### THE NEW TESTAMENT

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SEVENTH EDITION

# THE NEW TESTAMENT

# A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings

Bart D. Ehrman

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#### PREFACE

ith this seventh iteration, I have been writing this book since 1994. It's a long time. But anyone who compares the first edition with what you are holding in your hands will see lots of differences.

To be sure, much of the content has remained constant: I still think much the same about the Gospel of Mark, Paul's letter to the Romans, and the formation of the New Testament canon. And I'm still completely committed to the approach I took at the outset. I have always wanted the book to be a historical introduction to the early Christian writings, rather than, say, one that was theological or exegetical; I've always found a comparative approach to be particularly useful (Luke in relation to Mark in relation to John; Jesus in relation to Paul; Paul in relation to the Pastorals; etc. etc.); I've always wanted students to develop critical skills (not to criticize, but to think); and I've always wanted the book to be interesting and stimulating rather than dull and boring (the reality of so many textbooks in so many fields, as we all know). And so, for any improvements I've made over the years, I have tried to enhance these original features.

But there have been large-scale changes as well, principally in the forms of presentation. In terms of layout, pedagogical usefulness, and general appearance, the book is far superior in its mature years to what it was at its birth. Or so it seems to me, the weary parent.

Still, its progressive improvement has also created problems for me. Each time I have been asked to do a revision, I wonder if it is possible to make the book any better (I'm not saying that it's as

perfect as can be imagined, but that I have reached my creative limits). And then I reread it and realize, yes indeed, there is a lot of room for improvement. Alas.

I have made several important changes in this new edition—clarified the writing in places, improved the structure, reworked some chapters, added a few parts, taken others away, updated the Suggestions for Reading. I have also worked over all the study questions at the end of each chapter. Some instructors, and probably more students, have found a few of the questions biased in one direction or another (usually the former), too pointed, or leading. That's not my intention. I want these questions to challenge students to think but not to make them think like me, or like their teacher. And they are not meant to be exercises in regurgitation. So I have changed the ones that I thought needed changing, trying to make them interesting and thought-provoking, but not slanted.

Moreover, I have added a dozen "boxes" throughout the book, dealing with issues that strike me as unusually interesting, involving such matters as the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library; the size of the Christian church in the New Testament period (and later); the role of miracle stories in the spread of the religion at the time; Jesus' view of hell; and, well, other things.

Let me say a word about these boxes, especially those marked "Another Glimpse into the Past" and "What Do You Think?". I know some students skip over these as (apparently?) less important than the main narrative of each chapter. But in my humble opinion, as their creator, I think these are far and away the most interesting parts of the book.

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#### **xxiv** Preface

They are almost always on intriguing and important topics (at least for me) and they tend to bring up things you wouldn't think to ask about (if you were a college student). I hope you, the teacher, urge your students to read them.

So too with the excursuses. I have restructured how I do these in this edition, and added an important one. Or rather, I asked someone else to do so. My long-time friend-in-the-field (and outside of it) Jeffrey Siker, recently retired from a distinguished career teaching New Testament at Loyola Marymount, has just now written an important book on the Bible in the digital age (Jeffrey S. Siker, Liquid Scripture: The Bible in the Digital World. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017). I asked him to write a short excursus for me on the importance of digital technology for Bible study, and he graciously complied. This, then, will accompany the excursus written by my erstwhile student Shaily Patel on contemporary forms of criticism (feminist, queer, postcolonial, and others), as the two bits of this book written by someone other than me. I think everyone can agree this is all to the good.

A number of biblical scholars have read the sixth edition of the book and made suggestions for improvement. I have listened carefully to them and often heeded their advice. For each of them, there

is no eternal reward (that I know of): they did so out of love for the field and the instructors who teach it. I very much appreciate their help. And so I conclude by extending my heartfelt thanks to the following people:

James C. Browning, University of Pikeville Susanna Elm, University of California Berkeley Corrie Norman, University of Wisconsin Madison Doris Plantus, Oakland University William Rodriguez, Bethune Cookman University Rannfrid I. Thelle, Wichita State University Witold Wolny, The University of Virginia's College at Wise

I would especially like to thank my long-term editor and good friend Robert Miller, Senior Executive Editor at Oxford University Press, for driving me to keep at it, still after all these years. Many thanks are also due Alyssa Palazzo, Editorial Assistant at OUP, for all her hard work and good cheer.

This seventh edition remains dedicated to a great teacher, mentor, and friend, David Adams, who first taught me the Synoptic Gospels thirty-five years ago, and whose pedagogical skill and clarity of thought set the goals to which I, and all his students, have always sought to attain.



# NOTES ON SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

he bibliographical suggestions at the end of each chapter are meant to guide beginning students who are interested in pursuing one or more of the issues raised in this book. To avoid overwhelming the student with the enormous quantity of literature in the field, for most chapters I have limited myself to seven or eight entries (more for longer chapters, fewer for shorter ones). All of the entries are books, rather than articles, and each is briefly annotated. Some of the entries are more suitable for advanced students, and these are indicated as such. For most chapters, I have included at least one work that introduces or embraces a markedly different perspective from the one that I present. I have not included any biblical commentaries in the lists, although students should be urged to consult these, either one-volume works such as the HarperCollins Bible Commentary (revised edition, ed. James Mays) or commentaries on individual books, as found in the Anchor Bible, Hermeneia, Interpretation, and New International Commentary series.

For some of the issues that I discuss, there are no adequate full-length treatments for beginning-level students to turn to, but there are excellent discussions of virtually everything having to do with the New Testament in Bible dictionaries that are readily available in most college libraries. Students should browse through the articles in such one-volume works as the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (2nd edition, ed. Mark Allen Powell). In particular, they should become intimately familiar with the

impressive six-volume Anchor Bible Dictionary (ed. David Noel Freedman), which has been a major resource for students at all levels for years. (Just with respect to chapter 1 of this text, for example, the Anchor Bible Dictionary presents full-length treatments, with bibliographies, of early Christianity, Christology, the Ebionites, Marcion, Gnosticism, Nag Hammadi, heresy and orthodoxy, and the New Testament canon.)

There are numerous online resources available for the study of the New Testament. The difficulty with Web pages generally, of course, is that anyone—trained professional, interested amateur, well-meaning crank—can construct one; and often it is difficult, if not impossible, for the student to know whether the information provided is reliable, disputed, or zany. One other difficulty is that Web pages come and go like summer storms. Rather than provide an entire list of useful pages, then, I have chosen to recommend just two. The first is one that I believe will be around for a very long time and that provides trustworthy scholarly information (through carefully chosen links) on just about everything one might want to know about the New Testament. This is the page created and maintained by Dr. Mark Goodacre at Duke University: www.ntgateway.com. The other has been produced by the Society of Biblical Literature and is also chock-full of interesting and important information provided by top-level scholars in the field and updated regularly: www.bibleodyssey.com.

XXV



# RESOURCES FOR INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS

his text is accompanied by a robust package of supplemental material for both students and instructors.

- The Ancillary Resource Center (http://oup-arc.com/ehrman-new-testament/) includes chapter summaries, key terms, pedagogical suggestions, PowerPoint lecture outlines, and a test bank that offers essay, true/false, and multiple choice questions.
- On the Companion Website (www.oup.com/he /ehrman-nt7e), instructors can find most of the material from the Ancillary Resource Center, password protected. Resources for students include links to media resources, interactive multiple choice self-quizzes, reading guides, flash cards, maps, and timelines.

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#### Photo Essay 1: Ancient Manuscripts of the New Testament

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#### Photo Essay 2: The Material World of Jesus and the Gospels

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#### Photo Essay 3: The Cities and Roads of Paul

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### MASTER TIMELINE

History of Hellenistic and Roman Times

**History of Palestine** 

**History of Christianity** 

800 B.C.E.

**753** B.C.E. Traditional date for the founding of Rome

**700** B.C.E.

600 B.C.E.



**510** B.C.E. Expulsion of kings from Rome and beginning of Roman Republic

**587–586** B.C.E. Final conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, destruction of the Temple, Jewish Leaders taken into exile

**559–332** B.C.E. Palestine ruled by the Persians



**500** B.C.E.

400 B.C.E.

**332–323** B.C.E. Conquests of Alexander the Great

**333–332 B.C.E.** Palestine conquered by Alexander the Great

300 B.C.E.

**264–241, 218–201,** and **149–146 B.C.E.** Punic Wars, Rome against Carthage for domination of the Mediterranean

**300–198 B.C.E.** Palestine ruled by the Ptolemies (of Egypt)

**200** B.C.E.



**198–142 B.C.E.** Palestine ruled by the Seleucids (of Syria)

**167–142** B.C.E. The Maccabean revolt

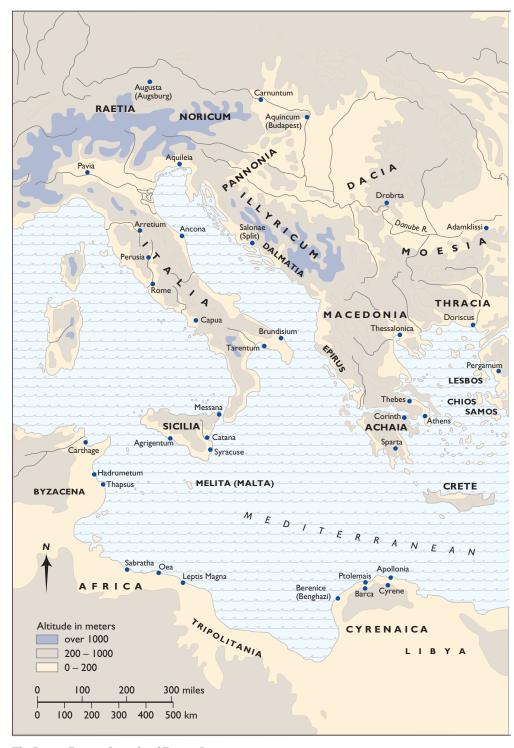
**142–63** B.C.E. Palestine ruled by the Hasmoneans; formation of the Jewish sects: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes



xxix

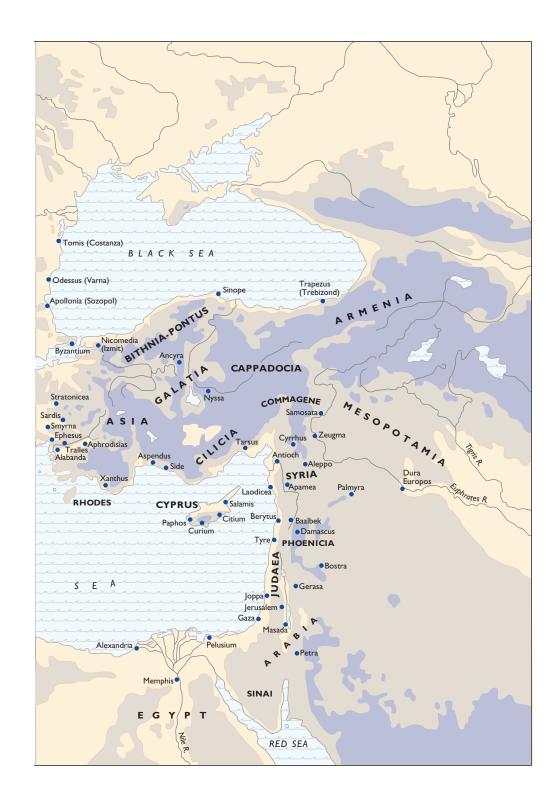
	History of Hellenistic and Roman Times	History of Palestine	History of Christianity
100 B.C.E.	44 B.C.E. Assassination of Julius Caesar  27 B.C.E. Octavian (Caesar Augustus) as emperor; beginning of Roman Empire	63 B.C.E. Palestine conquered by Roman general Pompey 40–4 B.C.E. Herod made king of the Jews by the Romans	
		<b>4</b> B.C.E. The birth of Jesus	4 B.C.E. The birth of Jesus
<b>1</b> C.E.	<b>14–37</b> Tiberius, emperor	<b>4–6</b> Judea ruled by Herod's son	<b>4</b> B.C.E.— <b>30</b> C.E. Life of Jesus <b>27–30?</b> Public ministry of Jesus
, o.e.	37–41 Caligula, emperor	Archelaus  4–39 Galilee ruled by Herod's son Antipas	<b>30?</b> Crucifixion of Jesus
		<b>6–41</b> Judea governed by Roman prefects (Pontius Pilate, prefect in 26–30 c.e.)	<b>30–120</b> Oral traditions of Jesus and initial spread of Christianity throughout the empire
	<b>41–54</b> Claudius, emperor	<b>41–44</b> Agrippa 1, king over most of Palestine	<b>31–32?</b> Conversion of Paul
	<b>54–68</b> Nero, emperor	<b>44–66</b> Most of Palestine ruled by Roman procurators	<b>34–64</b> Paul's missionary activities
	<b>68–69</b> Year of four emperors	<b>66–70</b> First Jewish revolt	
			49 1 Thessalonians, Paul's earliest letter and the earliest surviving Christian writing 49–62 Paul's letters

		History of Hellenistic and Roman Times	History of Palestine	History of Christianity		
		<b>69–79</b> Vespasian, emperor		<b>64</b> Death of Paul and Peter		
TANOTA I		79–81 Titus, emperor 81–96 Domitian, emperor	<b>70</b> Destruction of Jerusalem/Temple	<b>65–70</b> Gospel of Mark		
				<b>80–85</b> Gospels of Matthew and Luke		
				<b>80–110</b> Deutero-Pauline epistles, Pastoral epistles, general epistles		
				<b>90–95</b> Gospel of John		
	G C	96–98 Nerva, emperor		<b>95</b> 1 Clement		
		<b>98–117</b> Trajan, emperor		<b>95–100</b> Book of Revelation		
	100 C.E.	117–138 Hadrian, emperor	<b>132–135</b> Second Jewish revolt (under Simon bar Cochba)	<b>100</b> The <i>Didache</i>		
				100–130 Rise of Gnosticism		
				<b>110</b> Letters of Ignatius		
				<b>110–120</b> Gospels of <i>Thomas</i> and <i>Peter</i>		
				<b>120–140</b> Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter		
				<b>130</b> Epistle of Barnabas		
	No.			<b>130–150</b> Rise of Marcionites; Gospel of Judas		
				<b>155</b> Martyrdom of Polycarp		
			1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1			
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The Roman Empire: Central and Eastern Provinces

#### xxxii



xxxiii

### Introduction

### Why Study the New Testament?

he New Testament is the most commonly purchased, widely read, and deeply cherished book in the history of Western civilization. It is also the most widely misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused. These facts alone should make it worth our time to study it. But there are other reasons as well—religious reasons, historical reasons, and literary reasons.

### Religious Reasons

Most people who study the New Testament do so, of course, for religious reasons. Many people revere the Bible as the Word of God and want to know what it can teach them about what to believe and how to live. If that is also your reason for wanting to study the New Testament, you are in good company! And obviously you will want to get to know as much about the New Testament as possible.

But there are other reasons to study the New Testament, even for those who are not religious or interested in becoming religious. Among other things, to understand our world, with its two billion Christian believers, we need to have a firmer grasp on the book that stands at the heart of the Christian religion. And so this study of the New Testament will be for all people, believers and non-believers alike. We will therefore not be studying the New Testament to promote any particular religious point of view or theology—Baptist, Lutheran,

Catholic, Jewish, agnostic, atheist, or anything else. We will instead be approaching the New Testament from a historical point of view.

#### Historical Reasons

One of the most important reasons for studying the New Testament—especially from a historical point of view—is because of its importance for the history of Western civilization. The dominant religion of Europe and the New World for the past two thousand years has been Christianity. This religion continues to assert an enormous influence on our form of culture. This is true not only on the individual level, as people are guided in their thoughts, beliefs, and actions by what they learn in this religion. It is also true on the broadest historical scale imaginable. Christianity has had the single greatest impact on Western civilization of any religion, ideology, or worldview—whether looked at culturally, socially, politically, or economically. There is no other institution that can even come close. And at the foundation of Christianity—at its heart, one could argue—stands the New Testament. If one does not understand the New Testament, one cannot fully understand the course of the history of the world we inhabit.

And more than that, there can be no doubt that the New Testament has influenced, and continues to influence, millions and millions of people's lives.

I

#### 2 The New Testament: A Historical Introduction

It is widely known that the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible—i.e., the Christian Old Testament—and the New Testament) is the bestselling book of all time, without any serious competitor. What is not always appreciated is that the Bible is the bestselling book every year, year in and year out. So many copies of the Bible are sold every year that no one has been able to add them all up. According to recent statistics, some 100 million copies of the Bible are sold or given away each and every year some 20-25 million in the United states alone. That means some 274,000 new Bibles are distributed every day; over 11,000 every hour. But what is most astounding is that the vast majority of those Bibles—especially in the United States—were sold to people who already had Bibles: over nine out of ten American households own at least one copy of the Bible, and the average household has four. As an article in the New Yorker magazine of December 18, 2006, put it, this "means that Bible publishers manage to sell twenty-five million copies a year of a book that almost everybody already has" (see http:// www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa\_ fact1#ixzz1nstdNgma).

Americans not only like owning and buying Bibles. They like reading them. One Gallup poll has indicated that 16 percent of Americans claimed to read the Bible every day, 21 percent at least once a week, and 12 percent at least once a month (http://www.gallup.com/poll/2416/Six-Ten-Americans-Read-Bible-Least-Occasionally.aspx). That means that fully half the population of the United States reads the Bible every month. About how many other books can that be said?

What is even more impressive is the number of people who actually believe the New Testament. Another, more recent, Gallup poll showed that 24 percent of Americans think that the Bible is the absolute Word of God and is to be interpreted literally. Another 47 percent do not think that it is to be interpreted literally, but that it is nonetheless the Word of God. This means that seven out of ten Americans—fully 71 percent—believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God (https://news.gallup.com/poll/210704/record-few-americans-believe-bible-literal-word-god.aspx).

The vast influence of the New Testament on Americans may be seen as a positive set of reasons for why the Bible should be studied: whether or not we ourselves are believers or are committed to the New Testament, it is important to know more about this book that is affecting so many of our fellow citizens. Moreover, no one can doubt that sincere believers who follow what they understand to be the key teachings of the New Testament have frequently done a world of good throughout history, sometimes through enormous sacrifice to themselves. The New Testament teaches to "love your neighbor as yourself," to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and many other selfless ethical principles. Anyone who follows such teachings is obviously going to do real service to the human race and work to make society better.

But the New Testament has not only had a positive effect on people: it has had very serious negative effects as well, as just about everyone knows. The New Testament (along with the Hebrew Bible) has been used for extremely harmful and malicious purposes over the years—for example, in helping to justify war, murder, and torture during the Crusades and Inquisitions of the Middle Ages. In the American South, the New Testament was used to justify slavery and white supremacy. The New Testament continues to be used to justify war; the slaughter of innocent lives; and the oppression of women, gays, and just about everyone else that others in society do not like or approve of. In part this is because the Bible itself is, in places, a very violent book—not just in the Old Testament (see, e.g., the slaughter of the Canaanites by the Israelites, as mandated by God, in the book of Joshua) but also in the New Testament (see, e.g., the destruction of the human race by God in the book of Revelation). And so, in the opinion of many, people not only use the Bible but also misuse it. This gives us all the more reason to want to study it.

### Literary Reasons

In addition to religious and historical reasons for studying the Bible, there are literary reasons. For anyone interested in great literature, it is essential to have a grasp on the writings found in the New Testament. This is for two reasons. For one thing, the New Testament contains some of the great literary gems of the world's literature. The following are just some examples:

- The Gospel of Matthew: this is the first book of the New Testament and contains the famous "Sermon on the Mount," arguably the most moving and significant collection of Jesus' ethical and religious teachings, including the Golden Rule and the Lord's Prayer.
- The Gospel of John: long a favorite among Christian readers, this account of Jesus' life portrays him as a divine being come to earth for the salvation of all who believe in him.
- The letter to the Romans: the most prominent author of the New Testament, the apostle Paul, describes in this letter how a person can be made right with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

 The Revelation of John: this, the final book of the New Testament, indicates how all of human history will come to a climactic end with the destruction of the world as we know it.

A second literary reason for studying the Bible is that it is impossible to understand a good deal of Western literature without it—as many of its stories and themes and phrases are cited, alluded to, paraphrased, reworked, and explored by many of the greatest authors of our civilization: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, Tolstoy, T. S. Eliot, and hundreds of others.

There are, in short, numerous compelling reasons to study the New Testament, whether you are a believer or not, whether you are a Christian, Jew, Muslim, agnostic, atheist, or something else. It is the most important book in the history of our form of civilization; and in this course of study, you will get to know it and its teachings in a deep and intimate way.

## 1 CHAPTER

## What Is the New Testament?

The Early Christians and Their Literature

#### WHAT TO EXPECT

This chapter is concerned with some hard but intriguing questions that many people have never thought to ask about the New Testament: Where did this book—or, rather, this collection of books—come from? How did the twenty-seven books of the New Testament get gathered together into a "canon," a collection of authoritative books? Why were these books included in the Scriptures, but not other Christian books—some of them written at the same time? Who made the decisions? On what grounds? And when?

We will start by considering a basic feature of early Christianity that will recur time and again throughout our study: its remarkable diversity. Rather than being one thing, early Christianity was lots of different things, so much so that some scholars prefer to speak about "early Christianities" rather than "early Christianity." As we will see, it was in the context of early Christian struggles to determine the "right" beliefs and practices that one group of Christians decided which books should be included among the Scriptures. Somewhat surprisingly, the final decisions did not come in just a few years or decades: they took more than three hundred years.

hristianity in the modern world is a richly diverse phenomenon. Ask any Pentecostal preacher who has attended a Roman Catholic mass, or Greek Orthodox monk who has happened upon a Baptist tent revival, or Episcopalian nun who has visited a Jehovah's Witness prayer meeting. There is, to be sure, common

ground among many Christian groups; but when you compare the beliefs and practices of an Appalachian snake handler with those of a New England Presbyterian, you may be more struck by the differences than the similarities.

Is this kind of rich diversity a modern development? Many people appear to think so. For them,

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Christianity was originally a solid unit, but with the passing of time (especially since the Protestant Reformation), this unity became fractured and fragmented. Historians, however, recognize that in some ways Christian differences today pale in comparison with those that existed among believers in the distant past. If we turn the clock back 1,850 years to the middle of the second century, we find people calling themselves Christian who subscribe to beliefs that no modern eye has seen or ear heard; Christians who believe that there are 2 different gods, or 30, or 365; Christians who claim that the Old Testament is an evil book inspired by an evil deity; Christians who say that God did not create the world and has never had any involvement with it; and Christians who maintain that Jesus did not have a human body, or that he did not have a human soul, or that he was never born, or that he never died.

Of course, many people today would argue that such views could not be Christian. What is striking to the historian, however, is that people who believed these things claimed to be Christian. Moreover, these believers invariably maintained that their ideas had been taught by Jesus himself. In many instances, they could appeal to written proof, for they all possessed documents allegedly penned by Jesus' own apostles.

The New Testament also contains books that were thought to have been written by the apostles. These books, however, do not teach that there are several gods, or that the creator of the world is evil, or that Jesus did not have a real body. Are there historical grounds for thinking that the New Testament

books actually were written by Jesus' apostles and that books supporting contrary views are forgeries? Indeed, how is it that some books claiming to be written by the apostles were included in the New Testament, but others were not? Moreover, even if the books that came to be included in the New Testament agree on certain fundamental points (e.g., that there is only one God), is it possible that they disagree on others (such as who Jesus is)? That is to say, if Christians in the second century, 150 years or so after Jesus, held such a wide range of beliefs, is it possible that Christians of the first century (when the books of the New Testament were being written) did as well? Did all of the early Christians agree on the fundamental points of their religion?

These are some of the issues that we will consider as we begin to examine the earliest Christian writings. They are not, of course, the only issues. There is an extraordinarily broad range of important and intriguing questions that readers bring to the New Testament—about where it came from, who its authors were, what their messages were—and many of these will occupy us at considerable length in the pages that follow. But the issue of Christian diversity is a good place for us to begin our investigation. Not only can it provide a useful entrée into important questions about the early stages of the Christian religion, starting with the teachings of Jesus; it can also enlighten us about the nature of the New Testament itself, about how and why these various books came to be gathered together into one volume and accepted by Christians as their sacred canon of scripture (see Box 1.1).

#### ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST



#### BOX 1.1 The Canon of Scripture

The English term "canon" comes from a Greek word that originally meant "ruler" or "measuring rod." A canon was used to make straight lines or to measure distances. When applied to a group of books, it refers to a recognized body of literature. Thus, for example, the "canon of Shakespeare" refers to all of Shakespeare's authentic writings.

With reference to the Bible, the term "canon" denotes the collection of books that are accepted as authoritative by a religious body. Thus, for example, we can speak of the canon of the Jewish Scriptures or the canon of the New Testament. See Box 1.2.

## THE DIVERSITY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

As I have intimated, Christian diversity is somewhat easier to document in the second century, after the books of the New Testament were written, than in the first. This is because, quite simply, there are more documents that date to the later period. Virtually the only Christian writings that can be reliably dated to the first century are found in the New Testament itself, although we know that other Christian books were produced at this time. We begin our investigation, then, by examining several examples of later forms of Christianity, before seeing how these are relevant to the study of the New Testament.

#### Jewish-Christian Adoptionists

Consider first the form of religion embraced by a group of second-century Jewish Christians known to be living in Palestine, east of the Jordan River. These believers maintained that Jesus was a remarkable man, more righteous as a follower of the Jewish Law than any other, a man chosen by God to be his son. Jesus, in fact, was "adopted" at his baptism; when he emerged from the waters of the Jordan, he saw the heavens open up and the Spirit of God descend upon him as a dove, while a voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my son, today I have begotten you."

According to these Christians, who were sometimes called **Ebionites**, Jesus was empowered by God's Spirit to do remarkable miracles and to teach the truth of God. Then, at the end of his life, he fulfilled his divine commission by dying as a willing sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world, a sacrifice that put an end to all sacrifices. Afterward, God raised him from the dead. Jesus then ascended into heaven, where he currently reigns.

There may seem to be little that is remarkable about these beliefs—until, that is, one probes a bit further into the details. For even though Jesus was chosen by God, according to these Christians, he was not himself divine. He was a righteous man, but nothing more than a man. In their view, Jesus was not born of a virgin, he did not exist prior to

his birth, and he was not God. He was adopted by God to be his son, the savior of the world. Hence the name bestowed on this group by others: they were "adoptionists." For them, to call Jesus God was to tell a blasphemous lie. For if Jesus were God, and his Father were also God, there would be two Gods. But the Jewish Scriptures emphatically state otherwise: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4).

According to these Christians, this one God chose Israel and gave it his Law (in the form of the Jewish Scriptures). Furthermore, Jesus taught that his followers must continue to obey the entire Law (except the law that required animal sacrifice—for them, Jesus himself was the perfect sacrifice) in all its details—and not just the Ten Commandments! Those who were not born Jews must first become Jews to follow Jesus. For men, this meant being circumcised; for men and women, it meant such things as observing the Sabbath and keeping kosher food laws.

On what grounds did these Christians advance this understanding of the faith? They had a sacred book written in Hebrew that they claimed contained the teachings of Jesus himself, a book that was similar to what we today know as the Gospel of Matthew (without the first two chapters). What about the other books of the New Testament, the other Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, the epistles, and Revelation? Odd as it might seem, these Jewish Christians had never heard of some of these books and rejected others of them outright. In particular, they considered Paul, one of the most prominent authors of our New Testament, to be an arch-heretic rather than an apostle. Since, in their opinion, Paul blasphemously taught that Christ brought an end to the Jewish Law, his writings were to be rejected as heretical. In short, these secondcentury Christians did not have our New Testament canon (see Box 1.1).

#### Marcionite Christians

The Jewish-Christian adoptionists were by no means unique in not having our New Testament. Consider another Christian group, this one scattered throughout much of the Mediterranean in the mid-to late second century, with large numbers of

#### ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST



#### BOX 1.2 The Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament

The terms "Jewish Scriptures" and "Hebrew Bible" both refer to the collection of books considered sacred in the religion of Judaism, books that were written almost entirely in Hebrew. Many of these writings were regarded as holy even before Jesus' day, especially the first five books of Moses, known as the Torah, or Law.

About a century after Jesus, the collection of books into the Hebrew Scriptures was more or less fixed. Altogether, the collection comprised twenty-four different books. Because of a different way of counting them, they number thirty-nine books in English translation (the twelve minor prophets in English Bibles, for example, count as only one book in the Hebrew Bible).

Christians have long referred to these books as the "Old Testament" to set them apart from the books of the "New Testament" (the new set

of books that reveal God's will to his people). Throughout our study, I will use the term "Old Testament" only when referring explicitly to Christian views; otherwise, I will call these books the Jewish Scriptures or Hebrew Bible.

Even within Christianity there are different numbers of books included in the "Old Testament." The Roman Catholic Church, for example, accepts an additional twelve books (or parts of books)—including such works as Tobit, Judith, I and 2 Maccabees—which they call "deuterocanonical" (meaning that they came into the canon at a later time than the books of the Hebrew Bible). Protestant Christians usually call these books the "Apocrypha." Since they did not form part of the Hebrew Bible, I will not be including them in this chart or discussing them at any length.

#### The Hebrew Bible

The Torah (5 books)  Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy  The Prophets (8 books)  Former Prophets Joshua Judges Samuel (counts as I book) Kings (counts as I book) Later Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve	Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi  The Writings (II books) Job Psalms Proverbs Ruth Song of Solomon Ecclesiastes Lamentations Esther
Isaiah	Song of Solomon
Jeremiah	Ecclesiastes
The Twelve	Esther
(count	Daniel
as I book)	Ezra-Nehemiah
Hosea	(I book)
Joel	Chronicles (I book)

#### The Christian "Old Testament"

The Pentateuch	Ecclesiastes
(5 books)	Song of Solomon
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers	Prophetic Books (17 books) Major Prophets Isaiah
Deuteronomy	Jeremiah
Historical Books	Lamentations
(12 books)	Ezekiel
Joshua	Daniel
Judges	Minor Prophets
Ruth	Hosea
I and 2 Samuel	Joel
I and 2 Kings	Amos
I and 2 Chronicles	Obadiah
Ezra	Jonah
Nehemiah	Micah
Esther	Nahum
Poetry and Wisdom	Habakkuk
Books (5 books)	Zephaniah
Job	Haggai
Psalms	Zechariah
1 3411113	Malachi

**Proverbs** 

Malachi

congregations flourishing especially in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Their opponents called them "Marcionites" because they subscribed to the form of Christianity advanced by the second-century scholar and evangelist Marcion, who himself claimed to have uncovered the true teachings of Christianity in the writings of Paul. In sharp contrast to the Jewish Christians east of the Jordan, Marcion maintained that Paul was the true apostle to whom Christ had especially appeared after his resurrection to impart the truth of the gospel. Paul, according to Marcion, had begun as a good Jew intent on obeying the Law to the utmost, but the revelation of Christ showed him beyond doubt that the Jewish Law played no part in the divine plan of redemption. For Paul, Christ himself was the only way of salvation. Marcion argued that Paul's writings effectively set the gospel of Christ over and against the Law of the Jews and that the apostle had urged Christians to abandon the Jewish Law altogether.

For Marcion and his followers, the differences between the religion preached by Jesus (and his apostle Paul) and that found in the Jewish Scriptures were plain to see. Whereas the Jewish God punishes those who disobey, they claimed, the God of Jesus extends mercy and forgiveness; whereas the God of the Jews says "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," the God of Jesus says to "turn the other cheek"; and whereas the Old Testament God tells the Israelites to conquer Jericho by slaughtering its entire population—men, women, and children the God of Jesus says to love your enemies. What do these two Gods have in common? According to the Marcionites, nothing. For them, there were two separate and unrelated Gods, the God of the Jews and the God of Jesus.

Marcionite Christians maintained that Jesus did not belong to the wrathful and just God of the Jews, the God who created the world and chose Israel to be his special people. In fact, Jesus came to save people from this God. Moreover, since Jesus had no part in the Creator, he could have no real ties to the material world that the Creator-God made. Jesus therefore was not actually born and did not have a real flesh-and-blood body. How, then, did Jesus get hungry and thirsty, how did he bleed and die? According to the Marcionites, it was all

an appearance: Jesus only seemed to be human. As the one true God himself, come to earth to deliver people from the vengeful God of the Jews, Jesus was never born, never got hungry or thirsty or tired, and never bled or died. Jesus' body was a phantasm.

The contrasts between the Jewish Christians and the Marcionites are stark. One group said that Jesus was totally human and not divine; the other said that he was totally divine and not human. One group staunchly maintained that there was only one God; the other asserted that there were in fact two. One said that the true God created the world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them the Law; the other said that the true God had never had any dealings with the world or with Israel. One group urged believers to follow the Law; the other argued that they should reject it altogether. Both groups considered themselves to be the true Christians.

Most significant for our purposes here, these groups did not appeal to the same authorities for legitimation of their views. On the contrary, whereas the Jewish Christians rejected Paul as a heretic, the Marcionites followed him as the greatest of the apostles. Moreover, instead of adhering to a version of Matthew's Gospel, the Marcionites used a truncated version of something like our Gospel of Luke, along with ten of Paul's letters (all of those found in the New Testament, with the exceptions of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). But even these were not exactly the letters as we have them today. Marcion believed that earlier heretics had willfully modified these books by inserting positive references to the God of the Jews, his creation, and his Scriptures; accordingly, he excised these passages, giving his followers a form of the Bible strikingly different from that used by Christians today: eleven books, all of them shortened, and no Old Testament.

#### **Gnostic Christians**

The Jewish-Christian adoptionists and the Marcionites were not the only two Christian groups vying for converts in the second century. In fact, there were many other groups supporting a wide range of other beliefs on the basis of a wide range of other authorities as well. Some of the best known are the various sects of Christian Gnostics, so

named because of their claim that special "gnosis" (Greek for "knowledge") is necessary for salvation.

We know that Gnostic Christians were located in major urban areas throughout much of the Mediterranean during the second and third centuries especially in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Rome, and Gaul. Gnostics were themselves wildly diverse, with different groups believing radically different things (see chap. 12). Some Gnostics agreed with Marcion that Jesus was totally divine and not at all human, and for much the same reason that he did: Jesus represented a different God from the one who created this world. Others, however, claimed that Jesus Christ consisted of two distinct beings: the human Jesus and the divine Christ. These Gnostics agreed with the Jewish-Christian adoptionists that Jesus was the most righteous man on earth and that something special had happened at his baptism. They did not think, however, that God adopted him to be his son; instead, they maintained that his baptism was the moment at which a divine being, the Christ, came into the man Jesus, empowering him for his healing—and, especially, his teaching ministry. At the end of Jesus' life, immediately before his death, the Christ then departed from him once again to return to heaven. This is why Jesus cried out in such anguish on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you left me behind?" (cf. Mark 15:34).

Who, though, was this divine Christ? For many Gnostics, he was one of the deities that made up the divine realm. Unlike the Jewish Christians who maintained that there was only one God, or the Marcionites who claimed that there were two, Gnostics accepted the existence of many gods. In some of the Gnostic systems that we know about there were 30 different gods; in others as many as 365. Moreover, for all of these systems, the true God was not the God of the Old Testament. Unlike Marcion, however, Gnostics did not believe that the Old Testament God was simply vengeful and righteous, a God who had high standards (the Law) and little patience with those who did not meet them. Instead, for many of the Gnostics, the Creator-God of the Old Testament was a malformed and ignorant divinity; and this material world that he created was an awful place that needed to be escaped.

Gnostics had a sense that they had come into this world from another realm, and they knew that they did not belong here. They were spiritual beings from the divine world above who had become entrapped in the realm of matter by the inferior God and his subordinates. Salvation meant returning to their spiritual home, away from this material world. Thus a god from the divine realm entered into the man Jesus and left him prior to his death, so that he could impart to the spirits embodied here the knowledge (gnosis!) that is necessary for escape.

This was secret knowledge not divulged to the masses—not even to the mass of Christians. It was meant only for the chosen, the elect, the Gnostics themselves. They did not deny that Jesus taught the crowds publicly, but they believed he reserved the secret teachings that led to salvation only for the elect who were able to act on them. The Gnostics passed on this teaching by word of mouth and claimed that it could be discovered through a careful reading of the writings of the apostles. It lay there hidden beneath the surface. Thus, for the Gnostic, the literal meaning of these texts was not what mattered; the truth necessary for salvation could be found only in the secret meaning, a meaning exclusively available to Gnostic interpreters, those "in the know."

Different Gnostic groups had different sets of literary texts that they considered authoritative and revelatory. We know that many of them were especially drawn to the Gospel of John and that others cherished Gospels that most modern people have never heard of: the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Judas, and the Gospel of Truth. Some of these books have only recently been discovered by archaeologists. Each of them was thought to convey the true teachings of Jesus and his apostles.

How is it that most of these books cannot be found in our own New Testament? Or, for that matter, how is it that the versions of Matthew, Luke, and Paul read by Jewish-Christian adoptionists and Marcionites were not included in it? Why do the views of these other groups not have equal representation in the Christian Scriptures? The answer can be found by examining the story of one other group of second-century Christians.

#### "Proto-Orthodox" Christians

The "proto-orthodox" Christians represent the forerunners (hence the prefix "proto") of the group that became the dominant form of Christianity in later centuries. When this group later acquired more converts than any of the others (say, by the beginning of the fourth century) and stifled its opposition, it claimed that its views had always been the majority position—and that its rivals were, and always had been, "heretics," who willfully "chose" (the Greek root of the word "heresy") to reject the "true belief" (the literal meaning of "orthodoxy").

We ourselves can use the term "proto-orthodox" only in retrospect since the adherents of this position did not actually know that their views would become dominant, nor did they think of themselves as forerunners of believers to come later; like all the other groups of their day, they simply saw themselves as the true Christians. The story of their victory over their opponents is fascinating, but aspects of it are hotly debated among modern-day scholars. Some historians think that the proto-orthodox beliefs were original to Christianity; others maintain that they developed over time. Some scholars claim that the protoorthodox had always been in the majority throughout Christendom; others think that different forms of Christianity were predominant in many parts of the Mediterranean (e.g., Jewish Christians in parts of Palestine, Gnostics in parts of Egypt and Syria, Marcionites in Asia Minor). Fortunately, we do not need to resolve these thorny problems here.

But there are aspects of the proto-orthodox struggle for dominance that are directly germane to our study of the New Testament. To begin with, we can consider what these Christians believed in contrast to the other groups we have discussed.

Proto-orthodox Christians agreed with the Jewish Christians who said that Jesus was completely human, but disagreed when these people denied that he was divine. They agreed with the Marcionites who said that Jesus was completely divine, but disagreed when they denied that he was human. They agreed with the Gnostics who said that Jesus Christ taught the way of salvation, but disagreed when they said that he was two beings rather than one and when they claimed that his true teachings had been secret, accessible only

to the elect few. In short, proto-orthodox Christians argued that Jesus Christ was both divine and human, that he was one being instead of two, and that he had taught his disciples the truth. They claimed that the apostles had written the teachings of Jesus down and that, when interpreted in a straightforward and literal fashion, the books that were passed on from the apostles to their followers revealed the truth necessary for salvation.

These views may sound familiar to readers who have had any involvement with Christianity—and no surprise! For the side that held these views won the debates and determined the shape of Christianity up to the present day.

The proto-orthodox position, then, attempted to counteract the claims of the groups that they opposed. In part, this meant that the proto-orthodox group had to reject some documents that claimed to be written by apostles but that advanced beliefs contrary to their own—such as the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Thomas, all of which appeared to support alternative perspectives. Some of the writings used by the opposing groups, however, were quite popular among the proto-orthodox Christians as well. For example, the Gospel of Matthew was well loved by Jewish Christians, and the Gospel of John was a favorite of many Gnostics. Indeed, by accepting and ascribing authority to both of these Gospels, the proto-orthodox believers were able to balance the "heretical" claims that could be made when only one of them was taken to be the ultimate authority. In other words, if Jesus appears to be completely human in one Gospel and completely divine in another, by accepting both authorities as Scripture the proto-orthodox were able to claim that both perspectives were right and that an exclusive emphasis on Jesus as only human, or purely divine, was a perversion of the truth. The development of the canon of Scripture within protoorthodox circles is in large part an attempt to define what true Christians should believe by eliminating or compromising the views of other groups.

Because the proto-orthodox group represented the party that eventually became dominant in Christianity (by at least the fourth century), Christians of all later generations inherited the proto-orthodox canon of Scripture rather than the canons supported by their opponents.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON OF SCRIPTURE

The purpose of the preceding sketch was not to give a complete account of Christianity in the second century but simply to indicate how early Christianity was extremely diverse and to show how this diversity led to the collection of books into a sacred canon. The Christian Scriptures did not drop from the sky one day in July the year Jesus died. They were written by individual authors at different points of time, in different countries, to different communities, with different concerns; they were later read by an even wider range of Christians and were eventually collected together into what we now call the New Testament. Before launching into a study of these various books, we should reflect further on how and when they (and not others) came to be placed in the canon. We can begin with some preliminary observations concerning the shape of the canon as we now have it.

#### The New Testament: Some Basic Information

The New Testament contains twenty-seven books, written in Greek, by fifteen or sixteen different authors who were addressing other Christian individuals or communities between the years 50 and 120 c.e. (see Box 1.3). As we will see, it is difficult to know whether any of these books was written by Jesus' own disciples.

The first four books are "Gospels," a term that literally means "good news." The Four Gospels of the New Testament proclaim the good news by telling stories about the life and death of Jesus—his birth, ministry, miracles, teaching, last days, crucifixion, and resurrection. These books are traditionally ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Proto-orthodox Christians of the second century claimed that two of these authors were disciples of Jesus: Matthew, the tax collector mentioned in the First Gospel (Matt 9:9), and John, the beloved disciple who appears in the Fourth (e.g., John 19:26). The other two Gospels were reportedly written by associates of famous apostles: Mark, the secretary of Peter, and Luke, the traveling companion

of Paul. This second-century tradition does not go back to the Gospels themselves; the titles in our Bibles (e.g., "The Gospel according to Matthew") were not found in the original texts of these books. Instead, their authors chose to remain anonymous.

The next book in the New Testament is the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author who penned the Third Gospel (whom modern scholars continue to call Luke even though we are not certain of the author's identity). This book is a sequel to the Third Gospel in that it describes the history of early Christianity beginning with events immediately after Jesus' death; it is chiefly concerned with how the religion was disseminated throughout parts of the Roman Empire, among Gentiles as well as Jews, and principally through the missionary labors of the apostle Paul. Thus, whereas the Gospels portray the beginnings of Christianity (through the life and death of Jesus), the book of Acts portrays the spread of Christianity (through the work of his apostles).

The next section of the New Testament comprises twenty-one "epistles," that is, letters written by Christian leaders to various communities and individuals. Not all of these epistles are, strictly speaking, items of personal correspondence. The book of Hebrews, for example, appears to be an early Christian sermon; and the epistle of 1 John is a kind of Christian tractate. Nonetheless, all twenty-one of these books are traditionally called epistles. Thirteen of them claim to be written by the apostle Paul; in some cases, scholars have come to question this claim. In any event, most of these letters, whether by Paul or others, concern theological or practical problems that have arisen in the Christian communities they address. Thus, whereas the Gospels describe the beginnings of Christianity and the book of Acts its spread, the epistles are more directly focused on Christian beliefs, practices, and ethics.

Finally, the New Testament concludes with the book of Revelation, the first surviving instance of a Christian apocalypse. This book was written by a prophet named John, who describes the course of future events leading up to the destruction of this world and the appearance of the world to come. As such, it is principally concerned with the culmination of Christianity.

#### ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST



#### BOX 1.3 The Common Era and Before the Common Era

Most students will be accustomed to dating ancient events as either A.D. (which does not stand for "After Death" but for "anno domini," Latin for "year of our Lord") or B.C. ("Before Christ"). This terminology may make sense for Christians, for whom A.D. 1996 is indeed "the year of our Lord 1996." It makes less sense, though, for Jews, Muslims, and others for whom Jesus is not the "Lord" or the "Christ." Scholars have therefore begun to

use a different set of abbreviations that are more inclusive of others outside the Christian tradition. In this book, I will use the alternative designations of C.E. ("the Common Era," meaning common to people of all faiths who utilize the traditional Western calendar) and B.C.E. ("Before the Common Era"). In terms of the older abbreviations then, C.E. corresponds to A.D. and B.C.E. to B.C.

#### Other Early Christian Writings

The books I have just described were not the only writings of the early Christians, nor were they originally collected into a body of literature called the "New Testament." We know of other Christian writings that have not survived from antiquity. For example, the apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, refers to an earlier writing that he had sent them (1 Cor 5:9) and alludes to a letter that they themselves had sent him (1 Cor 7:1). Unfortunately, this correspondence is lost.

Other noncanonical writings, however, have survived. Among the best known of these are writings by authors collectively called the "Apostolic Fathers." These were Christians living in the early second century whose writings were considered authoritative in some proto-orthodox circles, some of them on a par with the writings of the Gospels or Paul. In fact, some of our ancient manuscripts of the New Testament include writings of the Apostolic Fathers as if they belonged to the canon.

Other, previously unknown, Christian writings have been discovered only in modern times. Some of these writings clearly stand at odds with those within the New Testament; some of them appear to have been used as sacred scripture by certain groups of Christians. A number of them claim to be written by apostles. The most spectacular find occurred in 1945 near the town of Nag Hammadi,

Egypt, where some peasants digging for fertilizer accidentally uncovered a jar containing thirteen fragmentary books in leather bindings (see Box 11.6). The books contain anthologies of literature, some fifty-two treatises altogether, written in the ancient Egyptian language called Coptic. Whereas the books themselves were manufactured in the mid-fourth century c.e. (we know this because some of the bindings were strengthened with pieces of scratch paper that were dated), the treatises that they contain are much older: Some of them are mentioned by name by authors living in the second century. Before this discovery, we knew that these books existed, but we didn't know what was in them.

What kind of books are they? I earlier indicated that Gnostic Christians appealed to written authorities that did not make it into the New Testament, some of them allegedly written by apostles. These are some of those books. Included in the collection are epistles, apocalypses, and collections of secret teachings. Yet more intriguing are the several Gospels that it contains, including one allegedly written by the apostle Philip and another attributed to Didymus Judas Thomas, thought by some early Christians to be Jesus' twin brother (see Box 12.2).

These books were used by groups of Christian Gnostics during the struggles of the second, third, and fourth centuries, but they were rejected as

#### ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST



#### BOX 1.4 The Layout of the New Testament

#### Gospels: The Beginnings of Christianity (4 books)

Matthew Mark Luke John

Acts: The Spread of Christianity (1 book)

The Acts of the Apostles

Epistles: The Beliefs, Practices, and Ethics of Christianity (21 books)

Pauline Epistles Romans I and 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians

This schematic arrangement is somewhat simplified. All of the New Testament books, for example (not just the epistles), are concerned with Christian beliefs, practices, and ethics; and Paul's epistles are in some ways more reflective

Philippians
Colossians
I and 2 Thessalonians
I and 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
General Epistles
Hebrews
James
I and 2 Peter
I, 2, and 3 John
Jude

#### Apocalypse: The Culmination of Christianity (1 book)

The Revelation of John

of Christian beginnings than are the Gospels. Nonetheless, this basic orientation to the New Testament writings can at least get us started in our understanding of the early Christian literature.

heretical by proto-orthodox Christians. Why were they rejected? The question takes us back to the issues raised earlier concerning how Christians went about deciding which books to include in the New Testament and when their decisions went into effect.

#### The Development of the Christian Canon

Proto-orthodox Christians did not invent the idea of collecting authoritative writings together into a sacred canon of Scripture. In this they had a precedent. For even though most of the other religions in the Roman Empire did not use written documents as authorities for their religious beliefs and practices, Judaism did.

Jesus and his followers were themselves Jews who were conversant with the ancient writings that were eventually canonized into the Hebrew Scriptures. Although most scholars now think that a hard-and-fast canon of Jewish Scripture did not yet exist in Jesus' own day, it appears that most Jews did subscribe to the special authority of the Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Hebrew Bible; see Box 1.2). Also, many Jews accepted the authority of the Prophets as well. These writings include the books of Joshua through 2 Kings in our English Bibles, as well as the more familiar books of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the books of the twelve minor prophets. According to our earliest accounts, Jesus himself quoted from some of these books; we can assume that he accepted them as authoritative.

Thus Christianity had its beginning in the proclamation of a Jewish teacher who ascribed authority to written documents. Moreover, we know that Jesus' followers considered his own teachings to be authoritative. Near the end of the first century, Christians were citing Jesus' words and calling them "Scripture" (e.g., 1 Tim 5:18). It is striking that in some early Christian circles, the correct interpretation of Jesus' teachings was thought to be the key to eternal life (e.g., John 6:68 and Gosp. Thom. 1). Furthermore, some of Jesus' followers, such as the apostle Paul, understood themselves to be authoritative spokespersons for the truth. Other Christians granted them this claim. The book of 2 Peter, for example, includes Paul's own letters among the "Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16).

Thus by the beginning of the second century, some Christians were ascribing authority to the words of Jesus and the writings of his apostles. There were nonetheless heated debates concerning which apostles were true to Jesus' own teachings (cf. the arguments between Marcion and the Jewish Christians over Paul), and a number of writings that claimed to be written by apostles were thought by some Christians to be forgeries. It is interesting to reflect on how our present New Testament emerged from this conflict: for, in fact, the first person to establish a fixed canon of Scripture appears to have been none other than Marcion. Marcion's insistence that his sacred books (a form of Luke and ten truncated letters of Paul) made up the Christian Bible evidently led other Christians to affirm a larger canon, which included other Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) and other epistles (the "Pastoral" epistles—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus—and the eight general epistles) as well as the books of Acts and Revelation.

It appears then that our New Testament emerged out of the conflicts among Christian groups and that the dominance of the proto-orthodox position was what led to the development of the Christian canon as we have it today. It is no accident that Gospels that were deemed heretical—for instance, the Gospel of Peter or the Gospel of Philip—did not make it into the New Testament. This is not to say, however, that the canon of Scripture was firmly set by the end of the second century. Indeed, it is a striking fact of

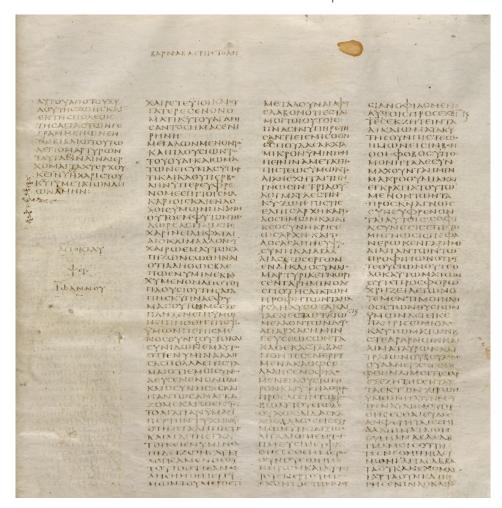
history that even though the Four Gospels were widely considered authoritative by proto-orthodox Christians then—along with Acts, most of the Pauline epistles, and several of the longer general epistles—the collection of our twenty-seven books was not finalized until much later. For throughout the second, third, and fourth centuries, protoorthodox Christians continued to debate the acceptability of some of the other books. The arguments centered around (a) whether the books in question were ancient (e.g., some Christians wanted to include The Shepherd of Hermas; others insisted that it was penned after the age of the apostles); (b) whether they were written by apostles (some wanted to include Hebrews on the grounds that Paul wrote it; others insisted that he did not); and (c) whether they were widely accepted among proto-orthodox congregations as containing correct Christian teaching (e.g., many Christians disputed the doctrine of the end times found in the book of Revelation).

Contrary to what one might expect, it was not until the year 367 c.e., almost two and a half centuries after the last New Testament book was written, that any Christian of record named our current twenty-seven books as the authoritative canon of Scripture. The author of this list was **Athanasius**, a powerful bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. Some scholars believe that this pronouncement on his part, and his accompanying proscription of heretical books, led monks of a nearby monastery to hide the Gnostic writings discovered sixteen hundred years later by Bedouin near Nag Hammadi, Egypt.



#### IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR STUDY

Understanding the process by which the New Testament canon came into being raises a highly significant issue. The various books of the New Testament are typically read as standing in essential harmony with one another. But do the books of the New Testament agree in every major way? Or are they only thought to agree because they have been placed together, side by side, in an authoritative collection that is venerated as sacred Scripture? Is it possible that when these books are read in their original settings rather than their



**Figure 1.1** Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest surviving manuscript of the entire New Testament. This fourth-century manuscript includes *The Shepherd* of Hermas and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (the first page of which is pictured here), books that were considered part of the New Testament by some Christians for several centuries.

canonical context, they stand at real tension with one another?

These are among the most difficult and controversial issues that we will address in our study of the New Testament writings. To anticipate my approach, I might simply point out that historians who have carefully examined the New Testament have found that its authors do, in fact, embody remarkably diverse points of view. These scholars have concluded that the most fruitful way to

interpret the New Testament authors is to read them individually rather than collectively. Each author should be allowed to have his own say,\* and his perspective should not be too quickly reconciled

<sup>\*</sup>Throughout this book, I will be using the masculine pronoun to refer to the authors of the early Christian literature, simply because I think all of them were males. For discussion of some of the relevant issues, see chapter 26 and Box 5.1.

#### AT A GLANCE



#### BOX 1.5 The New Testament Canon

- Early Christianity was not the unified monolith that modern people sometimes assume. It was, in fact, extremely diverse.
- This diversity was manifest in a wide range of writings, only some of which have come down to us in the New Testament.
- The New Testament canon was formed by proto-orthodox Christians who wanted to show that their views were grounded in the writings of Jesus' own apostles.
- 4. Whether these writings actually represented the views of Jesus' own apostles, however, was in some instances debated for decades, even centuries.
- 5. A historical approach to these writings allows each book to speak for itself, without assuming they are all saying the same thing.
- This approach will allow us to see the diversity of early Christianity, which was already evident in its earliest writings, more clearly.

with the point of view of another. For example, we should not assume that Paul would always say exactly what Matthew would, or that Matthew would agree in every particular with John, and so on. Following this principle, scholars have been struck by the rich diversity represented within the pages of the New Testament. This point cannot be stressed enough. The diversity of Christianity did not begin in the modern period, as some people unreflectively assume, nor did it begin in the second century, in the fragmented forms of Christianity discussed

earlier in this chapter. The diversity of Christianity is already evident in the earliest writings that have survived from the Christians of antiquity, most of which are preserved within the canon of the New Testament

In this book, we will approach the writings of the New Testament from this historical perspective, looking at each author's work individually, rather than allowing the shape of the later Christian canon to determine the meaning of all of its constituent parts.

#### TAKE A STAND

- 1. Discuss the various ways that early Christians (and Christian groups) differed from one another. In your opinion, is there any belief or practice that all the groups held in common? That is to say, is there some one thing (or more than one thing) that made all the groups that called themselves Christian, Christian? Or not?
- Suppose that instead of the proto-orthodox, a group of believers that did not accept the Jewish
- Scriptures into their Bible had become the dominant form of Christianity. In what concrete ways do you suppose the Christian faith today would be different?
- 3. Pick one of the early Christian groups other than the proto-orthodox and suppose that it had won out to become the dominant form of Christianity. How would the world we live in today be different? Would it be a better place or a worse one, in your opinion? Why?



#### **KEY TERMS: CHAPTER I**

Each term, or its close derivative (e.g., apocalyptic/apocalypticism; apostle/apostolic, etc.), can be found in the Glossary; its first significant occurrence in the chapter appears in **boldface** type.

adoptionists	canon	heretic
apocalypse	C.E.	Law
Apocrypha	Ebionites	manuscripts
apostle	epistle	Marcion
Apostolic Fathers	Gentile	Nag Hammadi
Athanasius	Gnostics	"proto-orthodox Christians"
B.C.E.	Gospel	Torah



#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Bauer, Walter. Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity.
  Trans. Robert Kraft et al. Ed. Robert Kraft and Gerhard
  Krodel. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971. The classic study of
  the wide-ranging diversity of second- and third-century
  Christianity, suitable only for more advanced students.
- Brakke, David. The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. A recent attempt to explain how best to understand the world of Gnosticism by a leading scholar in the field.
- Denzy Lewis, Nicola. Introduction to "Gnosticism": Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. An accessible and valuable introduction to the so-called Gnostic library of texts discovered in modern times near Nag Hammadi, Egypt.
- Dunn, James D. G. Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity, 3rd ed. London: SCM Press, 2006. A very informative discussion that applies Bauer's view of early Christian diversity to the New Testament itself; highly recommended for students who have already completed a course in the New Testament.
- Ehrman, Bart D. Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. An examination of the early conflicts among various Christian groups (Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics, proto-orthodox) and the various "Scriptures" they produced—including noncanonical Gospels, Acts, epistles, and apocalypses. For popular audiences.
  - The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New

- Testament. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Chapter 1, "The Text of Scripture in an Age of Dissent," explores the diversity of early Christianity on a more introductory level than Bauer's text.
- Gamble, Harry. The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. A clearly written and informative overview of the formation of the New Testament canon.
- Harnack, Adolph von. Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God. Trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma. Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1990. The classic study of the life and teachings of Marcion.
- Hultgren, Arland J. The Rise of Normative Christianity. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994. A book that disagrees with Bauer's understanding of early Christianity and argues that early Christian diversity was not as wideranging and pervasive as some have thought.
- Marjanen, Antti, and Petri Luomanen. A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics." Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008. An up-to-date discussion of all the second-century Christian groups and teachers mentioned in this chapter—and many more!—by internationally renowned scholars in the field.
- Metzger, Bruce M. The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. The authoritative discussion of the formation of the canon. For advanced students.
- Pagels, Elaine. The Gnostic Gospels. New York: Random House, 1976. An enormously popular and provocative account of the views of some of the early Gnostics in relation to emerging Christian orthodoxy.



### EXCURSUS 1

## Some Additional Reflections: The Historian and the Believer

ost of the people interested in the New Testament, at least in modern American culture, are Christians who have been taught that it is the inspired word of God. If you yourself belong to this camp, then you may find the historical perspective that I have mapped out in chapter 1 somewhat unusual, maybe even difficult to accept, in that it may seem to stand at odds with what you have been taught to believe. If so, then it is for you in particular that I want to provide these brief additional reflections.

Here is the question: How can a Christian who is committed to the Bible affirm that its authors have a wide range of perspectives and that they sometimes disagree with one another? I can address the question by restating that it is not my intention to call your personal religious views into question or to urge you to change them. This is a historical introduction to the early Christian writings, principally those found in the New Testament, rather than one that requires the reader (you) to accept any particular set of beliefs about God, Jesus, salvation, and so on. This is an important distinction because the New Testament has always been much more than a book for Christian believers. It is also an important cultural artifact, a collection of writings that stands at the foundation of much of our Western civilization and heritage. In other words, in addition to being documents of faith, these books are rooted in history; they were written in particular historical contexts and have always been read within particular historical contexts. For this reason, they can be studied not only by believers for their theological significance but also by historians (whether or not they happen to be believers) for their historical significance.

Historians deal with past events that are matters of the public record. The public record consists of human actions and world events-things that anyone can see or experience. Historians try to reconstruct what probably happened in the past on the basis of data that can be examined and evaluated by every interested observer of every persuasion. Access to these data does not depend on presuppositions or beliefs about God. This means that historians, as historians, have no privileged access to what happens in the supernatural realm; they have access only to what happens in this, our natural world. The historian's conclusions should, in theory, be accessible and acceptable to everyone, whether the person is a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, an atheist, a pagan, or anything else.

To illustrate the point, historians can tell you the similarities and differences between the worldviews of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you that Gandhi's belief in God was wrong or that Martin Luther King's was right. This judgment is not part of the public record and depends on theological assumptions and personal beliefs that are not shared by everyone conducting the investigation. Historians can describe to you what happened during the conflicts between Catholics and Lutherans in sixteenth-century Germany; they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you which side God was on. Likewise, historians can explain what probably happened at Jesus' crucifixion, but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you that he was crucified for the sins of the world.

Does that mean that historians cannot be believers or that believers cannot do history? No, of course not. But it does mean that if historians tell you that Martin Luther King Jr. had a better theology than Gandhi, or that God was on the side of the Catholics instead of the Protestants, or that Iesus was crucified for the sins of the world, they are telling you this not in their capacity as historians but in their capacity as believers. Believers are interested in knowing about God, about how to behave, about what to believe, about the ultimate meaning of life. The historical disciplines cannot supply them with this kind of information. Historians who work within the constraints of this discipline are limited to describing, to the best of their abilities, what probably happened in the past (as discussed further in Excursus 3).

Many such historians, including a large number of those mentioned in the bibliographies scattered

throughout this book, find historical research to be completely compatible with—even crucial for their personal religious views. Others find that it makes their views difficult. This is an issue that you yourself may want to deal with as you grapple intelligently with how the historical approach to the New Testament affects positively, negatively, or not at all your faith commitments. I should be clear at the outset, though, that as the author of this book, I will neither tell you how to resolve this issue nor urge you to adopt any particular set of theological convictions. My approach instead will be strictly historical, trying to understand the writings of the early Christians from the standpoint of the professional historian who uses whatever evidence happens to survive to reconstruct what happened in the past.

That is to say, I am not going to convince you either to believe or to disbelieve the Gospel of John; I will describe how it probably came into existence and discuss what its message was. I am not going to persuade you that Jesus really was or was not the Son of God; I will try to establish what he said and did based on the historical data that are available. I am not going to discuss whether the Bible is or is not the inspired word of God; I will show how we got this collection of books and indicate what they say and reflect on how scholars have interpreted them. This kind of information may well be of some use to the reader who happens to be a believer, but it will certainly be useful to one—believer or not—who is interested in history, especially the history of early Christianity and its literature.

# CHAPTER

# Do We Have the Original New Testament?

#### WHAT TO EXPECT

Many Christians believe that the very words of the New Testament are inspired by God; and nearly everyone, whether believing that or not, assumes the words we read are the words the authors themselves wrote. But is this true? Do we know the authors' actual words?

This chapter addresses several crucial questions: Do we have the original copies of the writings of the New Testament? If not, do we have reliable copies? And if not, how can we reconstruct the words as the authors themselves wrote them?

As it turns out, there are thousands of surviving copies of the New Testament, all of them filled with mistakes. Is it possible that in some cases we simply don't know the original words?

ow that we have seen how the collection of books called the New Testament came into being, we can ask a question that has never occurred to most readers of the Bible. Do we actually have the original writings of the New Testament? The answer may surprise you, but there is no doubt about it. The answer is a definite no.



To explain why we don't have the original New Testament writings, we should begin by considering how books were published in the ancient world.

It was a very different process from what happens today. When I write a book today, I draft it on my word processor, edit it, and send it to my publisher in electronic form. The publisher sends it off to a professional compositor, who sets up my word-processing files to look like a book—with the proper style of font, all the right headings and subheadings, correct margins, and so on. After I approve what the compositor has done, the book is sent into production. A professional printer uses the electronic file to produce the books—thousands of them at a time, every one of them exactly alike, no differences of any kind on any of the pages. These are then bound in covers and sent off to bookstores. Any copy of the book that you buy anywhere in the country—it doesn't matter if it is in California, Louisiana, or Vermont—will be precisely the same book in every way. No copy will look any different from any other copy.

It was not like that in the ancient world. There were obviously no electronic means of writing or publication; there were no compositors; there were no printing presses; there was no mass distribution of books. How, then, were books produced and published?

In the ancient world, an author had to write out a book by hand, normally using a pen made out of a reed and writing on papyrus—a writing material made out of reeds that grew in Egypt and manufactured into a writing surface that was comparable to our "paper" (this was centuries before paper itself had been invented). When an author was finished writing his book, he would have it copied out neatly and give it to a friend. Or he might read it aloud to a group of friends. If any of them wanted a copy, he would have a scribe produce one for them, or they would get it copied themselves. And that was how the book then was "published" or put into circulation. Anyone else who wanted a copy—a friend of a friend, for example—had to have a copy made, by hand.

Any handwritten copy of a writing is called a "manuscript" (from a Latin phrase meaning "written by hand"). The writings of the New Testament were circulated in manuscript form many centuries before the invention of the printing press. When an author like Paul wrote a letter to one of his churches—say, the church in the city of Corinth—he would send his handwritten version off to the community. If the Christians in Corinth wanted

another copy of the letter, or if they wanted Christians in another city (e.g., Philippi, or Thessalonica) to have a copy, they had to have the letter copied—one sentence, one word, one letter at a time. Copying a text was a slow and arduous process, especially if it involved a lengthy writing. An entire Gospel would take a long time indeed to copy out.

What happens to books when they are copied by hand? The results are very different from what we see in the modern world, where every copy of one of the Harry Potter books will be exactly like every other copy, all of the words in each precisely the same. When books were copied slowly, by hand, one letter at a time, the copyists—called scribes—sometimes made mistakes. These scribes were human, after all, and sometimes they got tired and inattentive; sometimes their minds wandered; sometimes they were not very skilled at copying in the first place. At other times, a scribe changed what he was copying on purpose, because he thought—rightly or wrongly—that the author, or an earlier scribe who produced the copy that he was copying, made a mistake, and he wanted to correct it. Or sometimes he simply wanted to change what the author said because he thought he could say it better.

As a result, in handwritten copies of writings, mistakes multiply. When a subsequent scribe copies a copy that already has mistakes in it, he naturally copies the mistakes of his predecessor, and makes mistakes of his own as well. The next scribe comes along and copies *that* copy, reproducing the mistakes of both preceding copyists and adding mistakes of his own. His copy is then copied by the next scribe—and so on and so on, for copy after copy, month after month, year after year, century after century.

The only time errors get corrected is when a scribe realizes that his predecessor made a mistake, and he tries to correct it. The problem is that there is no way to know whether he corrected the mistake correctly. He might correct it "incorrectly"—so that now there are three forms of the text: the original text, the changed text, and the mistaken correction of the changed text. And so it goes.

This process of copying and making mistakes is not unique, of course, to the writings of the New Testament. The same process happened for every writing in the ancient world—the writings of Homer, Euripides, Plato, Julius Caesar, and Saint