began lecturing at around 300 B.C.E. Among the philosophical schools prominent in the first century, Stoicism is notable for its remarkable ethical affinities to Christian teaching. As early as Tertullian (ca. 160–225) we see the Stoic Seneca positively noted,<sup>119</sup> and by the time of

IF, HOWEVER, YOU  
DESIRE A PATTERN,  
TAKE SOCRATES.

SENECA

Jerome (ca. 345–419), who refers to Seneca as “our Seneca,”<sup>120</sup> many believed that the similarities between Paul and this Stoic philosopher constituted decisive evidence that Seneca had been converted by the apostle.<sup>121</sup> Stoicism illustrates well the democratization of philosophy in that its

leading figures spanned the social spectrum—from the former slave Epictetus (late first century) to the emperor Marcus Aurelius (late second century). Seneca makes this point particularly well:

But a noble mind is free to all men; according to this test, we may all gain distinction. Philosophy neither rejects nor selects anyone; its light shines for all. Socrates was no aristocrat. Cleanthes worked at a well and served as a hired man watering a garden. Philosophy did not find Plato already a nobleman; it made him one.<sup>122</sup>

Stoics, like most of the philosophical schools we will survey, had a deep admiration for Socrates.<sup>123</sup> For the Stoics, however, this admiration could almost

be described as veneration. Dio Chrysostom refers to Socrates as "the wisest of all" and does not blush in calling himself "an admirer of Socrates . . . filled with wonder at the man."<sup>124</sup> Although Socrates founded no school of philosophy, the Stoics saw themselves as Socrates' true heirs and looked to him as their guide and paradigm:

The good and excellent man neither contends with anyone, nor as far as he has the power, does he allow others to contend. We have a paradigm before us of this also, as in everything else, in the life of Socrates.<sup>125</sup>

The imitation of Socrates is a common theme among Stoics, so much so that Epictetus could define Stoics as "followers of Socrates."<sup>126</sup>

While Stoic ethics were similar in many respects to those of Christians, its theology and ontology could not have been more different. Stoicism was essentially pantheistic, believing God and the cosmos to be coterminous: "the world is god."<sup>127</sup> Yet Stoic pantheism did not result in an impersonal deity. Rather, they conceived of universe as a vast rational being with intelligence and volition. This ultimate reality could be designated God, Zeus, Reason, Logos, Spirit, Fire, and so on, and they also accepted other divinities as part of this great cosmic deity—stars, planets, and the traditional Olympian gods. Moreover, first-century stoics like Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Dio Chrysostom could refer to God as "father" and humanity and lesser gods as his "children." Their language at times was so affectionate and personal that one could be forgiven for suspecting them of being monotheists.<sup>128</sup> That Paul could cite the Stoic Aratus in Acts 17:28 is a perfect illustration of this ambiguity: "For we are indeed his offspring."

Stoics held to a cyclical view of history in which the world moved ineluctably toward a cosmic conflagration, from which a new world emerged. This cycle was infinitely repeated, and each subsequent world was identical to the previous, hence the fatalism of Epictetus: "Lead me on, Zeus and Destiny, to wherever I have been allotted by you; I will go without faltering. And if I become evil and unwilling, nevertheless, I will follow."<sup>129</sup> At death the constituents of the individual were "restored to those elements from which it came"<sup>130</sup> and would reappear in the next

GOD IS ONE AND THE  
SAME WITH REASON,  
FATE, AND ZEUS; HE  
IS ALSO CALLED BY  
MANY OTHER NAMES.  
DIOGENES LAERTIUS

THE PALTRY BODY MUST  
BE SEPARATED FROM THE  
BIT OF SPIRIT, EITHER  
NOW OR LATER, JUST AS  
IT EXISTED APART FROM  
IT BEFORE . . . WHY? SO  
THAT THE CYCLE OF THE  
UNIVERSE MAY NOW  
BE ACCOMPLISHED.  
EPICTETUS

ALL THE VIRTUES MAKE  
IT THEIR GOAL TO BE  
HAPPY, WHICH DEPENDS  
ON LIVING IN AGREE-  
MENT WITH NATURE.  
ARIUS DIDYMUS

cosmic cycle. Although some Stoics entertained the possibility that the soul of the deceased would survive until the next cosmic conflagration, the afterlife

FURTHER, THIS YOUNG  
STOIC BELIEVED THAT  
TORTURE, BODILY PAIN  
AND DEADLY PERIL  
COULD NEITHER INJURE  
NOR DETRACT FROM  
THE HAPPY STATE AND  
CONDITION OF LIFE  
WHICH, IN HIS OPIN-  
ION, HE HAD ATTAINED.

AULUS GELLIUS

and personal immortality were little discussed by the Stoics.

The primary relevance of Stoicism to the nascent Christian movement is the Stoic image of the virtuous person and the means by which virtue is attained. The ideal sage is someone who could face hardship, calamity, fame and fortune with casual indifference: "Hunger, exile, loss of reputation and the like have no terrors for him; nay he holds them as mere trifles."<sup>131</sup> The Stoic arrived at this state of sublime transcendence by learning to distinguish what is necessary for true happiness from what is unnecessary:

Of the things which exist, some are good, some are bad, and some are indifferent. These are examples of good things: intelligence, self-restraint, justice, bravery. . . . These are examples of bad things: stupidity, lack of self-restraint, injustice, cowardice. . . . These are examples of indifferent things: life, death, reputation, lack of reputation, toil, pleasure, riches, poverty, sickness, health, and things of this sort.<sup>132</sup>

Moral progress was made by consistently choosing the good, rejecting the bad, and wisely using the indifferent things to advance in virtue: "If good

JUST AS THE LOSS OF  
LEAVES IS A LIGHT  
THING, BECAUSE THEY  
ARE BORN AFRESH, SO  
IT IS WITH THE LOSS OF  
THOSE WHOM YOU LOVE  
AND REGARD AS THE DE-  
LIGHT OF YOUR LIFE; FOR  
THEY CAN BE REPLACED.

SENECA

health, rest, and freedom from pain are not likely to hinder virtue, shall you not seek these things? Of course I shall seek them, but not because they are goods,—I seek them because they are according to nature."<sup>133</sup> Living according to nature, an idea ubiquitous in Stoic writings,<sup>134</sup> would lead to *eudaimonia*, "happiness," and would render the valiant Stoic completely self-sufficient, impervious to the vicissitudes of fortune and the cussedness of life: "Who then is a Stoic? . . . Show me a man who though sick is happy, though in danger is happy, though dying is happy, though

condemned to exile is happy, though in disrepute is happy. Show him! By the gods, I would fain see a Stoic!"<sup>135</sup>

The Stoics were also notorious for their disdain of emotion, which is chiefly how they are remembered today: in contemporary usage *stoic* refers to someone "not affected by or showing passion or feeling."<sup>136</sup> Technically, this is not an accurate representation of ancient Stoicism. In principle Stoicism distinguished between good, healthy emotions, and inappropriate, unhealthy emotions:

[The Stoics] also say that there are three emotional states which are good, namely, joy, caution, and wishing. Joy, the opposite of pleasure, is rational elation. Caution, the opposite of fear, is rational avoidance. For while the wise man will never feel fear, he will use caution. And they say that wishing is the opposite of desire, or craving.<sup>137</sup>

Yet because the Stoics so severely restricted the range of appropriate emotion, the modern caricature of Stoicism as cold and impassive is probably not wildly inaccurate. In fact, it was a stereotype that first-century Stoics battled as well.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, it is not difficult to find passages in which Stoics do sound as if they are rejecting emotions entirely, as in Seneca's advice in *Epistle 116*:

The question has often been raised whether it is better to have moderate emotions, or none at all. Philosophers of our school reject the emotions; the Peripatetics keep them in check. I however, do not understand how any half-way disease can either be wholesome or helpful. . . . Let us therefore resist these faults when they are demanding entrance, because, as I have said, it is easier to deny them entrance than to make them depart.<sup>139</sup>

Stoics were particularly scornful toward grief and romantic love. Epictetus, for example, agrees that familial affection is proper and in accord with nature<sup>140</sup> but argues that the wise man should be able to abandon home, family, wife, and children "without groaning or yearning."<sup>141</sup> To the one who countered that, according to Homer, Odysseus wept over his wife, Epictetus retorted, "Do you believe everything you read in Homer? Odysseus was an excellent man, and it is impossible for an excellent man to weep."<sup>142</sup> Seneca counsels that one's affection for a friend should be like one's affection for a flower; when it dies, find a new one.<sup>143</sup> As for romantic love, it was regarded as a distraction that ultimately led to the lover being enslaved to his or her beloved.<sup>144</sup>

DO NOT BE UPSET,  
FATHER, THAT I AM  
CALLED A DOG. . . . FOR  
I AM HEAVEN'S DOG,  
NOT EARTH'S, SINCE I  
LIKEN MYSELF TO IT,  
LIVING AS I DO, NOT  
IN CONFORMITY WITH  
POPULAR OPINION, BUT  
ACCORDING TO NATURE.

CYNIC EPISTLES

### *Cynicism*

Cynics shared many of the concerns of Stoics, and their preaching reflected similar themes: moral advance through living in accordance with nature and enduring hardship. This would lead to detachment from material things and complete self-sufficiency.<sup>145</sup> The Cynics, however, radicalized these values into a way of life that was intended as a visible affront to the status quo, especially those at the top of the social pyramid. In the words of the Cynic Demonax:  
"What men ought to do, then, is to reduce and cheapen the ranks of the rich by erecting in the face of their wealth a breastwork of contempt."<sup>146</sup>

Many Cynics advocated a lifestyle of extreme asceticism as a way of confronting and condemning the luxury and vice of society. Their model was their founder, Diogenes, who, legend has it, lived in a barrel in the outskirts of Corinth. His rough living and snarling rebukes led to his nickname, "the Dog," *kyōn*, from which we derive our word "cynic." The oft-told but fictitious tale of his meeting with Alexander the Great illustrates the contempt for status and material goods that came to characterize the movement. The powerful king visits Diogenes in his barrel and bids him, "Ask whatever you want, and it will be granted." Diogenes replies coolly, "Move out of the way; you are blocking my sun."<sup>147</sup>

YOU OFTEN SEE HIM BY  
THE THRESHOLD OF THE  
NEW TEMPLE, HIS UN-  
KEMPT BEARD FALLS ON  
HIS CHEST, A THREAD-  
BARE CLOAK COVERS  
HIM, AND THE CROWD  
THAT COMES HIS WAY  
GIVES HIM THE FOOD  
HE BARKS FOR. HE IS NO  
CYNIC, HE IS A DOG!

\*MARTIAL

More than what was absolutely essential for survival. They rejected the Stoic idea that wealth and property could be neutral "indifferents," believing that anything beyond "bread, water, a bed of straw and a coarse cloak"<sup>148</sup> was a sign of weakness and enslavement to pleasure. Herakles, who spent his life overcoming hardship by his own brute strength and ingenuity, was held up as the ideal Cynic: "Consider your ragged cloak to be Herakles' lion's skin, your staff his club, and your wallet the land and sea from which you are fed. For thus would the spirit of Herakles, mightier than every turn of fortune, stir in you."<sup>149</sup> The more extreme Cynic was perfectly happy to perform any act in public that he regarded as "natural," for example, intercourse or defecation: "This solid adamant

I AM SATISFIED TO HAVE  
THE PLAINEST FOOD  
AND THE SAME GAR-  
MENT SUMMER AND  
WINTER, AND I DO NOT  
WEAR SHOES AT ALL.

CYNIC EPISTLES

of virtue, this rebuker of everyone, this cynic who battles the elements has been caught! 'At what?' 'It is not proper to say.'<sup>150</sup>

It was not only this radical lifestyle that separated the Cynics from most Stoics. Cynics were doctrinally more eclectic. Diogenes passed on to his followers not primarily a dogma but a lifestyle. The Cynics entertained a variety of conceptions of the afterlife, and they were more

critical of traditional religion. Their harsh confrontational style was more severe than that of the Stoics, and they supported themselves through begging and handouts:

Be bold, not only in your dress, name, and way of life, but also in begging people for sustenance, for it is not at all disgraceful. . . . It is all right to beg, if it not for a free gift or for something worse in exchange, but for the salvation of everyone. . . .

Socrates used to say that sages do not beg, but demand back, for everything belongs to them, just as it does to the gods.<sup>151</sup>

Although Diogenes was admired by later generations, his first-century disciples were more often regarded as charlatans, or at least infiltrated by pretenders: "No one denies, Menestratus, that you are a cynic, and bare-footed and that you are shivering. But if you shamelessly steal loaves and broken pieces on the sly, I have a stick, and they will call you a dog."<sup>152</sup>

*Epicureanism*

In contemporary usage "epicurean" denotes the pursuit of sensual pleasure, a connotation already associated with Epicureans in the first century. Epicurus (341-270 B.C.E.), the founder of Epicureanism, did advocate a life devoted to pleasure but not one of unbridled self-indulgence and carnal excess. Rather, Epicurus sought to attain a state of tranquility, free from pain and anxiety: "For the goal of all our actions is that we have no pain and trouble."<sup>153</sup> Seeking pleasure was intuitive, in his view, the most basic instinctual drive: "All animals from the moment of their birth are delighted with pleasure, and are offended with pain by their natural instinct, and without the employment of reason."<sup>154</sup> Epicurus's brand of hedonism maintained that "the pleasures of the soul are greater than those of the body,"<sup>155</sup> and so he argued that not all pleasures should be embraced and not all pains should be avoided:

And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but sometimes pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance results from them. And sometimes we consider pains superior to pleasure, when submission to the pain . . . brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure.<sup>156</sup>

In fact, Epicurus advocated a life of moderation, simplicity, and virtue, as this was most likely to result in true tranquility: "Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a costly diet. . . . It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of fish

WHEN WE SAY THAT PLEASURE IS A CHIEF GOOD, WE ARE NOT SPEAKING OF THE PLEASURES OF THE DEBAUCHED MAN, OR THOSE WHICH LIE IN SENSUAL ENJOYMENT, AS SOME THINK . . . BUT WE MEAN THE FREEDOM OF THE BODY FROM PAIN, AND THE SOUL FROM CONFUSION.

EPICURUS

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO LIVE A LIFE OF PLEASURE WHICH IS NOT A LIFE OF PRUDENCE, HONOR, AND JUSTICE.

EPICURUS

EPICURUS HIMSELF, THE FATHER OF TRUTH, COMMANDED WISE MEN TO BE LOVERS, AND SAID THAT THIS IS THE GOAL OF LIFE.

PETRONIUS

and other delicacies of a luxurious table which produce a pleasant life; it is sober contemplation."<sup>157</sup> It is no small irony then, that Epicurus was not, in the modern sense of the word at least, an Epicurean.

Epicurus's later followers, however, were commonly accused of carousing and licentiousness: "These men despise all things divine and have set up the image of one single female divinity . . . representing a kind of wantonness or self-indulgent ease and unrestrained lewdness, to which they gave the name

FIRST, BELIEVE THAT  
GOD IS A LIVING BEING,  
IMMORTAL AND BLESSED  
. . . FOR THERE ARE  
INDEED GODS, AND  
KNOWLEDGE OF THEM  
IS SELF-EVIDENT, BUT  
THEY ARE NOT LIKE THE  
MASSES SUPPOSE THEM.

EPICURUS

'Pleasure.'<sup>158</sup> The frequency of these kinds of accusations leads one to suspect that where there's smoke there's fire and that the ideals of the founder dissipated as they were applied by men of weaker moral fiber. Philodemus (ca. 110 B.C.E.—ca. 35 B.C.E.) is a perfect example of this dissipation. As a leader of the Epicurean school he wrote a ponderous assortment of books on theology, ethics, rhetoric, and so on, but his amatory epigrams betray the firsthand experience of a soul clenched in the vise of sexual desire: "My soul, knowing my earlier tears and desires, tells me in

advance to flee passion for Heliadora. It speaks, but I have not the strength to flee; for shamefully indeed the same (soul) both foretells and, while foretelling, desires."<sup>159</sup> Feasting and carousing seem to have been somewhat routine as well:

To have white-violet wreaths yet again, harp songs and Chian wine again, and Syrian myrrh yet again; to revel again and to enjoy a drunken whore—this is what I do not want. I hate these things that lead to madness. But bind my brow with narcissus and give me a taste of cross-flutes and anoint my limbs with saffron, myrrh and wet my lungs with wine of Mytilene and wed me to a stay-at-home girl.<sup>160</sup>

Epicureans faced opposition on other fronts too. Epicurus was particularly concerned with the negative affects of popular superstition (the fear of the gods' wrath, punishment in the afterlife, etc.) and so developed a theology that maintained that the gods have no involvement in human affairs and are unconcerned with happenings on earth.<sup>161</sup> Although Epicurus believed in the gods, his denial of divination, providence, and the intervention of the gods led to the widespread belief that Epicureans were atheists—a serious allegation in antiquity: "It is doubtless therefore truer to say . . . that Epicurus does not really believe in the gods at all, and that he said what he did about the immortal gods only for the sake of deprecating popular odium."<sup>162</sup>

One further Epicurean doctrine worth noting is its complete materialism. Epicurus taught that body and soul are composed of atoms that, upon death, are reunited to the material cosmos from which they came. There is no afterlife, no punishment or rewards, no sensation: "Death is nothing to us; for the

body, when it has been resolved into its elements has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing for us."<sup>163</sup> Epicureanism, then, was very much a this-worldly philosophy. With nothing at stake in terms of future bliss or pain, it is little wonder that Epicurus's followers had difficulty implementing the ethical standards of their master.

### *Skeptics, Eclectics, and Others*

An exhaustive (and exhausting!) account of first-century philosophical currents would include entries on Neo-Platonism, Peripatetics, Pyrrhonism, Neo-Pythagoreanism, and others.<sup>164</sup> Perhaps the most relevant finding of a complete survey would be to underscore how varied Hellenistic-Roman philosophy was, and how blurred the lines between schools had become. Many, if not most, of the prominent writers of the period were somewhat eclectic in their philosophical musings, picking and choosing what they liked from the intellectual smorgasbord: Horace's poetry is Epicurean with Stoic accents; Philo was a Jewish Neo-Platonist; Dio Chrysostom, converted from sophistry, became Stoic in theology and Cynic in lifestyle; Cicero represented the skeptical Academy but with strong Stoic affinities, and so on.

Most of the common folk would not have identified with any school or even been aware of such neat divisions. Their worldview would have been formed by both local superstition and popular philosophy. This is not to say, however, that these philosophical currents were irrelevant to *hoi polloi*. Ideas have consequences, and the NT was written within a world of ideas that at times collided and at other times coincided with its message and aims. In his determination to "take every thought captive for Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), Paul was engaged in a battle of worldviews. His campaign to win hearts and minds took place on a crowded battlefield in which many combatants struggled for the same goal: the conversion of the undecided and the unsatisfied.

THE TRUE CYNIC MUST  
KNOW THAT HE HAS  
BEEN SENT BY ZEUS  
TO MEN PARTLY AS A  
MESSENGER, IN ORDER  
TO SHOW THEM THAT  
IN QUESTIONS OF  
GOOD AND EVIL, THEY  
HAVE GONE ASTRAY.

EPICETUS

## **CONVERSION**

For the modern reader, it might seem odd to treat the subject of conversion in a chapter dealing with philosophy and education. It is important to remember, however, that because exclusivity in worship was not a requirement of the gods of the Greco-Roman world, one didn't convert from the worship of one to the worship of another. The pious pagan devoutly honored his or her

ancestral gods, dutifully offered sacrifices to the deified Caesars, and might also participate in whatever mystery religions were represented in his or her locality. The closest parallel in antiquity to religious conversion in the modern sense—usually defined in terms of a reorientation of beliefs and behavior within the context of a supportive community—would be the often dramatic stories of conversion to philosophy.

### *Conversion to Philosophy*

A survey of philosophical conversion narratives reveals three common elements: Moral exhortation (preaching) that induces psychological guilt and an existential crisis; followed by a radical change of lifestyle; leading to a life characterized by moral renewal and the pursuit of virtue.

The writings of Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus, and Musonius Rufus provide numerous examples of Stoic-Cynic preaching, which aimed at producing deep conviction. Lucian's experience represents the ideal for which the philosopher strived: "When he stopped speaking . . . I dripped with sweat, I stumbled . . . my voice failed, my tongue faltered, and finally I began to cry in embarrassment; for

PHILOSOPHY, HOWEVER,  
IS THE ONLY POWER  
THAT CAN SHAKE OFF  
OUR DEEP SLUMBER.

SENECA

the effect he produced in me was not superficial or casual. My wound was deep and vital."<sup>165</sup> Converts to philosophy, especially of the Cynic variety, were known to leave their professions, sell their possessions, abandon their families, and lead a life of radical simplicity.<sup>166</sup> The story is frequently told of Crates, who, after hearing the

preaching of Diogenes, rushed into the market, bequeathed all his earthly possessions to the city, and shouted, "Crates sets Crates free!"<sup>167</sup>

The moral transformation that accompanied conversion to philosophy is often described in terms of "freedom"—be it from vice or from material possessions<sup>168</sup>—but also in terms of inner renewal. According to Lucian, philosophy claimed to "wash away the scars of the soul."<sup>169</sup> Seneca's words to his disciple Lucilius are equally effulgent: "I am not only being improved, I am being transformed."<sup>170</sup> The inwardness of the transformation is emphasized by Valerius Maximus, who speaks of "receiving philosophy into the heart,"<sup>171</sup> and Horace goes so far as depict philosophic conversion in terms of the new creation of the convert. Likening the study of philosophy to the magical arts, Horace persuades his readers that philosophy cures all the vices of the soul:

Is your bosom fevered with avarice and sordid covetousness? There are spells and sayings where by you may soothe the pain and cast much of the malady aside. Are you swelling with ambition? There are fixed charms which can fashion you anew (*recreo*) if with cleansing rites you read the booklet thrice.<sup>172</sup>

### *Conversion to Judaism*

It would be a mistake to attempt to delineate typical elements involved in converting to Judaism, not least because there was a spectrum of adherence to Judaism among Gentiles, ranging from sympathetic "God-fearers" (using Luke's term) to full converts.<sup>173</sup> Circumcision was required of male converts, which was an obvious hurdle, and then there was the problem of how the newly converted Gentile related to the ethnic Jewish community. Were they full members of the family or only stepbrothers and stepsisters? More practically, could a good Jewish boy or girl marry a converted Gentile? While this question was, no doubt, variously answered, the Jewish community responsible for the novella *Joseph and Aseneth* responded with an emphatic yes. In the course of providing a rationale for this answer, *Joseph and Aseneth* provides a remarkable window into the status of converts to Judaism and perhaps into the rituals involved in Gentile conversion.

*Joseph and Aseneth*, a first- or second-century romance of diaspora Judaism, tells the story of the marriage of Joseph to Aseneth, mentioned in Gen 41:45. The marriage of a venerated patriarch to the daughter of a pagan priest would have raised a few Jewish eyebrows and invited explanation. The author of *Joseph and Aseneth* solves this impropriety by explaining that Aseneth converted to Judaism prior to her marriage. In a wonderful tale of love, longing, intrigue, and vengeance, the author describes how the convert to Judaism (in this case, Aseneth) is recreated by God's Spirit, so all prior idolatrous involvements are irrelevant. This clears the way for marriage between ethnic Jews and pagan converts. The blessing offered by the synagogue leader to the new convert and overheard by Zoe (ch. 1) repeats verbatim the prayer of Joseph concerning the yet-to-be converted Aseneth:

You lord, bless this daughter, make her new by your Spirit, recreate her by your hidden hand, give her new life through your life. Let her eat your bread of life, let her drink your cup of blessing, and number her with your people whom you chose before all things. Let her enter your rest and live in your eternal life forever.<sup>174</sup>

Whether this prayer represents a formulaic blessing routinely pronounced over proselytes is uncertain, but what is clear is that it presents conversion to Judaism as new creation by God's Spirit. This imagery is not only relevant to

IT IS NOT FITTING FOR  
A MAN WHO WORSHIPS  
GOD, WHO WILL BLESS  
WITH HIS MOUTH THE  
LIVING GOD . . . TO KISS  
A FOREIGN WOMAN  
WHO WILL BLESS WITH  
HER MOUTH DEAD  
AND DUMB IDOLS.

JOSEPH AND ASENETH

IF ANYONE IS IN CHRIST,  
THEY ARE A NEW CRE-  
ATION! THE OLD THINGS  
HAVE PASSED. LOOK,  
THE NEW HAS COME!

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

converts to Judaism; thanks to Paul, a diaspora Jew, it also becomes relevant to converts to Christianity (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

### *Conversion among Mystery Religions*

Mystery religions of antiquity—and there were a substantial number—offered initiates a more personal form of religion than that available through the worship of the major Greco-Roman deities and promised a blissful eternal afterlife to their devotees. The initiation process often involved ceremonies similar to those of the primitive Jesus movement (ritual washing, ritual meals), and the event is sometimes interpreted as a kind of dying and rising, or rebirth.

Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* provides an illuminating picture into a significant mystery religion, the worship of Isis, from an insider's perspective. The main character of the story is a fellow named Lucius, who, through dabbling in magic, gets himself turned into an ass. He is restored to human form by the goddess Isis, which is symbolic of the transformation this mystery religion promised. Lucius's initiation is explained to him by the officiating priest as follows: "He said

HOW FORTUNATE HE  
IS, BY HERCULES, AND  
THRICE BLESSED! . . . FOR  
HE WAS IN A MANNER  
REBORN AND IMMEDIATELY  
ENGAGED TO  
THE SERVICE OF ISIS.

APULEIUS

that both the gates of death and the guardianship of life were in the goddess's hands, and the act of initiation was performed in the manner of voluntary death and salvation obtained by favor."<sup>175</sup>

Although mystery religions did not require the exclusive worship of their followers, some, like the mysteries of Isis, evinced an evangelistic tendency. The followers of Isis regarded her to be the supreme deity who embodied all the gods. In this context, "initiation" took on connotations normally associated with "conversion." The public parade of Isiac worshipers that halted Heraclitus and his wards before entering the Peirene is taken from Apuleius's story, and these spectacles were intended to attract the attention of potential followers. Unlike the typical portrayal of the gods of Greece and Rome, Isis is described by Apuleius as beneficent, loving, and deeply concerned about humanity:

Finally I prostrated myself before the goddess and wiped her feet with my face for a long time. Tears welled up in me . . . as I spoke to her: "O holy and eternal savior of mankind, you who ever bountifully nurture mortals, you apply the sweet affection of a mother. . . . The fullness of my voice is inadequate to express what I feel about your majesty. . . . I shall store your divine countenance and sacred godhead in the secret places of my heart."<sup>176</sup>

The fervency of this devotion may represent literary hyperbole, but it is still a far cry from anything we see in the worship of the traditional Roman gods.

The personal nature of the deity and the salvation offered is what set the mystery religions and Christianity apart from other first-century religions and is one of the reasons that the mysteries of Mithras nearly eclipsed Christianity in the fourth century.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXT

### PAUL THE LETTER WRITER

Paul is remembered in many ways—an apostle, a missionary, a pastor, and a theologian, to name just a few. Yet fundamental to all of this—and often overlooked—is that Paul wrote a lot of letters. Not just the one-page sort that you and I occasionally write, but tremendously long and sometimes cerebral letters. If a hand-written copy of Romans were sitting before us, it would take up nearly forty pages of standard writing paper. When was the last time you wrote a letter like that?

Paul's letters were not simply personal notes of greeting intended to stay in touch. Romans reads like a theological treatise, 1 Corinthians like a lengthy FAQ, 1 Timothy like a minister's manual, and so on. The production, dispatch, and collecting of Paul's letters is a fascinating subject,<sup>177</sup> but my concern here is to emphasize something even more obvious: Paul was literate. This fact alone put Paul in a very select group of privileged individuals. If contemporary estimates of ancient literacy are correct, and between 80 and 90 percent of the population of the first-century Mediterranean world were functionally or completely illiterate, then Paul, educationally speaking, was among the most privileged people in antiquity.

And Paul was not semi-literate or moderately literate. Far from it. His letters contain complex rabbinic argumentation, sophisticated rhetorical conventions, numerous Old Testament citations—which he apparently had memorized—all in well-crafted and intentionally chosen epistolary formats.<sup>178</sup> In fact, for all the Corinthians' complaints about Paul, even they acknowledged his letters packed a wallop: "His letters are weighty and forceful" (2 Cor 10:10).

The details of Paul's education remain obscure, though Acts tells us that Paul was trained under the leading Jewish scholar of his day, Gamaliel.<sup>179</sup> Given

I, PAUL, WRITE THIS  
GREETING WITH MY  
OWN HAND. THIS IS  
THE SIGN OF GENU-  
INENESS IN EVERY  
LETTER OF MINE; IT IS  
THE WAY I WRITE.

2 THESSALONIANS 3:17

TIMOTHY, WHEN YOU  
COME . . . BRING MY  
BOOKS, AND ABOVE  
ALL THE PARCHMENTS.

2 TIMOTHY 4:13 ESV