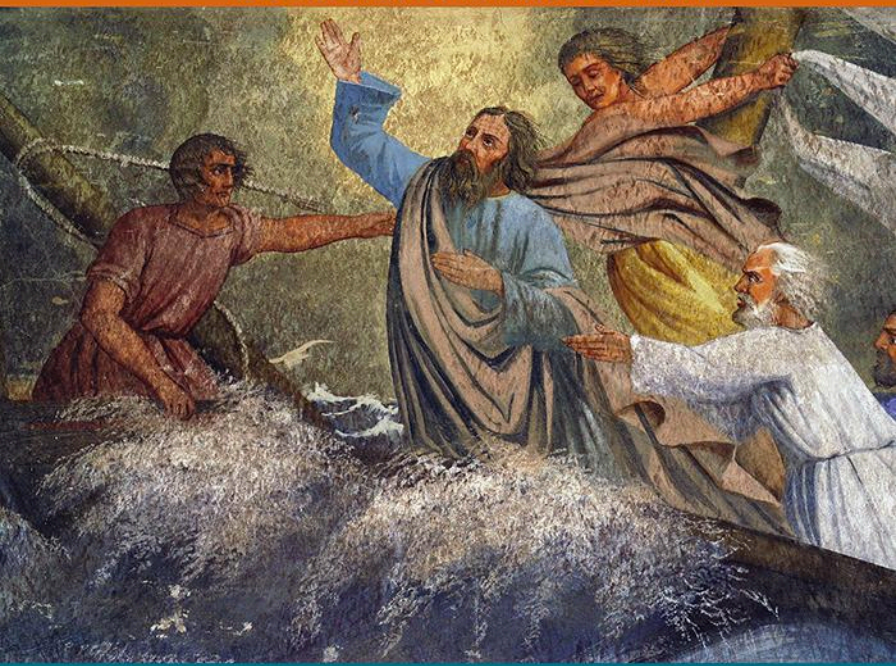
Ninth Edition

The New Testament

A STUDENT'S INTRODUCTION



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Stephen L. Harris

The New Testament

A STUDENT'S INTRODUCTION

Ninth Edition

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A STUDENT'S INTRODUCTION, NINTH EDITION

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 LCR 21 20 19

ISBN 978-1-259-92263-3 (bound edition)
MHID 1-259-92263-4 (bound edition)

ISBN 978-1-260-68671-5 (loose-leaf edition)
MHID 1-260-68671-X (loose-leaf edition)

Product Developers: *Alexander Preiss, Adina Lonn*
Marketing Manager: *Nancy Baudean*
Content Project Managers: *Lisa Bruflodt, Danielle Clement*
Buyer: *Susan K. Culbertson*
Designer: *Beth Blech*
Content Licensing Specialist: *Melisa Seegmiller*
Cover Image: *©Zvonimir Atletic/123RF*
Compositor: *Lumina Datamatics, Inc.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Harris, Stephen L., 1937-, author.
Title: The New Testament : a student's introduction / Stephen L. Harris, Professor Emeritus, California State University, Sacramento.
Description: Ninth Edition. | Dubuque : McGraw-Hill Education, 2019.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018041766 | ISBN 9781259922633 (alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Bible. New Testament—Introductions. | Bible. New Testament—Textbooks.
Classification: LCC BS2330.3.H37 2019 | DDC 225.6/1—dc23 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018041766

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For Geoffrey Edwin, Jason Marc, and Kevin Lee

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Preface to the Ninth Edition

Like its predecessors, the ninth edition of *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction* is designed for undergraduates beginning their first systematic study of the Christian Greek Scriptures. The purpose of this introductory text is twofold: to familiarize readers with the contents and major themes of the New Testament and to acquaint them with the goals and methods of important biblical scholarship.

Updated Important Scholarship and New Features

Because the previous edition made the text more accessible and easier for readers to capture the big picture by rearranging it into six parts, the new presentation focuses on recent scholarship. Part One—"An Invitation to the New Testament"—describes the process by which the canon, the list of official New Testament books, slowly grew over the centuries, and as well as an updated introduction to the individual translations. In Part Two, "The Three Worlds in Which Christianity Originated," the text reviews the three major forces that largely shaped and defined the new faith: Judaism and its Bible, innovative Greek culture, and Roman political power. As the religion expanded through the Roman Empire, Christian missionaries such as Paul and his colleagues espoused the revolutionary doctrine that non-Jews (Gentiles) were saved by their faith rather than their keeping the Mosaic Law. At the same time as it grew, Christianity confronted, generally peacefully but sometimes with mass disturbances, the power structures of imperial Rome.

Part Three, "Diverse Portraits of Jesus," the longest section, analyzes the four differing Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, investigating the particular themes that make each canonical narrative unique. Chapter 6, "The Gospels: Form and Purpose," not only examines each of the four distinctive accounts but also surveys theories to explain the Synoptic Problem. In recent decades, the scholarly consensus has unraveled: whereas the "two-document" hypothesis is still the majority view, scholars have proposed many new theories to explain why Mark, Matthew, and Luke are so alike. Scholars assume that Mark is the first Gospel written (doubted by a small scholarly minority), but many critics propose that Luke used Matthew or that Matthew was aware of Luke, or some other hypothetical combination. Discussion of the Fourth Gospel, that ascribed to John, is sharpened to emphasize its differences from the Synoptic writings (Chapter 10).

In renewing the "Quest for the Historical Jesus" (Chapter 11), scholars have devised several new criteria for their investigation, including historical plausibility, and precisely how Jesus' behavior caused the Roman government to charge him with treason. Did Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God lead to his execution? The majority of scholars have espoused Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet with an eschatological vision of an imminent End, but a minority presents him primarily as a wisdom teacher. Part Four, "An Account of the Early Church," surveys the Book of Acts, in which their adversaries accuse Christian missionaries of "flout[ing] the Emperor's laws, and assert[ing] that there is a rival king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7; see Box 12.4, "The Christian Message's Disruptive Effect on Greco-Roman Society").

Part Five, "Paul and the Pauline Tradition," introduces a fresh review of the "new perspective," emphasizing Paul's Jewishness and that he never abandoned the religion in which he was brought up. In fact, Paul probably assumed that he was not promoting a new religion and that those Gentiles who accepted that Jesus was Israel's Messiah were "children" of Abraham and fellow inheritors of the covenant promises. A new box in Chapter 14 (Box 14.1), "Women's Roles of Leadership in the Church," notes that women were included in administrative and teaching positions in Paul's congregations. Students will enjoy comparing this with another recently added box, "The Role of Women in John's Gospel" (Box 10.6).

The final section, Part Six, "General Letters and Some Visions of End Time," underscores the anxieties that troubled the late-first-century and early-second-century church, including the failure of Jesus to return. Whereas Revelation declares that Jesus will reappear "soon," the pseudonymous 2 Peter faces directly the delayed Second Coming, urging believers to hasten the Parousia. A corrective to Paul's doctrine of faith, James, essentially a Jewish-Christian wisdom book, interprets Abraham's trust in God differently. The three letters from the Johannine community—the same group that produced the Gospel of John—show the fractured congregations disintegrating amid bitter quarrels over doctrine and conduct. The last chapter emphasizes the flood of documents—Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and theological letters—that characterized the turn of the first century and throughout the second century (see Chapter 20).

Pedagogical Aids

The New Testament: A Student's Introduction provides numerous devices to help readers learn the material quickly and easily. In the textbook, each chapter begins with a concise summary of key topics/themes, several of which have been revised to become even clearer. Important terms are printed in **boldface** and listed at the end of every chapter. The extensive Glossary at the back of the book, approximately thirty pages long, defines the terms listed succinctly but completely. To help students recall relevant information, each chapter includes Questions for Review, as well as aids to facilitate class dialogue, Questions for Discussion and Reflection.

Recommended Readings refer students to serious publications available at most college and university libraries. Most have been updated with the latest scholarly works and represent the labors of many different scholars, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, offering crucial insights and analytical tools for understanding the New Testament contents. The bibliographies also enhance our ability to comprehend the sociohistorical environment in which the Christian Scriptures developed.

Online Resource

The ninth edition of *The New Testament* is available online with Connect, McGraw-Hill Education's integrated assignment and assessment platform. Connect also offers SmartBook for the new edition, which is the first adaptive reading experience proven to improve grades and help students study more effectively. All of the title's website and ancillary content, including an Instructor's Manual, Test Bank, and PowerPoint lecture slides, is also available through Connect.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to the colleagues who provided generous commentary and advice for improving the book's quality and usefulness in the classroom. Notes from Emeritus Professor Richard A. Spencer

of Appalachian State University were particularly valuable.

I would also like to express appreciation to my managing editor at McGraw-Hill, Alexander Preiss, the skilled project manager, Adina Lonn, and the copyeditor, Lumina Datamatics, Inc.

In addition, I would like to thank two friends and colleagues: Professor Bradley Nystrom, for his fluent translation of Cleanthes' "Hymn to Zeus," and the late Rev. Dr. James Straukamp, for his permission to use his excellent photographs of biblical sites.

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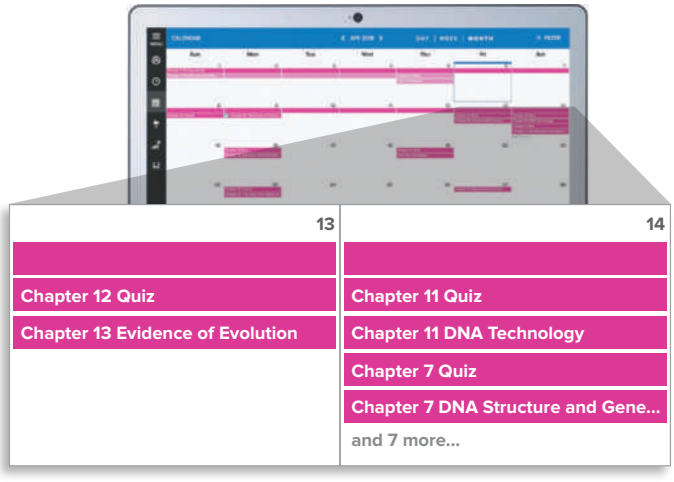

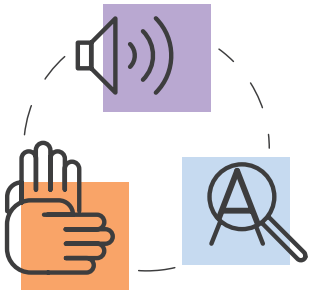

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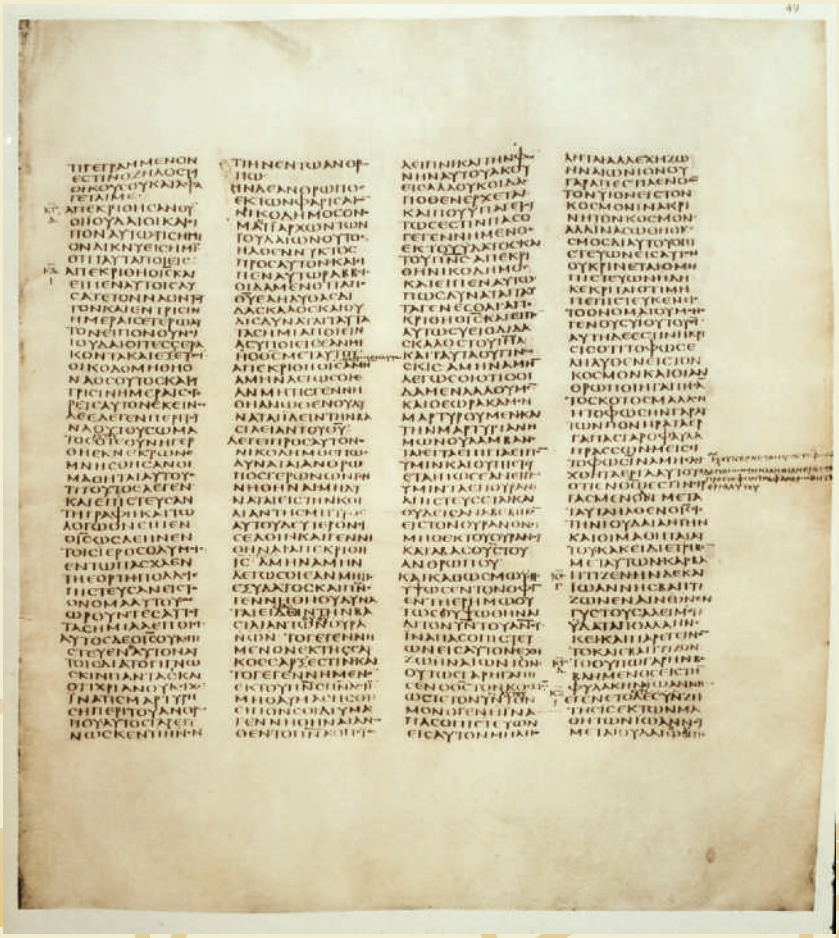

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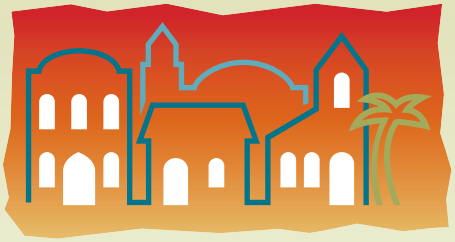

CHAPTER 1

An Overview of the New Testament

Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Mark 1:1*

Key Topics/Themes A collection of twenty-seven Greek documents that early Christians appended to a Greek edition of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), the New Testament includes four Gospels, a church history, letters, and an apocalypse (revelation). The early Christian community produced a host of other writings as well, which scholars also study to understand the diverse nature of the Jesus movement as it spread throughout the Greco-Roman world.

People read the New Testament for an almost infinite variety of reasons. Some read to satisfy their curiosity about the origins of one of the great world religions. They seek to learn more about the social and historical roots of Christianity, a faith that began in the early days of the Roman Empire and that today commands the allegiance of more than 2 billion people, almost a third of the global population. Because Christianity bases its most characteristic beliefs on the New Testament writings, it is to this source that the historian and social scientist must turn for information about the religion's birth and early development.

Most people, however, probably read the New Testament for more personal reasons. Many readers search its pages for answers to life's important ethical and religious questions. For hundreds of millions of Christians, the New Testament sets the only acceptable standards of personal belief and behavior (see Box 1.1). Readers attempt to discover authoritative counsel on issues that modern science or speculative philosophy cannot resolve, such as the nature of God, the fate of the soul after death, and the ultimate destiny of humankind.

Jesus of Nazareth, the central character of the New Testament, provides many people with the most compelling reason to read the book. As presented by the Gospel writers, he is like no other figure in history. His teachings and pronouncements have an unequaled power and authority. As an itinerant Jewish prophet, healer, and teacher in early-first-century Palestine, the historical Jesus—in terms of the larger Greco-Roman world around him—lived a relatively obscure life and died a criminal's death at the hands of Roman executioners. His followers' conviction that he subsequently rose from the grave and appeared to them launched a vital new faith that eventually swept the Roman Empire. In little more than three centuries after Jesus' death, Christianity became Rome's official state religion.

*Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the New Testament are from the New English Bible, copyright © Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press, 1961, 1970. All rights reserved; see Chapter 2, p. 36.

BOX 1.1 The New Testament: A Relatively Modern Artifact

A printed, bound copy of the New Testament that readers can hold in their hands is a relatively modern development. Until the fourth century CE, the New Testament did not even exist as a coherent entity—a single volume containing the twenty-seven books in its now-familiar table of contents. Before then, believers, and even church leaders, had access to individual Gospels or subcollections, such as compilations of Paul's letters, but not to a comprehensive edition of the entire text.

Even after Rome made Christianity the state religion and imperial patronage encouraged the production of an official Christian Scripture, New Testaments were extremely rare. Not only were manuscript copies prohibitively expensive, but the vast majority of people in the Roman Empire could neither read nor write. It was not until the printing press was invented in the fifteenth century CE, permitting the eventual mass production of Bibles, that the New Testament as we know it came into being.

Clearly, the New Testament authors present Jesus as much more than an ordinary man. The Gospel of John portrays him as the human expression of divine Wisdom, the Word of God made flesh. Jesus' teaching about the eternal world of spirit is thus definitive, for he is depicted as having descended from heaven to earth to reveal ultimate truth. About 300 years after Jesus' crucifixion, Christian leaders assembled at the town of Nicaea in Asia Minor to decree that Jesus is not only the Son of God but God himself.

Given the uniquely high status that orthodox Christianity accords the person of Jesus, the New Testament accounts of his life have extraordinary value. Jesus' words recorded in the Gospels are seen not merely as the utterances of a preeminently wise teacher but also as the declarations of the Being who created and sustains the universe. The hope of encountering "God's thoughts," of discovering otherwise unattainable knowledge of unseen realities, gives many believers a powerful incentive for studying the New Testament.

What Is the New Testament?

When asked to define the New Testament, many students respond with such traditional phrases as "the Word of God" or "Holy Scripture." These responses are really confessions of faith that the Christian writings are qualitatively different from ordinary books. Some students express surprise that non-Christian religions also have **scriptures**—documents that these groups consider sacred and authoritative (having the power to command belief and prescribe behavior). In fact, many other world religions possess holy books that their adherents believe to represent a divine revelation to humankind. Hindus cherish the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavadgita; Buddhists venerate the recorded teachings of Buddha, the "enlightened one"; and followers of Islam (meaning "submission" [to the will of Allah]) revere the Quran (Koran) as transmitting the one true faith. Ideally, we approach all sacred writings with a willingness to appreciate the religious insights they offer and to recognize their connection with the cultural and historical context out of which they grew.

Given the historical fact that the New Testament was written by and for believers in Jesus' divinity, many readers tend to approach it as they do no other work of ancient literature. Whether or not they are practicing Christians, students commonly bring to the New Testament attitudes and assumptions very different from those they employ when reading other works of antiquity. The student usually has little trouble bringing an open or neutral mind to exploring stories about the Greek and Roman gods. One can read Homer's *Iliad,* an epic poem celebrating the

Greek heroes of the Trojan War, without any particular emotional involvement with the Homeric gods. However, this objective attitude toward supernatural beings is rare among persons studying the New Testament.

To be fair to the New Testament, we will want to study it with the same open-mindedness we grant to the writings of any world religion. This call for objectivity is a challenge to all of us, for we live in a culture that defines its highest values largely in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We can most fully appreciate the New Testament if we begin by recognizing that it developed in, and partly in reaction to, a society profoundly different from our own. To a great extent, the New Testament is the literary product of a dynamic encounter between two strikingly different cultures of antiquity—the Jewish and the Greek. A creative synthesis of these two traditions, early Christianity originated in a thoroughly Jewish environment. But in the decades following Jesus' death, Christianity spread to the larger Greek-speaking world, where it eventually assumed the dominant form that has been transmitted to us.

The Jewish world of Jesus and his first disciples was centered in **Palestine,** an area at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea now partly occupied by the modern state of Israel (see Figure 1.1). According to the biblical Book of Genesis, God had awarded this territory—the **Promised Land**—to his chosen people, the Jews.* In Jesus' day (the first third of the first century CE†), however, the land was ruled by Rome, the capital of a vast empire that surrounded the entire Mediterranean basin, from France and Spain in western Europe to Egypt in northeast Africa and Syria-Palestine in western Asia (see Figure 1.2). As a Palestinian Jew, Jesus experienced the tension that then existed between his fellow Jews and their often-resented Roman overlords (see Chapters 5–10 for discussions of Gospel references to Jewish–Roman relations).

Although many students automatically ascribe their own (twenty-first-century North American) values and attitudes to Jesus' world, it is important to recognize that, even today, inhabitants of the eastern Mediterranean region do not view life as Americans typically do. In the Mediterranean's agrarian, conservative peasant society, old ideas, values, and practices contrast sharply with those in the West's technologically sophisticated democracies. Two thousand years ago, the degree of difference—social, religious, and political—was even greater, a fact that must be considered when studying the Gospel accounts of Jesus' interaction with Palestinian villagers and Roman officials. The more we learn about first-century Palestinian-Jewish and Greco-Roman customs, social institutions, and religious beliefs, the better we will understand both Jesus and the writers who interpreted him to Greek-speaking audiences (see Chapters 3–5).

The New Testament and the Hebrew Bible

Before considering the second great historical influence on the creation of the New Testament—Greek thought and culture—it is helpful to describe what the New Testament is and how it relates to the older Jewish Scriptures, the **Hebrew Bible** (so called because it was originally composed in the Hebrew language, with a few later books in a related tongue, **Aramaic;** see Boxes 1.2 and 1.3). Basically, the New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven Christian documents, written in Greek and added as a supplement to a Greek edition of the Hebrew Bible known as the **Septuagint** (see below). The Christian Bible, therefore, consists of two unequal parts: the longer, more literarily diverse Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the Old Testament), and a shorter anthology of Christian writings (the New Testament). Bound together, the two testaments form the Christian Bible. **Bible,** a term derived from the word

*_Jew,_ a term originally designating the inhabitants of Judea, the area surrounding Jerusalem, also includes all members of the covenant community living outside Palestine.

†CE (the Common Era), a religiously neutral term used by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others, is synonymous with the traditional AD, initials representing *anno domini*, Latin for "in the year of the Lord." BCE (before the Common Era) corresponds to BC (before Christ).

FIGURE 1.1 Palestine at the time of Jesus (early first century CE). Located at the eastern margin of the Mediterranean Sea, this region promised to Abraham's descendants was then controlled by Rome (see Figure 1.2).

FIGURE 1.2 Map of the Roman Empire (c. 30 BCE). By the reign of Augustus (30 BCE–14 CE), the Roman Empire controlled most of the known world.

biblia (meaning "little books"), is an appropriate title because this two-part volume is really a compilation of many different books composed over a time span exceeding 1,100 years.

In considering early Christians' use of the Hebrew Bible, however, we must remember that the Jewish Scriptures did not then exist as an easily accessible bound volume. At the time of Jesus and the early church, the Hebrew Bible existed only as a collection of separate scrolls (see Chapter 2). Few Jews or early Christians owned copies of biblical books or read them privately. Instead, most Jews and Jewish Christians only heard passages from the Mosaic Torah or prophetic books read aloud at religious services in the local synagogue or at a Christian house church. If at the latter, they likely heard the Scriptures read not in the original Hebrew but in Greek translation.

That the early Christian movement appropriated the Hebrew Bible, which had been created by and for the Jewish community, is extremely significant. Believers who accepted Jesus as the Jewish **Messiah** (Anointed One, a term applied to all of Israel's kings; see Chapter 3) looked to the Jewish Scriptures–the only written religious authority for both Jews and early Christians–to find evidence supporting their convictions. When New Testament authors refer to "Scripture" or "the Law and the Prophets" (cf. Luke 24:27, 32), they mean the Hebrew Bible, albeit in a Greek (Septuagint) edition. In composing their diverse portraits of Jesus, the Gospel writers consistently clothed the historical figure in images and ideas taken from the Hebrew Bible. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, virtually every word or action of Jesus is interpreted in terms of ancient biblical prophecy (see Chapter 8).

BOX 1.2 Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha

TORAH

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

PROPHETS

Former Prophets
- Joshua
- Judges
- Samuel (1 and 2)
- Kings (1 and 2)

Latter Prophets
- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel

The Twelve (Minor Prophets)
- Hosea
- Joel
- Amos
- Obadiah
- Jonah
- Micah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- Zephaniah
- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Malachi

WRITINGS

Psalms
Job
Proverbs
Ruth
Song of Solomon
Ecclesiastes
Lamentations
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah
Chronicles (1 and 2)

DEUTEROCANONICAL BOOKS (APOCRYPHA)

1 Esdras
2 Esdras
Tobit
Judith
The rest of the chapters of the Book of Esther
The Wisdom of Solomon
Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach
Baruch
A Letter of Jeremiah
The Song of the Three
Daniel and Susanna
Daniel, Bel, and the Snake
The Prayer of Manasseh
1 Maccabees
2 Maccabees

Testament and Covenant

The very term *New Testament* is intimately connected with the Hebrew Bible. In biblical usage, **testament** is a near synonym for **covenant,** which refers to an agreement, contract, vow, or bond. To appreciate the New Testament concept of the bond between God and humanity, we must examine the Hebrew Bible's story of God's relationship with **Israel,** the ancient Near Eastern people with whom the Deity forged a binding covenant, making them his exclusive partner. Exodus, the second book of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), recounts the solemn ceremony in which the Israelites conclude their central covenant with **Yahweh** (the sacred name of Israel's God) (Exod. 19–20; 24). Under the terms of the **Mosaic Covenant** (so called because the Israelite leader **Moses** acts as mediator between Yahweh and his chosen people), the Israelites swear to uphold all the laws and commandments that Yahweh enjoins upon them. These legal injunctions are contained

BOX 1.3 Organization of the Hebrew and Christian Greek Scriptures

The contents of the New Testament are arranged in a way that approximates the order of the Hebrew Bible, which is also called the Tanakh, a term whose consonants represent the three principal divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures: the *Torah* (Mosaic Law or instruction), the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and the *Kethuvim* (Writings).

	OLD COVENANT (TESTAMENT)	NEW COVENANT (TESTAMENT)
T	*Torah* (five books of Moses)	Four Gospels (story of Jesus)
A		
N	*Nevi'im* (Prophets)	
	Histories of Joshua-Kings	Book of Acts (church history)
	Books of the Prophets	Letters of Paul and other church leaders
A		
K	*Kethuvim* (Writings)	
H	Books of poetry, wisdom, and an apocalypse (Daniel)	Book of Hebrews, catholic epistles, and an apocalypse (Revelation)

in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Together with the Book of Genesis, which serves as an introduction to the framing of the Mosaic Covenant, this section of the Hebrew Bible is known as the **Torah** (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4). Meaning "law," "teaching," or "instruction," the Torah is also referred to as the **Pentateuch** (a Greek term for the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy). According to Mark's Gospel, when Jesus is asked to state Israel's most essential teaching, he cites Torah commands to love God and neighbor (see Mark 12: 29–31; cf. Deut. 6:4–5 and Lev. 19:18).

According to stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant, Yahweh's vow to protect Israel is contingent upon the people's faithfulness in keeping Yahweh's instructions; failure to obey the more than 600 covenant laws will result in Israel's destruction (Deut. 28–29; see Box 3.1). Some of Israel's later prophets concluded that the people had been so disobedient that Yahweh eventually rescinded his covenant vow, abandoning Israel to its enemies. Writing about 600 years before the time of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah promised that Yahweh would replace the old Mosaic agreement with a "new covenant [testament]" (Jer. 31:31).

The Gospel writers believed that Jesus had instituted the promised New Covenant at the Last Supper he held with his disciples. "And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying Drink ye all of it: For this is my blood of the new testament . . ." (Matt. 26:27–28, King James Version). The adjective *new,* not present in the earliest manuscripts, was added to emphasize the change in God's relationship with humankind. (Most modern English translations, including the New Revised Standard Version, the New Jerusalem Bible, and the Revised English Bible, omit the interpolated "new" and use "covenant" instead of "testament" in this passage.) Believing themselves to be the people of the New Covenant that Jesus inaugurated the night before his death, Christians eventually called their collection of Gospels, letters, and other sacred writings the New Testament. Although the Hebrew Bible, which dealt with the older Mosaic Covenant, became known as the Old Testament, many scholars

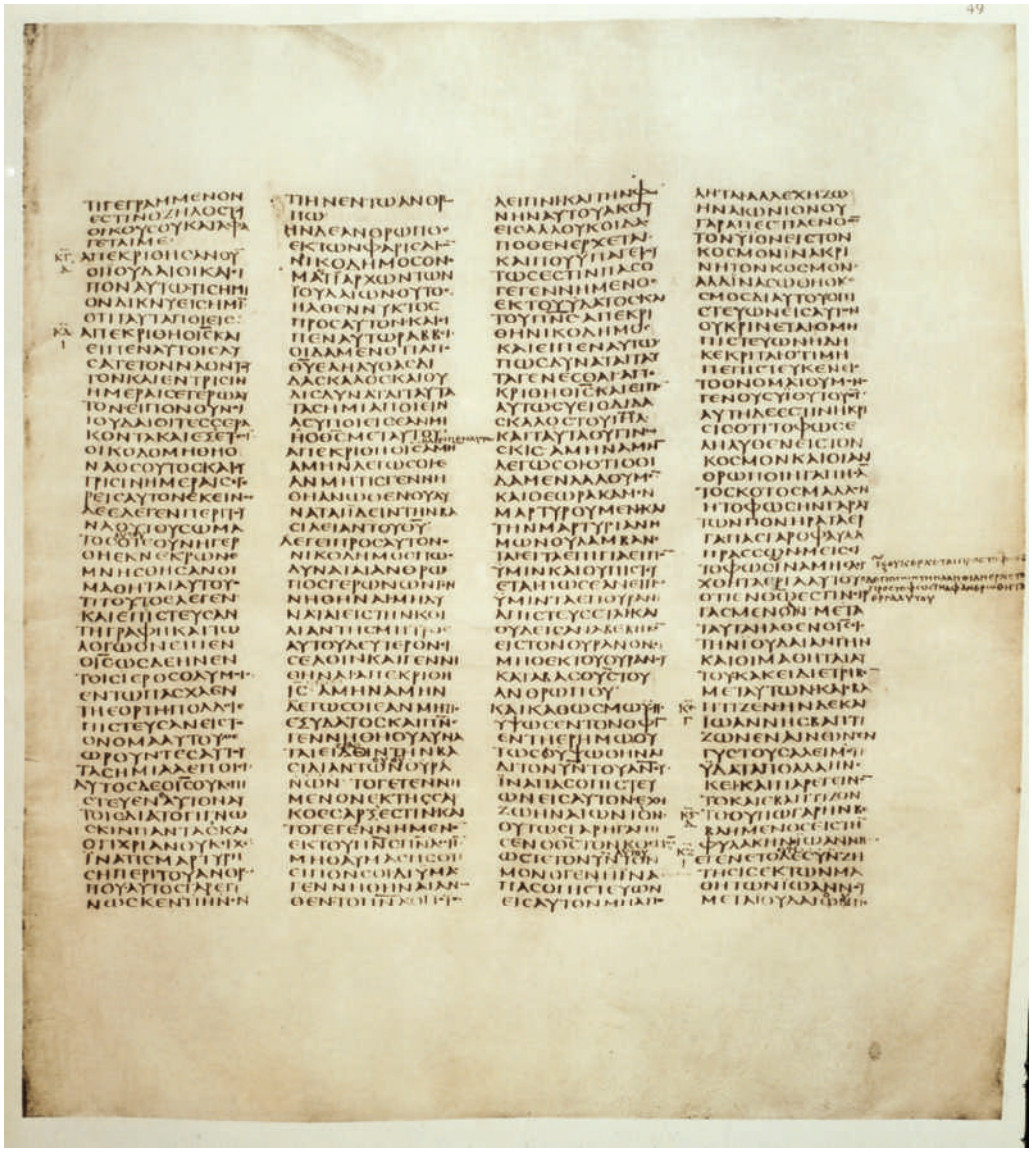

FIGURE 1.3 A page from John's Gospel in the Codex Sinaiticus. The oldest complete copy of the New Testament, the Codex Sinaiticus was produced about 330–350 CE.

suggest that it would be more appropriate to call it the First Testament. Because Christians believed that the covenants and promises made to Israel were fulfilled in Jesus, they retained their Greek version of the Hebrew Bible as authoritative and suitable for religious instruction.

The Septuagint

Although New Testament writers regarded the Hebrew Bible as their principal source for documenting their claim that Jesus was Israel's prophesied Messiah, they did not quote from the original

FIGURE 1.4 A Torah scroll. Copies of the Mosaic Torah are kept in every Jewish temple or synagogue. This elegant manuscript is approximately one-third the size of the standard Torah scroll.

Hebrew text. Instead, they used a popular Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that had been produced for Greek-speaking Jews who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, then one of the world's largest centers of literary and scientific research. Beginning about 250 BCE with a rendition of the Pentateuch into Greek, the Septuagint grew in discrete stages as historical, prophetic, and other books were added over time. According to a tradition preserved in the Letter of Aristeas, however, the Septuagint was almost miraculously produced. In the Aristeas account, which most scholars believe to be legend, the Septuagint was the work of seventy-two Hebrew scholars (divided into twelve groups of six) who labored seventy-two days to create a set of identical translations, their remarkable agreement signifying divine guidance in the project. Abbreviated in informal usage to "the work of the seventy," the Septuagint (represented by the roman numeral LXX) became the standard biblical text for Jews throughout the Greco-Roman world and is the version quoted most frequently in the New Testament.

Language and Literature of the New Testament

Koinē Greek

The New Testament was written in the same kind of ***koinē*** (common) Greek as the Septuagint. The most widely spoken language of the early Christian era, *koinē* became the dominant tongue of the eastern Mediterranean region after the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE; see Chapter 4). Although less polished and elegant than the classical Greek of the great Athenian poets and philosophers, *koinē* was then spoken by so large a percentage of the population that it communicated far more effectively than Hebrew or Latin.

Major Contributors to the New Testament

Most of the New Testament's twenty-seven books were composed during the half-century between

BOX 1.4 New Testament Books: Approximate Order of Composition

APPROX. DATE (CE)	TITLE OF BOOK	AUTHOR
c. 50	1 Thessalonians 2 Thess. (if by Paul)	Paul
c. 54–55	1 and 2 Corinthians	Paul
c. 56	Galatians	Paul
c. 56–57	Romans	Paul
c. 61	Colossians (if by Paul)	Paul
c. 61	Philippians	Paul
c. 62	Philemon	Paul
c. 66–70	Gospel of Mark	Anonymous
66–73	**Jewish War Against Rome: Destruction of Jerusalem and Temple**	
c. 80–85	Gospel of Matthew	Anonymous
c. 85–90	Gospel of Luke, Book of Acts	Anonymous
c. 85–95	Hebrews, 1 Peter, Ephesians, James	Anonymous/Pseudonymous*
c. 95	Revelation (the Apocalypse)	John of Patmos
c. 95–100	Gospel of John	Anonymous
c. 100–110	1, 2, and 3 John	Anonymous
c. 110–130	1 and 2 Timothy, Titus	Pseudonymous
c. 130–150	Jude, 2 Peter	Pseudonymous

*Pseudonymity—the literary practice, common among ancient Greco-Roman, Jewish, and early Christian writers, of composing books in the name of a famous religious figure of the past.

about 50 and 100 CE, although a few did not appear until the early decades of the second century CE (see Box 1.4). The oldest surviving Christian documents are the letters of **Paul,** a Greek-educated Jew who wrote the first—and by far the most influential—interpretations of Jesus' death on the cross. For Paul, Jesus' humiliating execution by Roman soldiers was not a historical accident, but an essential event in God's plan for reconciling humanity to its Creator. Written between about 50 and 62 CE, Paul's letters to newly founded congregations in Greece, Italy, and Asia Minor (modern Turkey) were highly controversial at the time of their composition. Paul, who claimed that he received his unique "gospel" directly from the risen Jesus (Gal. 1:11–12), argued that God had graciously extended his covenant to people of all nationalities. In Paul's view, moreover, Gentiles (non-Jews) did not have to obey Torah requirements, such as circumcision and dietary laws—a claim that seemed too radical for many believers. As Gentiles flocked in ever-increasing numbers to the church, however, Paul's innovative doctrines not only prevailed but eventually became central to mainstream Christianity.

Paul's legacy greatly influenced Christian editors who assembled the New Testament books. His genuine letters, as well as several that were ascribed to him by later Pauline disciples (see Chapter 17), constitute about a third of the New Testament. In addition, an idealized portrayal of Paul dominates the second half of the Book of Acts, a selective account of the early church. Composed by the same author, the Gospel of Luke and Acts together make up another third of the New Testament

collection. If we also add the Gospel of John and the three letters (1, 2, and 3 John) that originated in the same distinctive community, it's apparent that a relatively small group of writers collectively produced about three-fourths of the New Testament's total length. Although these few authors—Paul, Paul's disciples, the compiler of Luke-Acts, and the author of the literature ascribed to John—effectively define the Christian revelation, other writers also made important contributions. Certainly the author of the Gospel ascribed to Matthew, which contains the fullest collection of Jesus' teachings, had a major impact on Christian thought. Revelation, brimming with mystical imagery of angels and dragons, has never ceased to capture the Christian imagination.

The Supreme Importance of Jesus

To an incalculable extent, every book in the collection is a celebration of Jesus' significance: He is not only the chief agent of human salvation but also a figure of cosmic dimensions. Regarding Jesus' life and teachings as the culmination of God's revelation to humankind, the author of Hebrews asserts that Jesus is absolutely unique:

> When in former times God spoke to our forefathers [in the Hebrew Bible], he spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion through the prophets. But in this the final age, he has spoken to us in the Son whom he has made heir to the whole universe, and through whom he created all orders of existence.
>
> (Heb. 1:1–2)

From the Christian perspective, Jesus is the heir to all God's promises to Israel, intrinsically superior to any previous biblical figure or angelic member of the heavenly court. Only he is essential to God's creative process and only he perfectly expresses the divine nature: "The Son," Hebrews declares, "is the effulgence of God's splendor and the stamp of God's very being, and sustains the universe by his word of power" (Heb. 1:3). Despite his present exalted status, however, the human Jesus validated his position as divine son through painful testing. Submitting fully to God's will, "son though he was, he learned obedience in the school of suffering, and, once perfected, became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:7–10). Obedient unto death, Jesus posthumously ascended to heaven, where he is now seated "at the right hand of Majesty on high, raised as far above the angels, as the title he has inherited is superior to theirs [other members of the celestial assembly]" (Heb. 1:3–4). According to Hebrews' author, to Jesus alone has God declared: "Thou art my Son; today I have begotten thee" (Heb. 1:5), a statement that was traditionally spoken at the coronation of Israel's kings when they were ceremonially adopted as God's sons (Ps. 2:7; see the discussion of Israel's Messiah in Chapter 3).

Jesus' central position in the New Testament is affirmed from the first book in the collection, the Gospel of Matthew, to the last, John's visions of the cosmic Christ in Revelation. Matthew opens his Gospel with a genealogy showing Jesus' descent from great figures of the Hebrew Bible, including Abraham, traditional progenitor of the Jewish people, and David, the ruler of Israel to whom God promised an eternal line of kings. In recounting the story of Jesus' birth, Matthew introduces an astronomical image that reappears—with major changes—in Revelation and that imparts a cosmic frame to the entire New Testament collection. In Matthew, a mysterious star leads foreign astrologers to visit Jesus' birthplace, inadvertently inciting King Herod's attempt to kill the child (Matt. 2:1–12). In Revelation's description of the risen Jesus, the once vulnerable infant has become a gigantic figure dominating the sky and holding a vast constellation of stars in one hand (Rev. 1:8–2:1). Editors thus gave the New Testament a linear narrative structure that begins with Matthew's endangered child and closes with visions of a future new creation ruled by that same Jesus, now transformed into ruler of the universe.

New Testament Literary Forms

The New Testament contains several different genres (categories) of literature, although it has considerably less variety than the Hebrew Bible. Early Christian editors arranged the contents not in chronological order according to dates of composition, but

according to the documents' literary classification, beginning with the Gospels and ending with the Book of Revelation.

The Gospels The only literary category that early Christians invented, the English word **"Gospel"** translates the Greek *evangelion,* meaning "good news." Designed to proclaim the "good news" about Jesus, the Gospels tell the story of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. The term **Evangelist** refers to the writer of an *evangelion* (Gospel).

In the Greek-speaking world of New Testament times, *evangelion* commonly was used to denote public proclamations about the Roman emperor. The emperor's military victories, welfare policies, and elevation to the status of a god were typical examples of Roman "good news" to be "evangelized" (see the discussion of the imperial ruler cult in Chapter 5). Paul uses *evangelion* to describe his oral message about salvation through faith in Jesus. Matthew also employs it to denote Jesus' spoken teachings (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; 26:13). To distinguish *gospel,* an oral message, from *Gospel,* a literary work about Jesus, we will capitalize the term when it refers to the written Gospel form.

By definition, a Gospel must involve the deeds and/or words of Jesus. Although all four New Testament Gospels are narratives—they tell a story—about Jesus' actions and teachings, early Christians also produced Gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas, that include only Jesus' sayings. Recovered in 1945 from the desert sands of Egypt, the Gospel of Thomas, among many other early Christian writings, is not accepted among the New Testament's officially recognized books (see the discussion of canon in Chapter 2).

Although they present Jesus' activities in ostensibly chronological order, the Gospels are not real biographies in the modern sense. They do not attempt to present a complete life of Jesus or to explain what forces—social, psychological, cultural, historical, or political—caused him to become the kind of man he was. Only two of the Gospels—Matthew and Luke—include traditions about Jesus' birth and infancy. None gives even a scrap of information about his formative years, education, friendships, or other experiences that modern historians would regard as essential. Luke recounts a single incident of Jesus' youth, a pilgrimage from his hometown of Nazareth to Jerusalem, Judaism's holy city (Luke 2:22–40). But the Gospels tell us nothing about what happened to Jesus between the ages of twelve and "about thirty" (Luke 3:23), when he suddenly appears at the River Jordan for baptism. All four concentrate exclusively on the last phase of Jesus' life, the period of his public ministry when his teachings both attracted devoted followers and created bitter enemies.

In all four Gospel accounts, only the final week of Jesus' human existence is related in detail—the events leading up to and including his arrest, trial, and execution by the Romans. The significance of Jesus' suffering and death (known as the **Passion**) is the central concern of each Evangelist. Even the Fourth Gospel (John), which includes a longer version of Jesus' public career than any other, devotes nearly half of its narrative to retelling the story of Jesus' last few days on earth. Observing this emphasis of the Evangelists, New Testament scholars have described the Gospel form as a Passion narrative with a long introduction. All incidents in Jesus' life leading up to his crucifixion are rigorously subordinated to the climactic circumstances of his death. The Gospels' form and content are shaped not by purely historical or biographical considerations, but by their respective authors' theological viewpoints. Combining the Greek *theos* (God) with *logos* (word or logical analysis), *theology* means "a study of God." It is a religious discipline involving the study of God's nature, will, and activity among humankind. The theologian typically defines and interprets systems of belief that express a religion's essential worldview. The Gospel writers are theologians, and like all New Testament authors, the Evangelists write primarily to voice their individual understanding of Jesus' religious or theological significance.

By placing four different versions of Jesus' story at the head of the New Testament collection, Christian editors not only highlighted the diverse ways in which Jesus could be interpreted acceptably by four different Christian writers but also affirmed the supreme importance of Jesus' achievement. The order of contents thus emphasizes the primacy of Jesus' story, the four Gospels together forming

a composite foundation document for the Christian religion. No matter how influential the writings that appear later, such as Paul's letters with their innovative declaration that salvations comes to Jew and Gentile alike through faith in Christ, they must always be weighed against the initial presentations of what Jesus said and did.

An Account of the Early Church To a large extent, the books that follow the Gospels either explore the consequences of Jesus' life and death or offer interpretative meditations on their meaning. A continuation of Luke's Gospel, the Book of Acts portrays Jesus' followers carrying on his work, directed by the same divine Spirit that had animated Jesus. Opening with a brief description of the resurrected Jesus' ascension to heaven and ending with Paul's preaching activity in Rome, Acts narrates a series of crucial episodes in Christianity's early development, covering the years from about 30 to 60 CE.

Letters Whereas Acts gives a theological overview of Christianity's rapid expansion in the Roman Empire, the New Testament's twenty-one letters (some of which are actually sermons or tracts) offer close-up views of individual Christian communities and their difficulties in trying to follow Jesus in a sometimes hostile world. Letters by (or attributed to) Paul form a major unit of the collection. Written before the Gospels appeared, the authentic Pauline letters vividly reflect the struggle for unity of thought and purpose taking place in the Greek-speaking congregations that Paul served.

The miscellaneous documents comprising the final part of the New Testament echo the hopes and troubles of widely scattered churches in the late first and early second centuries CE, a period well after that of Paul's missionary tours. Whereas the Book of Hebrews is anonymous, the seven short works known as the catholic epistles are ascribed to early leaders in the original Jerusalem church, the apostles Peter and John and two of Jesus' kinsmen, James and Jude. Although several of the epistles were not accorded undisputed scriptural status until the late fourth century, they express the postapostolic church's ongoing anxieties, particularly the problems raised by false teachers and the inexplicable delay in Jesus' promised return (see Chapter 18).

An Apocalypse The Book of Revelation represents the fourth and final literary category in the Christian Scriptures. The title *Revelation* translates the Greek noun *apokalypsis,* which means an "uncovering" or "unveiling." Like other **apocalyptic literature,** Revelation features visions of an unseen world inhabited by spirit creatures both good and evil. It highlights the cosmic struggle between God and Satan, a conflict involving both heaven and earth that ultimately sees evil defeated, God's kingdom triumphant, and the creation of a new earth and heaven (Rev. 12; 16; 20–21). Revelation's message is urgent, demanding that believers hold firm in the faith because, like Paul, the author of Mark's Gospel, and other apocalyptic writers, the author believes that the universal war he envisions is about to begin. This climactic event "must shortly happen" because Jesus is "coming soon" (Rev. 1:1, 3; 12:12; 22:7, 11, 12).

Apocalyptic ideas played an extremely important role in early Christian thought and dominate many passages in the New Testament. As we study the Gospel accounts of Jesus' preaching, we will find numerous apocalyptic concepts, commonly involving **eschatology.** Derived from two Greek phrases—*to eschaton* (referring to the world's end) and *ho logos* (meaning "study of")—eschatology refers to beliefs about events occurring at the End of time. On a personal level, eschatology involves momentous events at the end of an individual's life: death, posthumous judgment, heaven, hell, and resurrection. On a more general level, it relates to developments that culminate in the End of human society and history as we know them.

Although the twenty-seven documents composing the New Testament generally fit into one of four broad literary genres, most also contain a number of subgenres. The Gospels, for example, include not only biographical narratives about Jesus but also such disparate forms as genealogies, parables, aphorisms, confrontation stories, miracle stories, prayers, reconstructions of conversations, and, in the case of John's Gospel, long metaphysical discourses. The Book of Acts similarly incorporates public speeches,

private dialogues, anecdotes about individual figures, and perhaps even excerpts from a diary or travel journal.

Some documents grouped in the third section—the Pauline letters and catholic epistles—are technically not forms of correspondence. Except for its opening phrases, the Book of James is more like a collection of traditional wisdom sayings than a letter. The Book of Hebrews is actually an elaborate sermon, whereas 1 John and Jude resemble tracts directed against opponents who were (or had been) part of their respective authors' religious communities.

Diversity and Unity in the New Testament Documents

The New Testament's variety of literary genres is paralleled by the diversity of its authors' thoughts. Whereas all canonical writers are unified in their conviction of Jesus' supreme value, they respond to his life and teachings in significantly different ways. Modern scholarship has increasingly come to realize that early Christians not only were an ethnically and theologically diverse group but also produced a literature—including the New Testament books—reflecting that diversity. Scholars such as Raymond E. Brown and James D. G. Dunn (see "Recommended Reading") have explored the intellectual, social, and theological forces operating in—and in some cases dividing—different early Christian communities.

Paul's genuine letters, written to largely Gentile (non-Jewish) congregations between about 50 and 62 CE, advocate a Gentile Christian's total freedom from the "bondage" of Mosaic Law. In contrast, the Gospel of Matthew, probably composed in Antioch for Jews converted to Christianity, promotes continuing obedience to the Mosaic heritage. A third group, which emphasized the unique divinity of Jesus, issued the Gospel of John as its foundation document. That community, based on the teachings of "the disciple whom Jesus loved," later split into factions debating the question of Jesus' physical humanity, a division reflected in the letters of 1 and 2 John.

After Paul's death, a variety of writers claimed his authority for their particular group. While one Pauline school created the Book of Ephesians, updating Paul's thought to deal with new issues and situations, another composed the Letters to Timothy and Titus, promulgating church structure, administrative authority, and the power of received tradition (see Chapter 17). Whereas these pseudo-Pauline works were eventually accepted into the New Testament, others also attributed to the apostle, such as the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, were not.

After Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE—and along with it Christianity's parent church (see Chapters 2 and 5)—New Testament writers differed in their attitude toward the secular government. Although he generally adopts a policy of cooperation with Roman authorities, the author of Luke-Acts also reveals that missionaries' preaching often provoked riots and other disturbances in many Greco-Roman cities, causing serious problems for public officials (see Box 12.4). The fiery visionary who wrote Revelation rejects the imperial system altogether and predicts its imminent destruction (see Chapter 19).

Other Early Christian Literature

In addition to the twenty-seven documents comprised in the New Testament, the early Christian community produced a large number of other writings, most of which are in the same literary genres as the New Testament books—Gospels, letters, and acts of the apostles (see Box 1.5). Some of these works, once included in church lists of "recognized books" along with familiar New Testament titles, are as old as or older than many documents that Christians eventually included in their bibles. No one knows why some documents were accepted by the early churches and others were not. Paul wrote letters other than those now in the New Testament (1 Cor. 5:9–11); we cannot be sure that their exclusion was the result of their being destroyed or otherwise lost. Specific works may have been accepted or rejected primarily because of their relative usefulness in supporting

BOX 1.5 Selected List of Early Christian Gospels, Apocalypses, and Other Writings Not Included in the New Testament

WORKS FORMERLY APPEARING IN SOME NEW TESTAMENT LISTS

- The Epistle of Barnabas (attributed to Paul's Jewish-Christian mentor)
- The Didache (supposedly a summary of the Twelve Apostles' teachings on the opposing ways leading to life or death)
- 1 Clement (a letter by the third bishop of Rome to the Corinthians)
- The Apocalypse of Peter (visions of heaven and hell ascribed to Peter)
- The Shepherd of Hermas (a mystical apocalyptic work)

GOSPELS POSSIBLY PRESERVING SOME OF JESUS' TEACHINGS OR OTHER HISTORICAL INFORMATION ABOUT HIM

- The Gospel of Thomas (a compilation of 114 sayings of Jesus found in the Nag Hammadi Library)
- The Gospel of Peter (a primitive account of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection ascribed to Peter)
- The Egerton Papyrus 2 (a fragment of an unknown Gospel that may have provided a source for some of the Johannine discourses)
- The Apocryphon of James (a private dialogue between Jesus and two disciples, Peter and James)

OTHER GOSPELS, MOST SURVIVING ONLY IN FRAGMENTARY FORM

- The Protoevangelium of James (complete)
- The Dialogue of the Savior
- The Gospel of Judas
- The Gospel of the Egyptians
- The Gospel of the Hebrews
- The Gospel of the Nazoreans
- The Gospel of the Ebionites
- The Infancy Gospel of Thomas (complete)
- Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 840

MISCELLANEOUS OTHER WORKS

- The Acts of Pilate
- The Acts of John
- The Epistula Apostolorum
- 2 Clement
- The Epistle to Diognetus

OTHER IMPORTANT EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

- The Epistles of Ignatius:
  - To the Ephesians
  - To the Magnesians
  - To the Trallians
  - To the Romans
  - To the Philadelphians
  - To the Smyrnaeans
  - To Polycarp
- The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians
- The Martyrdom of Polycarp

what was later regarded as **orthodoxy**—"correct teaching" promoted by church leaders.

Although many early Christian writings have disappeared and are known only by title, enough remain to indicate that the early Christian community was extremely diverse and created a literature that expressed that diversity. Rather than a monolithic organization in which all members embraced a single "true faith," Christianity, for the first three centuries of its existence, interpreted Jesus in a variety of ways. Whereas some Jewish-Christian groups in Palestine and Syria regarded Jesus as fully human, a man whom God adopted as his "son" to represent him on earth, some

Christians in Rome claimed that Jesus was entirely divine, a spirit being who only appeared to be human. If we were to travel back in time to the second century CE, visiting individual congregations of believers in different geographical regions—from Galilee (where the Jesus movement began), to Antioch in Syria (where Peter had taught), to Ephesus (from which Paul conducted missionary journeys to non-Jewish peoples), to Rome (where different interpreters of Jesus' nature passionately clashed)—we would find a diversity not unlike that which prevails in different denominations today. All of these groups, ancient and modern, emphasized the importance of Jesus in God's plan for humanity, but as their literary remains testify, they understood his role in very different ways.

Scholarly Approaches to the New Testament

The presence of numerous similarities, as well as some striking differences, in both the New Testament books and other early Christian writings suggests the need for a careful comparison of these documents if we are to understand the complex forces that helped shape Christianity. To help untangle the complexities, and even contradictions, apparent in formative Christian literature, modern scholarship has devised several methodologies for analyzing the texts. In approaching the New Testament analytically, it is important to remember that studying the Bible in a college or university classroom necessarily differs from reading it in church as part of an act of worship. At a religious service, whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant, short excerpts to be read aloud usually are chosen to encourage listeners to behave ethically: Stories of biblical heroes or villains offer models for worshipers to emulate or avoid. In a devotional setting, the Bible speaks with largely undisputed authority.

In a university environment, however, the Bible is studied in the same way as any other literary document from the ancient world. Using techniques similar to those applied in the disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and literary studies, students investigate such topics as the question of a document's date and authorship, the implied audience and social setting, the historical context, and the writer's apparent assumptions and goals. It is essential to read carefully to perceive what a text actually says (as opposed to what one may have been told about it elsewhere) and to compare it to similar works written at approximately the same time and under the same cultural influences. Comparative study of the Gospels, which were composed between about 70 and 100 CE, reveals much about their individual authors' distinctive theological concerns, helping to explain reasons for both similarities and differences in their accounts.

Since the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, when scientists and other scholars developed analytical tools to clear away long-held misconceptions about both the natural and the social worlds, virtually all forms of traditional authority have been challenged. In physics, the work of Newton—Einstein in the twentieth century—and other scientists revolutionized our understanding of the universe. In the political arena, rebels challenged the claim that kings ruled by divine right, triggering the American and French revolutions. In the social world, long-accepted institutions, such as slavery, exploitative child labor, and the subjugation of women, were questioned or replaced by more just practices. Religious claims, including authoritarian uses of the Bible, were similarly scrutinized. During the past two centuries, an international community of scholars—Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and others—has developed innovative methods to illuminate the nature and growth of biblical documents. This cosmopolitan body of scholars, historians, textual experts, literary critics, linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, and theologians includes thousands of university faculty, clergy, seminary instructors, and academic researchers. Collectively, their efforts have provided us with an increasingly precise and well-documented study of the New Testament literature and the environment out of which it grew. Virtually every textbook used in college and seminary courses today, including this one, draws heavily on these scholarly resources. (At the end of each chapter in this text, readers will find a list of publications by major New Testament

BOX 1.6 Helpful Tools for Studying the New Testament

Several one-volume Bible dictionaries offer concise alphabetized mini-essays on important topics:

Brown, R. E.; Fitzmeyer, J. A.; and Murphy, R. E., eds. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990. Although slightly dated, provides excellent discussions of all canonical books by leading Catholic scholars.

Collins, John J. and Harlow, Daniel C., eds. *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010. An indispensable resource for learning about Jesus.

Evans, Craig A., and Porter, Stanley E., eds. *Dictionary of New Testament Background.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000. Contains essays by generally conservative scholars.

Freedman, David Noel; Myers, Allen C.; and Beck, Astrid B., eds. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000. Current and scholarly, an excellent resource.

Powell, Mark A., ed. *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (Revised and Updated), New York: HarperOne, 2011. Concise, comprehensive, and generally reliable.

Multivolume bible aids include the following:

Coogan, Michael D., ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, 2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Up-to-date scholarly essays on each book of both the Old and the New Testament.

Keck, Leander, ed. *The New Interpreter's Bible,* 12 vols. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1994–2015. A series featuring the complete text of the Bible, in both the NRSV and NIV translations, with detailed scholarly commentary.

Sakenfeld, Katherine D., ed. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* 5 vols. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2006–2010. Authoritative scholarly discussions of each biblical book as well as many crucial topics, from the afterlife to Yahweh.

scholars, offering valuable references for further study; see also Box 1.6.)

Some of the principal methods that scholars use to study the New Testament are summarized in Chapter 6; here, we will briefly clarify the term *biblical criticism.* For some people, the term *criticism* may awaken negative feelings, perhaps implying faultfinding or a derogatory judgment. But in biblical studies, it is a positive means of understanding scriptural texts more accurately. *Criticism* derives from the Greek word *krino,* which means "to judge" or "to discern," to exercise rational analysis in evaluating something. In the fields of art and literature, it involves the ability to recognize artistic worth and to distinguish the relative merits or defects of a given work. In New Testament studies, various critical methods are used, ranging from techniques for investigating the oral traditions that preceded the written Gospels to literary analysis of their final form, structure, and content.

Because, for hundreds of millions of believers, the New Testament embodies their deeply held convictions and spiritual aspirations, approaching it objectively is difficult. For some readers, the rigorous application of dispassionate logic to documents thought to reveal the divine will seems inappropriate. For many people, however, spirituality, reverence for concepts of divinity, love of the biblical tradition, and critical study are not incompatible; from this perspective, thinking analytically about religious texts and the cultural environment that helped shape them is both a tribute to the texts' intrinsic value and a means of better understanding them. Many scholars believe that the scriptures of most world religions, including

the Vedas, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Quran, were composed to express authentic human experiences of divine power—represented by such classic moments as Moses encountering God at a burning bush on the slopes of Mount Sinai, Jesus hearing a heavenly voice after his baptism at the Jordan River, and Paul beholding the glorified Christ on the road to Damascus. These unique religious experiences, which seem to transcend the ordinary limits of human life, if they are to be preserved for others, must be articulated in human language that is ill equipped to express unearthly realities. Writing of Jesus' apparently supernatural abilities and personal vision of God's kingdom, the New Testament authors inevitably depicted them in terms of the prevailing culture, using then-current images and metaphors to approximate the inexpressible. Although scholarship cannot investigate the world of the spirit or the elusive dimension of religious transcendence the biblical authors explore, it offers enormous help in examining the means—cultural, social, historical, and literary—by which ancient writers conveyed these phenomena to us.

The New Testament Read from Different Social Perspectives

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly aware that the meaning of any book—including biblical texts—is to a large extent dependent on the reader's individual experience and viewpoint. In the United States, this is particularly true when readers belong to social groups such as ethnic or other minorities that the dominant culture may commonly undervalue or otherwise marginalize. Viewing New Testament passages from a specific social location—such as the African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, Native American, or feminist community—is likely to give these stories a meaning that is distinctly different from interpretations traditionally promoted by society's male Caucasian leadership. When an African American whose forebears were plantation slaves reads the New Testament admonition for servants to submit cheerfully to their masters, no matter how abusive (1 Pet. 2:18–20; Col. 3:22; Eph. 6:5), the command is likely to resonate differently for her than it will for the descendants of white slave owners.

As feminist scholars have pointed out, women of all nationalities may read the Christian Scriptures from a perspective fundamentally different from that of most men. Paul's flat refusal to permit a woman to teach in his churches (1 Cor. 14:34–35) or the pastor's insistence that the first woman must be blamed for humanity's downward spiral into sin and death (1 Tim. 2:13–14) may spark feelings of incredulity or resentment unknown to men reading the same texts. But, as feminist commentators have also observed, the same apostle who allegedly forbade women to address the congregation also recognized the role of women prophets (1 Cor. 11:5) and women as church officeholders, as well as "fellow workers" in the Christian fold (Rom. 16:1–5). Some scholars believe that the restrictions imposed on women in 1 Corinthians 14 are a later copyist's interpolation, to make Paul's instructions conform to the anti-feminist passages in a later (non-Pauline) letter (1 Tim. 3:11; see Chapter 14). (For discussions of the importance of women in Jesus' ministry and in the Pauline congregations, see Chapters 9 and 13 and Box 10.5; a discussion of the noncanonical Acts of Paul and Thecla, a legendary female disciple, appears in Chapter 20.)

At his most insightful, Paul endorses a vision of radical equality—legal, ethnic, social, and sexual: "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). For most societies, Paul's goal of an equal and united Christian fellowship is yet to be realized; most religious groups seem content to accept his more conventional statements regulating the social/sexual hierarchy. Both male and female scholars have come increasingly to see, however, that not only Paul but also much of our biblical heritage contains disparate elements that are almost inextricably blended: material that is at once marked as severely limited by its origin in intensely traditional ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean societies and at the same time material that seems to transcend its culture-bound limitations to express

universal principles of divine love and the humane treatment of all peoples. Consistent in all the traditions about Jesus' teaching is his emphasis on the supremacy of love, the transforming practice of selfless devotion that redeems interpersonal relationships and makes possible divine rule on earth (cf. Mark 12:28–31; Matt. 5:44–48; John 14:34–35; 15:9–10; 1 Cor. 13, etc.). The challenge to discern such abiding values in the biblical message will shape the contours of our journey through the diverse literature of the New Testament.

Summary

One among many of the world's sacred books, the New Testament is a collection of Greek documents that early Christian writers composed between about 50 and 140 CE. It forms the second part of the Christian Bible, the larger first section of which is the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), an older anthology of writings than the Jewish community produced. Besides the twenty-seven books included in the New Testament, early Christian authors also created many other religious works, only a few of which, such as the Gospel of Thomas, have survived. Because it combines aspects of both Jewish and Greek thought, scholars study the New Testament in the context of the culturally diverse environment in which it originated. Analyzing such elements as authorship, date of composition, literary form, thematic concerns, and theological content of New Testament texts, modern scholars endeavor to increase our understanding of these enormously influential documents.

Questions for Review

1. Define the term *testament,* and explain the relationship of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) to the New Testament.
2. What version of the Hebrew Bible did early Christians use? In what common language were the Septuagint and New Testament written?
3. Define and describe the major literary forms (genres) contained in the New Testament.
4. Which part of the New Testament was written first? Who was the author, and when did he write?
5. Describe the overall structure of the New Testament. In what specific ways does the figure of Jesus dominate the entire collection of books?
6. What is an apocalypse? Define the terms *apocalyptic* (adjective) and *eschatology* (noun), and explain their application to the early Christian worldview.
7. What evidence do we have of diversity in the early Christian community?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Try to define and describe the New Testament to someone who has never before heard of it. In what ways does this collection of early Christian documents resemble the scriptures of other world religions? In what ways does the New Testament differ from other sacred books?
2. The literary form or category in which writers choose to convey their ideas always influences the way in which those ideas are expressed. Why do you suppose early Christian writers invented the Gospel form to express their views about Jesus? Why do you think all four Gospel authors focused on the last week of Jesus' life?
3. Only one Gospel writer also wrote a history of the early church, continuing his story of the Jesus movement with additional stories about a few of Jesus' followers. Given that the New Testament contains *four* different accounts of Jesus' ministry, why do you think there is only *one* narrative about the church?
4. Of the twenty-seven early New Testament books, twenty-one are nominally letters. Why do you suppose the letter form was so popular among early Christians? In a church scattered throughout the Roman Empire, what advantage did letter writing have over other literary forms?
5. How can modern scholarship help us better understand the origin and growth of the New Testament? Discuss ways to distinguish essential religious experiences and spiritual insights from "culture-bound" interpretations of them.

Terms and Concepts to Remember*

apocalyptic literature
Aramaic
Bible
covenant (testament)
eschatology
Evangelist
Gospel
Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)
Israel

*Key terms appear at the end of each chapter and are defined in the Glossary at the back of the book.

Jesus
koinē
Messiah
Mosaic Covenant
Moses
orthodoxy
Palestine
Passion
Paul
Pentateuch
Promised Land
scriptures
Septuagint
Torah
Yahweh

Recommended Reading

Bailey, James L., and Vander Broek, Lyle. *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook.* Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. An excellent discussion of literary categories found in the New Testament.

Brown, Raymond E. *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind.* New York: Paulist Press, 1984. A brief but authoritative survey of seven different Christian communities—and their distinctive theologies—that produced major parts of the New Testament literature.

Dunn, James D. G. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity,* 2nd ed. London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1990. Contains a detailed examination of theological differences manifested in different New Testament books, as well as a summary of nine themes contributing to theological unity of canonical authors.

Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Includes Gospels, letters, and apocalypses not in the New Testament.

Evans, Craig A., and Porter, Stanley E., eds. *Dictionary of the New Testament Background.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000. Contains extended entries on both Greco-Roman and Jewish topics relating to early Christianity, from a generally traditional perspective.

Gamble, Harry Y. *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995. Explores such topics as the extent of literacy in the Greco-Roman world, the interaction of oral and written materials in the early Christian community, and the community's production and circulation of books.

Gneuse, Robert. *The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation and the Canon of Scripture.* New York: Paulist Press, 1985. A brief but thoughtful review of biblical authority and the nature of divine inspiration.

Massey, James E. "Reading the Bible as African Americans." In *The New Interpreter's Bible,* Vol. 1, pp. 154–160. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1994. Briefly surveys issues involving slavery and African American churches' use of Scripture.

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Reid, Barbara. *Taking Up the Cross: New Testament Interpretation Through Latina and Feminist Eyes.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. Explores the Passion story, relating Jesus' suffering to situations of women in Latin America.

Wicker, Kathleen; Dube, Musa; and Spencer, Althea, eds. *Feminist New Testament Studies: Global and Future Perspectives.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Feminist readings of the Christian Scriptures emphasizing a multiethnic and international context.

CHAPTER 2

How the New Testament Was Formed and Handed Down to Us

Of making many books there is no end . . . Ecclesiastes 12:12, NRSV

Key Topics/Themes Although the early Christian community produced many writings during the period when the New Testament books were composed (c. 50–140 CE), most were not accepted into the canon, the official list of church-approved documents. The process of canonization continued for several centuries; it was not until 367 CE that a canonical list corresponding exactly to the present New Testament first appeared, and even afterward church lists of approved books differed. Because no original copies of any canonical work survive and there are hundreds of variations in extant manuscripts, scholars must compare many different versions in creating a plausible Greek text from which modern translations are made. Although the first translators of the Bible into English, Wycliffe and Tyndale, were condemned by the church of their day, the Christian Scriptures are now available in many excellent English editions.

Formation of the New Testament Canon

For Jesus and his earliest followers, the only authoritative Scripture was the three-part Hebrew Bible. According to the Gospel of Luke, written perhaps fifty-five or sixty years after Jesus' death, the risen Jesus instructed his disciples in the proper application of the Jewish Bible, which was to interpret it as a series of prophecies about his role as Messiah. "'Everything written about me,'" Jesus states, "'in the Law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms was bound to be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:44–45). When New Testament writers, who were active between about 50 and 140 CE, quote Scripture, they quote exclusively from the Hebrew Bible, albeit in an expanded Greek edition.

The earliest contributor to the New Testament, Paul repeatedly emphasized that the Jewish holy writings not only anticipated Jesus' ministry and death but were directly relevant to the Christian movement. The Genesis story of Abraham, for example, was written "for our sake," for the benefit of Paul's contemporaries (Rom. 4:22–24). In fact, "all the ancient scriptures were written for our own instruction" and for Christian "encouragement" (Rom. 15:4). In urging the church at Corinth to refrain from complaints, Paul explains

that stories of Israelite "grumblings" were composed to preclude similar Christian errors: "All these things that happened to them [the Israelites] were symbolic and were recorded for our benefit as a warning. For upon us the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). For Paul, believers in Jesus are living at the brief overlap of two contrasting eras, the "present age of wickedness" (Gal. 1:4; cf. 1 Cor. 2:6), and the new age to come when God and Christ will reign completely (see Chapter 14).

Paul's genuine letters (others are attributed to his later disciples) were sent individually to disparate small congregations scattered throughout Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. Perhaps the first step in creating the New Testament occurred toward the end of the first century CE when one or more of Paul's admirers searched the archives of the various Pauline churches for surviving copies of his correspondence, gathering them together in a single unit. This anonymous Pauline disciple began an anthology of early Christian literature to which the Gospels, Acts, and other documents gradually were added, forming a New Testament canon.

A word derived from the Greek *kanon*, **canon** refers to a standard or measurement, the norm by which something is evaluated or judged acceptable. In religious usage, a canon is the official inventory of books, like those various churchmen assembled from the late second century on. Individual lists varied significantly and it took many centuries before the church as a whole recognized the twenty-seven books in the now familiar New Testament table of contents. The earliest canonical reference to any Christian writing as "scripture" appears in 2 Peter, which so designates Paul's letters (2 Peter 3:16). Most scholars date 2 Peter to about 130–140 CE and regard it as the last-written document in the New Testament canon (see Chapter 18).

At no time did a single church authority or council of church leaders formally decide on the contents of the Christian Scriptures. The long process by which the present New Testament gradually assumed its final form involved a variety of complex developments, including controversies over doctrine, particularly the nature and degree of Jesus' divinity (see the discussion of Marcion below). A document's usefulness in regulating belief—an "apostolic" understanding of essential principles—undoubtedly influenced a specific book's status. Shortly after the close of the second century CE, four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, and several other books were generally acknowledged, although at this point individual lists of acceptable documents showed marked contrasts. Different canons abounded, some including titles that would be totally unfamiliar to most of today's churchgoers, such as the Epistle of Barnabas or the Shepherd of Hermas. During the first several centuries of its development, Christianity was enormously diverse and produced an equally diverse body of literature, including numerous Gospels and other documents that claimed to be written by apostles. In the end, it was not so much a matter of what to include in the canon, but what to leave out. In the meantime, political events, as well as debates over doctrinal issues, directly or indirectly influenced the canonical process.

The Jewish Revolt Against Rome and Its Consequences

About thirty-five years after Jesus' death, the Jews of Palestine rose in open revolt against their Roman overlords (see Chapter 5). When Roman armies breached Jerusalem's walls, they slaughtered tens of thousands of Jews, burned the holy city, and demolished the Jerusalem Temple, the center of Jewish worship (70 CE). The "great tribulation" that marked Rome's destruction of the Jewish state—along with the parent church of apostolic Christianity—offers a chaotic background to the gradual formation of the New Testament, as well as to the closing stages of the Hebrew Bible canon.

At the time of the Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–73 CE), only a few books of what became the New Testament collection then existed: Paul's authentic letters; a hypothetical compilation of Jesus'

sayings known as the source (Q) document; and the Gospel of Mark (see Box 1.4). Most of the Christian Greek Scriptures were yet to be written, and it would be centuries before the church agreed on their exact contents. Echoes of the Jewish Revolt figure prominently in the first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—which devote considerable space to Jesus' prediction of the Temple's fall and to the sufferings of Jews and Christians that Jerusalem's destruction entailed. Significantly, the first three Evangelists also associate events of the Jewish Revolt, particularly the Temple's demolition, with Jesus' promised return as the glorious Son of Man (Matt. 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21; see Chapters 7–9).

Although all parts of the Hebrew Bible were completed well before the Jewish wars against Rome, the precise number of books to be included had not yet been determined. Following their suppression of the Jewish rebellion, the Romans apparently encouraged Jewish scholars who had not participated in the uprising to assemble at Jamnia (Yavneh) on the Mediterranean coast to help reorganize postwar Judaism. Led by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, a small group of rabbis ("masters" or "teachers") discussed ways to cope with the crisis—loss of Temple, priesthood, and homeland—and to provide religious leadership for the Jewish community. As noted in Chapter 3, the rabbis did not formally close the biblical canon, but they seem to have applied several criteria that excluded numerous books that many Greek-speaking Jews used outside Palestine. Accepting the thesis that inspired prophecy had ceased shortly after the time of Ezra (c. 400 BCE), the Jamnia scholars evidently rejected documents clearly composed after that period, such as the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and the books of Maccabees. Of all the extant apocalypses, only Daniel was accepted, perhaps because the author plausibly claimed to write during the sixth century BCE. Books that contradicted the Torah or that were not originally written in Hebrew, such as the Wisdom of Solomon, were also excluded. The Christian community, however, which adopted the Greek Septuagint as its preferred edition of the Bible, generally recognized the deuterocanonical status of these books the rabbis rejected. Known as the Apocrypha, these later books were eventually included in an official Latin Bible, the Vulgate (see the discussion of Jerome and the Vulgate below).

As a result of the rabbis rejecting later documents not composed in Hebrew or Aramaic, the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh has fewer books than Catholic or Orthodox Old Testaments, which include the later documents, such as Tobit, Judith, and the Wisdom of Solomon, contained in the Septuagint. By contrast, Protestant editions of the Old Testament typically follow the rabbinical model and exclude the apocryphal material (see Chapter 1).

In appropriating a Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures—and rechristening this collection as the Old Testament—the Christian movement also transformed the older Jewish writings into a Christological statement. In Christian eyes, the Old Testament served primarily to reveal Christ, not only through prophecy but also by analogy to specific biblical characters. Christian reinterpretations thus give startlingly innovative meanings to familiar Old Testament passages. Jesus of Nazareth becomes Eve's "seed" (Gen. 3:15), his death and resurrection are foreshadowed in Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22), and his universal rulership is anticipated by the reigns of Davidic Kings (2 Sam. 7; Pss. 2, 110; Isa. 7, 11, etc.).

The order in which Christian editors finally arranged the New Testament books emphasizes both Jesus' connection to characters in the Old Testament and his fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. First in the New Testament canon is Matthew's Gospel, which proclaims "Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham," the culmination of the covenant people's prophetic hopes. The other Gospels, Acts, Pauline letters, and catholic epistles similarly explicate biblical foreshadowings of Jesus' role and work. Although it took several centuries to assume this format, the Christian canon ultimately closed with the Book of Revelation and its image of Christ triumphant, subduing all nations and peoples in his universal kingdom. Because Christianity emerged historically as a messianic and apocalyptic moment within first-century CE Judaism, it is appropriate that the canonical climax occurs with Revelation's assurance that Christ is "coming soon," asserting that Jesus' return to earth—the Parousia or Second Coming—is imminent (Rev. 22:17–21) (see Chapter 19).

Jesus' failure to return visibly may have provoked a crisis of belief among second-century Christians, as the author of 2 Peter 3: 1–10 testifies. As Christians struggled to understand God's intentions in human history and his plan for the church, they simultaneously began to assemble an anthology of writings that most effectively expressed their core beliefs and hopes. Foremost was the meaning of Jesus' life and death, as interpreted by the preeminent Christian theologian and missionary, the apostle Paul. By the first half of the second century CE, at least some Christian groups already regarded Paul's letters as "scripture" (2 Pet. 3:16). Although all four of the accepted Gospels had been composed by the close of the first century CE, historians doubt that most believers were familiar with all four. It appears that each Gospel was probably created for a distinct Christian group in a particular city or region. Matthew, for example, seems to have been directed to a congregation at Antioch in Syria, where it probably served as a foundation document for Jewish Christians living there (see Chapter 8). Many scholars believe that the last Gospel written, the account ascribed to John, served to define the distinctive ideas of a religious community based on the teachings of a "disciple whom Jesus loved." Neither the name of the Beloved Disciple nor the original location of his group is known (see Chapter 10). Justin Martyr, a church leader executed in Rome about 165 CE, cites the "memoirs of the Apostles" or "Gospels" as though they had by then attained an authority equal to that of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

The titles by which we now know the canonical accounts of Jesus' life—"The Gospel According to Matthew," or "According to" Mark, or Luke or John—did not become part of the New Testament tradition until more than a century after they were composed. Until the late second century CE, Christian writers generally cite the Gospels anonymously. A notable exception is Papias (c. 140 CE), who refers specifically to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Only gradually did the Gospels come to be regarded as the work of Jesus' initial **apostles** or of later companions of the apostles, such as Mark and Luke, who were not eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry. (According to Luke, the apostles were persons (1) whom Jesus himself called to be his followers and (2) who had witnessed his resurrection [Acts 1: 21–22]. Paul indicates that there were more apostles than the twelve original disciples, citing not only himself but also Jesus' brother James and a woman apostle, Junia [1 Cor. 15:5, 7; Rom. 16:7].) When Justin Martyr insists that the church should acknowledge only four Gospels—presenting suspiciously labored arguments—he indicates that other Gospels were then in circulation and competed with the four that eventually became canonical. Indeed, the author of Luke's Gospel states that "many [early Christian] writers have undertaken to draw up an account" of Jesus' life (Luke 1:1). Although scholars agree that Luke used Mark's older Gospel as one of his chief sources, we do not know what other very early Jesus biographies the author had in mind (see Chapters 6 and 9). We do know that a host of other Gospels were circulating by the second century CE—accounts ascribed to prominent New Testament figures such as Peter, Thomas, James, or Mary Magdalene. Most of the noncanonical Gospels survive only as titles in later church writings denouncing them and/or in badly preserved manuscript fragments (see Chapter 20).

The notion that a single, consistent Gospel—rather than the four sometimes contradictory accounts—should be the church norm was expressed in the *Diatessaron* by a scholar named Tatian, compiled in about 170 CE and now lost. This composite version, which for centuries prevailed in the East, particularly in Syria, ingeniously wove together the contents of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as elements from oral tradition, into a unified narrative.

Different Church Canons

Not until late in the fourth century CE did a church leader produce a list of books that corresponds precisely to the twenty-seven books in our New Testament, although in a different order. In 367 CE, the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, made an inventory of accepted Christian documents part of his

Easter Letter. Even after Athanasius issued his seemingly definitive tally, however, for centuries various churches continued to use New Testament collections that differed significantly from one another.

The Muratorian Fragment Scholars usually date the list known as the **Muratorian Fragment** to the late second or early third century CE. The Muratorian inventory is probably typical of the mixed bag of both (ultimately) canonical and spurious books found in different church catalogues. Listing twenty-four documents, the Muratorian Fragment, which begins in mid-sentence, starts with Luke's Gospel (presumably Matthew and Mark were included earlier), the Book of Acts, thirteen letters ascribed to Paul (but not Hebrews), Jude, 1 and 2 John, the Wisdom of Solomon, Revelation, and the Apocalypse of Peter. The Muratorian list excludes five books that achieved canonical status, but it includes a Greek Wisdom book that was later assigned to the Old Testament Apocrypha and an "apostolic" vision of hell that was ultimately not included in any canon.

The Codex Claromontanus is a sixth-century Greek-Latin manuscript that contains a list also thought to derive from the fourth century CE. Besides enumerating most of the present canonical works, this codex includes the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Acts of Paul, and the Apocalypse of Peter—all four of which eventually were omitted from the canon. Even the Codex Sinaiticus, one of the oldest (fourth century) and most important manuscripts containing all twenty-seven New Testament books, also includes the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. As late as the fifth century, a Greek manuscript known as the Codex Alexandrinus included both 1 and 2 Clement as part of the Christian Scriptures.

1 Clement, attributed to an early bishop of Rome, is a letter sent to the church at Corinth, perhaps in the mid-90s CE. Concerned that the Corinthians have rejected their duly appointed leaders, the author primarily cites texts from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament to correct their perceived misbehavior, a practice typical of Christian writers of the period. The writer, however, also quotes passages from Hebrews and from the sayings of Jesus, though it is not certain whether he quotes from written Gospels or from oral tradition.

Like the Apocalypse of Peter, 2 Clement is pseudonymous—composed by an unknown writer in the name of a famous person. The practice of **pseudonymity** was common among both Jewish and Christian authors in the Greco-Roman era. Whereas the church repudiated many pseudonymous documents that claimed authorship by Peter, Paul, James, or other well-known figures in early Christianity, apparently some pseudonymous writings were included in the New Testament canon (see Chapters 17 and 18).

Writing in the early fourth century CE, the church historian **Eusebius** (c. 260–340 CE) observed that, even after Christianity had been legally validated by the Roman government, the New Testament canon was not yet fixed. In describing the church's current opinion of a given book's authenticity, Eusebius divided contenders for official canonization into three categories. The universally "acknowledged" works number twenty-one, including the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, and some of the catholic epistles. The "disputed" books, accepted by some churches but not others, include six that eventually entered the canon: Revelation, James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. Five other candidates for official inclusion ultimately failed to make the cut: the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache. Eusebius's "rejected" books are the Gospels ascribed to Peter, Thomas, and Matthias and the Acts attributed to Andrew, John, and other apostles, all pseudonymous works.

Whereas some Christian groups endorsed books later barred from the canon, others repudiated works that were finally canonized. Such celebrated writings as Revelation and the Gospel of John fail to appear in many New Testament lists. Several important churches, including those at Alexandria and Antioch, resisted accepting Revelation, partly because it was not believed to be the work of John the Apostle. Although eventually canonized, among Eastern churches Revelation did not attain the same authority as most other New Testament books. The Syrian churches consistently denied it canonical honors. (Box 1.4 lists the canonical books and their approximate order of composition.)

Marcion's Disputed Role Many scholars formerly thought that the notion of fashioning a Christian Scripture distinct from the Old Testament received its initial stimulus from the proposals of **Marcion.** A wealthy Greek shipbuilder who settled in Rome, Marcion (c. 140 CE) enthusiastically supported Paul's doctrine of salvation by faith. He also found the Old Testament ethically objectionable, especially its portrayal of Israel's God, which he denounced as violent and savage. Insisting that Christianity begin afresh, Marcion advocated wholesale rejection of the Jewish Scriptures and their replacement with an exclusively Christian text. Only Paul's letters and an edited version of Luke's Gospel, purged of its Old Testament references, should be the Christian Bible. According to an older scholarly view, church leaders began to see the importance of defining a New Testament canon only after Marcion had proposed his severely abbreviated list of acceptable documents.

Although Marcion's challenge to define a uniquely Christian Scripture undoubtedly had its effect, most scholars now believe that the evolution of the New Testament canon resulted from a broader set of social and historical circumstances. Noting that Paul's letters had already been collected before Marcion, recent scholars also point out that by 140 CE individual Gospels were already being employed in different churches, although few, if any, churches had accepted all four accounts. Locally approved Gospels and selected documents supposedly of apostolic origin were already regularly and extensively used in worship services and in teaching converts. Read aloud in churches from Syria to Gaul (France), some Gospels, Pauline letters, and other works were in the process of demonstrating their long-term value in maintaining a literary connection with Jesus and his early disciples.

In general, it seems that the New Testament canon evolved to serve two related purposes. First, canonization of certain texts clarified within the Christian community what beliefs church leaders considered true and acceptable. Questioners like Marcion and his numerous followers could thus be confronted with an officially sanctioned list of books that largely defined the faith. Second, the canon provided a unifying force for churches dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, imparting a firm written authority for universal belief and practice. Citing approved books (but not others), church leaders could distinguish **orthodoxy** (correct teaching) from **heresy** (ideas that church authorities judged deviations from the truth).

The Role of Constantine

The emperor **Constantine** (reigned 306–337 CE) introduced a momentous change in the Roman government's attitude toward Christianity, a change that also may have influenced the finalization of the New Testament canon. Following his victory at the Milvian Bridge over Maxentius, his rival for the imperial throne (312 CE), Constantine effected one of the most unexpected reversals in human history. According to tradition, the emperor experienced a vision in which Jesus was revealed as the divine power that enabled him to defeat his enemies. Undergoing a slow process of conversion to the Christian faith, Constantine ultimately championed Christ as his chief god. This imperial conversion had immense repercussions throughout the empire, altering forever the relationship of church and state (see Figure 2.1).

Shortly before Constantine began his long reign, his predecessor, Diocletian (284–305 CE), had initiated the most thorough and devastating persecution that Christians had yet endured, an ordeal that ended only with Diocletian's abdication and death. When Constantine issued his celebrated decree of religious toleration, the **Edict of Milan** (313 CE), and subsequently began restoring confiscated church property, consulting Christian leaders about official affairs, and appointing bishops to high public office, it was as if a miraculous deliverance of God's people had occurred. To many who benefited from Constantine's policy, it seemed that Revelation's seventh angel had sounded his trumpet: "the sovereignty of the world has passed to our Lord and his Christ" (Rev. 11:15).

In a more modest metaphor, the church historian Eusebius, who later became Constantine's biographer, compared the emperor's increasingly

FIGURE 2.1 Head of Constantine. Only the head and other fragments of this colossal statue remain, but they reflect the enormous power wielded by this remarkable general and administrator. Seeking the support of a unified church, Constantine summoned and presided over the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), which, amid intense theological controversy, formulated the Trinitarian creed affirming that the Son is co-equal, consubstantial, and co-eternal with the Father.

enthusiastic support of the church to the dawn of a brilliant new day, opening up glorious possibilities for the Christian religion. With the exception of Julian (361–363 CE), who was known as the Apostate for trying to revive Greco-Roman religion, all of Constantine's successors to the imperial throne were nominally Christians.

Constantine's influence on the future course of Christianity probably went far beyond his personal acceptance of the faith and his administration's consequent patronage of the church. Not only did the (as yet unbaptized) emperor directly preside over the Council of Nicaea (325 CE)—at which the divinity of Jesus and his co-equality with God were affirmed—he seems to have helped determine the final contents of the New Testament. As Eusebius reports, even three centuries after Jesus' death, Christians in different parts of the Roman Empire had not yet agreed on a fixed canon. Whereas some parts of the church accepted controversial books such as Revelation, James, and 2 Peter, many others did not. In some churches, works like the Dicache, the Epistle of Barnabas, and 1 Clement evidently continued to enjoy quasi-canonical status. When Constantine ordered church leaders to produce fifty parchment copies of the Christian Greek Scriptures for official use, however, ecclesiastical editors may have felt obliged to present the emperor with a consistent list of accepted books. We do not know the exact contents of Constantine's New Testament, but it may have included Revelation and other works that, according to Eusebius, were still "disputed" in his time.

The Latin Vulgate Canons at individual churches continued to differ even after Constantine had ordered official transcripts of the Christian Scriptures and after Athanasius issued his Easter list of approved books later in the fourth century. The event that was perhaps decisive in permanently establishing the New Testament canon was Jerome's translation of the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, into Latin. Beginning in 382 and continuing until 404 CE, Jerome translated directly from the original Hebrew and Greek, producing the **Vulgate** (from *vulgatus,* the "common" language of the western Roman Empire). This Latin edition remains the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. One of his era's great scholars and theologians, Jerome followed Athanasius's canon and included all seven catholic (general) epistles, as well as the controversial Hebrews and Revelation. Jerome's translation excluded other "disputed" writings, however, including the Epistle of Barnabas and the Apocalypse of Peter; once regarded as virtually equal to what we think of as "genuine" New Testament works, these texts were henceforth relegated to obscurity.

Transmitting the New Testament Texts

Although the New Testament text survives in more than 5,800 copies—far more than any other ancient work—no author's original text has yet been found. Our oldest fragmentary manuscripts date from about 200 CE, about a century to a century and a half after they were first composed. The earliest extant **manuscript** (hand-written on papyrus) is a tiny scrap of the Gospel of John containing four verses from Chapter 18. On the basis of its calligraphy (style of handwriting), historians date it to about 125–150 CE, a mere twenty-five to fifty years after the Gospel was written (see Figure 2.2).

Most of these early manuscripts are preserved only in small fragments, and all were found in Egypt, where the dry climate aided preservation of the papyrus on which they were penned. The fragmentary state of New Testament documents before the time of Constantine is probably the result of the emperor Diocletian's attempt to eradicate Christianity. During the **Great Persecution** (303–305 CE), Diocletian ordered the imprisonment or execution of Christian leaders and the burning of Christian books. Diocletian's systematic attacks on the church help to explain why we have no complete New Testament texts prior to Constantine's reign.

The oldest surviving texts of the New Testament as a whole, the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus, were compiled in the fourth century CE, when the imperial government sponsored the church (see the discussion of "codex" in the next section). These famous texts were written on parchment, an expensive material made of sheepskin or goatskin, and much more durable than papyrus. The high quality of the codices reflects the new prosperity of the church after Constantine.

The fourth-century parchment editions reflect the newfound prosperity of the Christian church. They appeared shortly after Christianity became the favored religion of the Roman emperors. The literary productivity that Constantine strongly encouraged contrasts sharply with conditions a few years earlier under the emperor Diocletian. During the Great Persecution (303–305 CE), Diocletian ordered the imprisonment or execution of Christian leaders and the burning of Christian books. Diocletian's systematic attacks on the church help explain why we have no complete New Testament texts dating prior to Constantine's time.

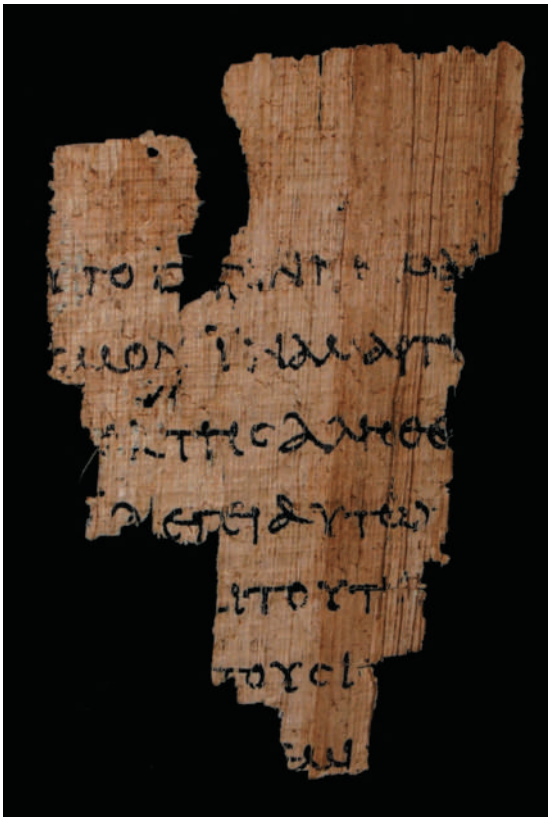

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FIGURE 2.2 Fragment of the Gospel of John, the oldest surviving manuscript of a New Testament book. Dating from about 125–150 CE and preserved for 1,800 years in the dry sands of an Egyptian grave, the tiny scrap of papyrus contains four verses from John 18.

Problems in Transmission

The large gap between the time that most of the New Testament was composed (c. 50–100 CE) and the age of the oldest complete manuscript copies (fourth century CE) creates a problem for textual scholars. Questions about whether surviving copies accurately represent the authors' original work are compounded by the fact that no two extant manuscripts or manuscript fragments are precisely alike (see Box 2.1).

BOX 2.1 Copyists' Modifications of New Testament Manuscripts

No two ancient Greek manuscripts of New Testament books are precisely alike. Although most differences in the texts were probably caused by unintentional errors in copying, some textual variations seem to have resulted from deliberate changes, many of which may have been motivated by theological considerations. A few of the oldest manuscripts, including the Codex Sinaiticus, do not contain the phrase "son of God" in Mark 1:1, leading some scholars to think that the phrase was inserted at the beginning of the Gospel to refute a belief that Jesus became God's adopted son at his baptism (see Chapter 7). Another possibly intentional change, made for the same purpose, may appear in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism; some early manuscripts have God declare, "You are my son; *this day* I have begotten you," a quotation from Psalm 2 (Luke 3:22; emphasis added). Most modern translations use an alternative phrasing that avoids the adoption issue, having God say, "in you I am well pleased" or "in you I delight" (New English Bible).

Similar concerns about an orthodox understanding of Jesus' origins apparently influenced manuscript changes in Luke's story of the youthful Jesus' being left behind in the Temple. Mary's reprimand to the child, "your father and I have been anxiously searching for you," was, in some manuscripts, changed to "*we* have been searching for you" (Luke 2:48; emphasis added), ostensibly to avoid any implication that Joseph was Jesus' real father. A theological belief in Jesus' omniscience may have prompted deletion of references to "the Son" from some copies of Matthew's statement that "about that day and hour [of the End] no one knows, … not even the Son; no one but the Father alone" (Matt. 24:36).

Perhaps the most striking New Testament interpolation appears in very late manuscripts of 1 John 5:7–8, where a scribe inserted the Bible's only explicit reference to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, asserting that God exists in three persons and that "these three are one." This trinitarian statement occurs in no manuscript dating prior to the fourteenth century.

Some scholars argue that theological controversies over such issues as Christ's eternally divine nature and equality with God prompted some scribes to emend manuscripts so that they conformed to the orthodox position (see Ehrman in "Recommended Reading" at the end of this chapter).

Although scholars have reconstructed what most believe to be a reliable version of the New Testament Greek text, it is impossible to confirm that we possess exact copies of the letters that Paul dictated or the Gospels as they first circulated in their respective authors' communities. Some scholars suggest that, besides making relatively minor errors of transmission, generations of Christian scribes who copied New Testament books may have edited various passages to make them conform more closely to evolving doctrines of the church. Scribes also commonly modified the wording of one Gospel to make it conform to that in another, a practice known as *harmonization.* A number of scribal additions have long been recognized and omitted in modern translations—such as interpolated trinitarian passages in 1 John—but, in the absence of first- or second-century manuscripts, scholars can only speculate about the nature and degree of many scribal modifications.

In preserving their sacred writings, Christians pioneered the use of the codex. Rather than continuing to record texts on scrolls—long sheets of papyrus or parchment rolled around a stick—Christian scribes assembled page-sized manuscript sheets bound together in the manner of a modern book (see Box 2.2 and Figure 2.3).

The great fourth-century codex editions of the New Testament were written in uncial characters. Also called "majuscules," uncials are large or capital letters written in continuous script without spaces between words and usually without punctuation. Later manuscripts, called "minuscules," were written in small cursive letters, with individual letters connected to form groups and syllables.

BOX 2.2 From Scroll to Codex

Although our word *Bible* derives from the Greek *biblia* (little books) and appropriately describes its nature as a literary anthology, some scholars warn that this designation is somewhat misleading. Modern English books are printed on paper pages that are bound together between covers and read consecutively from front to back, enabling readers to find specific passages with relative ease. By contrast, for most of their early history, the biblical documents existed only as a series of individual scrolls that bore little resemblance to a modern book. Consisting of sheets of papyrus 9 or 10 inches long and 5 or 6 inches wide that were stitched or glued together to form documents up to 25 to 30 feet long, scrolls were extremely difficult to use. To find a particular passage, readers were commonly obligated to unroll brittle papyrus documents for many feet, a process that was awkward and time-consuming.

Because scrolls were expensive to produce and because most people in the ancient world could neither read nor write, the majority of first-century Jews and Christians merely listened to biblical texts read aloud at their local synagogue or house church. In Luke's Gospel, the author shows Jesus, at a synagogue service in Nazareth, searching to find the correct place in a scroll of Isaiah, reading it aloud to the congregation, and then interpreting the passage as being fulfilled in him. "Today," he announces, "in your very hearing this text has come true" (Luke 4:16–22). Luke also refers to the three-part Hebrew Bible—"the Law of Moses" and "the prophets and psalms" (representing the Writings)—that then existed only as an open collection of disparate scrolls. In the days of Jesus and his first disciples, the exact contents of the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) had yet to be determined, and the New Testament had yet to be written (see the discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Chapter 3).

It was not until the fourth century ce that the early Christian community generally adopted the **codex,** a manuscript forerunner of the modern book. The most important surviving editions of the New Testament were produced in codex form, which consisted of parchment sheets folded over and sewn together to create a series of easily turned pages featuring a continuous text. Of particular value is the Codex Sinaiticus, a fourth-century manuscript discovered during the 1800s in the monastery of Saint Catherine at the foot of Mount Sinai. Besides the entire New Testament (including books not now in the canon), the Sinaiticus also contains much of the Greek Old Testament.

Assembling a Composite New Testament Text

The uncial codices are the most important basis of the text from which modern translations into English or other languages are made. The most valuable is the **Codex Sinaiticus,** a mid-fourth-century manuscript discovered during the mid-1800s in the monastery of Saint Catherine at the foot of Mount Sinai. Besides the entire New Testament (including the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas), the Sinaiticus also contains most of the Greek Old Testament. Additional pages of the Codex Sinaiticus were discovered as late as 1975.

Even older is the **Codex Vaticanus** (early fourth century), but it lacks part of Hebrews, several Pauline letters, and Revelation. Together with the slightly later uncial editions—the Codex Alexandrinus, which incorporates 1 and 2 Clement and a book of Jewish poetry called the Psalms of Solomon, and the Codex Bezae, which includes a Latin translation of the Greek text—these landmark editions provide scholars with the foundation on which to reconstruct the Greek texts of the New Testament.

The fourth-century codices represent only the beginning of the laborious process of textual reconstruction. Scholars must consult many hundreds of manuscript fragments; abundant quotations from church writers of the second, third, and fourth centuries; various minuscule editions; and scores of translations in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and other languages spoken throughout the Greco-Roman world.

FIGURE 2.3 Ancient codex. Christians pioneered the use of the codex, manuscript pages bound together like a modern book. This Greek text from the Gospel of John contrasts with older copies of New Testament books, which typically survive only in fragmentary form. After Constantine recognized Christianity as a legal religion in the early fourth century, New Testament manuscripts increased in number and quality.

Because only copies of copies of manuscripts exist and because no two copies are identical, scholars trying to assemble a standard Greek text face a huge challenge. Of the 5,800 manuscript copies, most in fragmentary form, some contain passages that other equally authoritative texts do not; some manifest remarkable differences in the wording or the arrangement of contents.

Creating a Standard Greek Text Beginning in the early sixteenth century, European scholars like Desiderius Erasmus, one of the most brilliant leaders of the northern Renaissance, attempted to establish a reliable Greek text from which translations could be made. Although scholars in almost every Western nation have labored for centuries to produce a definitive Greek text, at present there is no standard edition

that commands universal scholarly acceptance. Contemporary translations are typically based on a variety of carefully edited Greek texts that incorporate the latest scholarship, including new manuscript discoveries. In preparing the New English Bible (NEB), translators followed *The Greek New Testament,* edited by R. G. V. Tasker and published in 1964. After another major resource, the twenty-sixth edition of the *Novum Testamentum Graece,* was issued in 1979, scholars also consulted this text for the Revised English Bible (1989). Translators of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible employed the third edition of *The Greek New Testament* (1983).

Thanks to recent manuscript discoveries and the work of modern linguists and textual critics, it is possible today to produce a much more accurate translation than ever before, although absolute certainty remains elusive. Where modern translations differ from the long-familiar readings in the King James, or "Authorized," Version of the Bible, it is commonly because contemporary translators work from a far better Greek text than was available to the King James editors when their version was first published in 1611.

English Translations

The New Testament circulated in its original *koinē* Greek throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire (later known as the Byzantine Empire). In the west, however, where Latin was the dominant tongue, Latin translations of the Septuagint and New Testament began to appear during the early centuries CE. This movement culminated in Jerome's masterful translation of the Vulgate, a monumental work of biblical scholarship. After Germanic invasions triggered the collapse of the western empire in the late fifth century CE, both education and literacy declined precipitously. During the Dark Ages of the early medieval period, new European languages gradually developed among the politically fractured regions and states of Europe. Latin remained the official language of the Roman Catholic Church, however, and for nearly 1,000 years no major new translations of the Bible appeared (see Figure 2.4).

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FIGURE 2.4 Ninth-century book cover showing Saint Gregory and the three scribes. Scholarly priests copied and transmitted the New Testament texts.

Isolated scholars occasionally undertook to translate selected books of Scripture into one of the new European languages. The first person credited with doing so was the Venerable Bede, a Benedictine monk and historian of Anglo-Saxon England, who translated the Bible into his native English. In the 730s, Bede rendered part of Jerome's Latin Vulgate into Old English. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, a few other Bible books, including the Psalms and Gospels, also appeared in English. Not until the fourteenth century, however, did the entire Bible become available in English. This pioneering translation was the work of an English priest named John Wycliffe, who wished to make Scripture accessible

to Christian laypeople who did not know Latin. Wycliffe finished his task of translating both the Old and New Testaments by about 1384. The national church, however, fearing the consequences of the Bible's being read and interpreted by laypersons, condemned Wycliffe's version in 1408 and forbade any future translations.

The Invention of Printing

Two historical events ensured that the Bible would find a large reading public in English. The first was Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable type in 1455, a revolutionary advance that made it possible to print books relatively quickly rather than copying them laboriously by hand. The second was a strong religious movement known as the **Protestant Reformation,** begun in Germany in 1517. In that year, a German monk named Martin Luther vigorously protested administrative corruption and other practices within the Roman Catholic Church. Luther's German translation of the Bible (1522–1534) was the first version in a modern European language based not on the Latin Vulgate, but on the original Hebrew and Greek.

The first English translator to work directly from Hebrew and Greek manuscripts was William Tyndale; under the threat of church persecution, he fled to Germany, where his translation of the New Testament was published in 1525 (revised 1534). Official hostility to his work prevented him from completing his translation of the Old Testament, and in 1535–1536, he was betrayed, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake. Tyndale's superb English phrasing of the New Testament has influenced almost every English translation since.

Although the church forbade the reading of Wycliffe's or Tyndale's translations, it nevertheless permitted free distribution of the first printed English Bible—the Coverdale Bible (1535), which relied heavily on Tyndale's work. Matthew's Bible (1537), containing additional sections of Tyndale's Old Testament, was revised by Coverdale, and the result was called the Great Bible (1539). The Bishop's Bible (1568) was a revision of the Great Bible, and the King James Version was commissioned as a scholarly revision of the Bishop's Bible. The Geneva Bible (1560), which the English Puritans had produced in Switzerland, also significantly influenced the King James Bible.

The King James Bible (Authorized Version)

By far the most popular English Bible of all time, the King James translation was authorized by James I, son of Mary, Queen of Scots, who appointed fifty-four scholars to compose a new version of the Bishop's Bible for official use in the Anglican (English) Church. After seven years' labor, during which the oldest manuscripts then available were diligently consulted, the king's scholars produced in 1611 the Authorized, or King James, Version. One of the masterpieces of English literature, it was created at a time when the language was at its richest and most vivid. In the beauty of its rhythmic prose and colorful imagery, the King James Version remains unsurpassed in literary excellence. It has had a pervasive influence on subsequent English culture, with its phrasing of the Scriptures remarkably memorable and quotable.

Despite its wonderful poetic qualities, however, the King James Version has grave disadvantages as a text for studying the Bible. The very attributes that contribute to its linguistic elegance—the archaic diction, poetic rhythms, and Renaissance vocabulary—tend to obscure the explicit meaning of the text for many readers. Translated by scholars who grew up on the then-contemporary poetry of Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, the King James text presents real problems of comprehensibility to the average contemporary student. Students who have difficulty undertaking *Hamlet* cannot expect to follow Paul's sometimes complex arguments when they are couched in terms that have been largely obsolete for centuries. Even more important for serious Bible students, its translators lacked access to ancient manuscripts that have since been discovered and to recent linguistic studies that have greatly increased our understanding of Greek language and thought.

Modern English and American Translations

A living language changes over the years: words lose their original meanings and take on new connotations. Accordingly, Bible scholars have edited and