

An Introduction
to the New Testament
and the Origins of
Christianity

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I Introduction

Billions of people throughout the world today practice the religion of Christianity. It consists of three primary divisions: Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. It can be further subdivided into thousands of distinct denominations and sects, each differing to some degree in belief and practice. Though none of these Christian groups existed in the beginning of Christianity, all look back to that time as having fundamental significance for their own tradition. It is this foundational period of Christianity that we will study in this book. We will examine the history, literature, and religion of Christianity in its earliest stages.

Our study will focus on the years from about 30 to 150 of the present era, from the beginning of Christianity through the first half of the second century. Occasionally, we will take a look beyond those years. At the beginning of that period, a Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth went about Palestine preaching and attracting followers. After his crucifixion by the Roman governor, his Jewish followers continued to preach in his name, proclaiming him as the Jewish Messiah or Christ. Christianity thus emerged as a sect of Judaism in Roman Palestine. It quickly developed into various competing factions. Some of these factions remained primarily Jewish, while others opened the door to Gentiles (non-Jews). Some of these factions disappeared from history, while others survived and developed into forms of Christianity that still exist today.

In studying the origins of Christianity, we will examine numerous writings relating to the foundational period, some Christian and some non-Christian. Much of the Christian literature from this period has been preserved in various collections: the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, the New Testament Apocrypha, and the Nag Hammadi Library. Since much of our study will focus on the writings in these collections, we will begin by discussing the nature of this literature and our method of studying it.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Some of the earliest Christian writings, dating from the first and second centuries, have been preserved in a collection called the **New Testament**.

The New Testament as Christian scripture

The New Testament has special significance for the Christian religion. Like many other religions – such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam – Christianity has **scriptures**, sacred writings that members of the religion consider especially authoritative or important. The Christian scriptures have two main divisions. (1) Like Judaism, Christianity has traditionally viewed the **Hebrew Scriptures** as sacred writings. These are a collection of documents pertaining to the history and religion of ancient Israel and Judaism. Because Christianity developed out of the Jewish religion, early Christians took over the Jewish scriptures as their own. Christians generally call the Hebrew Scriptures the **Old Testament**. (2) In addition, Christian scriptures include the New Testament, a collection of twenty-seven writings pertaining to Jesus and the early Christian church. The story of how these writings came to be considered scripture is told in Chapter 8. Together the Old Testament and the New Testament make up the Christian **Bible**, a word that literally means “books.”

The New Testament as testament

The term “testament” in the title of these two collections would be translated more accurately as “covenant,” an agreement between two parties. In the Christian religion, the terms “old covenant” and “new covenant” express the idea that God entered into two covenants or agreements. According to this idea, in the old covenant he entered into an agreement with the nation of Israel: “I will be your God and you will be my people” (Leviticus 26:12). In the new covenant he entered into a similar agreement with people from all nations. According to this view, the Old Testament contains the writings that relate to the old covenant, while the New Testament contains those that relate to the new.

From the Jewish perspective, God made only one covenant, a covenant with the people of Israel. For Judaism, therefore, there is neither an “old covenant” nor a “new covenant,” but simply the covenant. There is no “Old” Testament, but simply the Hebrew Scriptures.

Contents of the New Testament

The New Testament contains the following books in the order given. Frequently the names of these books are abbreviated, as indicated.

BOOKS	ABBREVIATIONS
Gospels	
Matthew	Matt
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	
Acts of the Apostles	Acts
Letters ascribed to Paul	
Romans	Rom
1 Corinthians	1 Cor
2 Corinthians	2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Philippians	Phil
Colossians	Col
1 Thessalonians	1 Thes
2 Thessalonians	2 Thes
1 Timothy	1 Tim
2 Timothy	2 Tim
Titus	Titus
Philemon	Philem
Non-Pauline letters	
Hebrews	Heb
James	James
1 Peter	1 Pet
2 Peter	2 Pet
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Apocalypse	
Revelation	Rev

Types of literature

The New Testament contains twenty-seven different writings or “books.” Four types of literature are represented: Gospels (4), a book of Acts (1), letters (21), and an apocalypse (1).

1. The term “**Gospel**” (“good news”) refers to a type of writing that contains stories about Jesus and/or sayings that are attributed to him. Early Christians wrote many works called Gospels, but only four made their way into the New Testament. These are traditionally called the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, after their supposed authors.

2. The term “**Acts**” refers to a type of literature that relates the deeds of some particular person or group. The one book of Acts in the New Testament is called the Acts of the Apostles, a work that describes the beginning of the Christian church and its spread in the Roman world.

3. The twenty-one **letters** in the New Testament, also called epistles, were written by early Christian leaders to various churches and individuals to give instruction and exhortation. Thirteen of these letters claim to be written by one man, the apostle or missionary known as Paul.

4. An “**apocalypse**” (“revelation”) is a type of literature that claims to give secret information from God, often about the end of history. Many apocalyptic writings survive from the centuries before and after Jesus, but only one apocalypse, the book of Revelation, is included in the New Testament.

Chapters and verses

The books of the Bible are divided into chapters, and the chapters are divided into verses. When we wish to refer to a particular passage in the Bible, we give the book, the chapter, and the verse (or verses) in a conventional form. For example, Matthew (or Matt) 5:3–10 refers to the book of Matthew, the fifth chapter, verses 3 through 10 of that chapter.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

Early Christians wrote numerous works besides those that eventually became the New Testament. Before the New Testament came to be considered the only scripture, some of these other works were read in churches and esteemed just as highly as those in the New Testament. Gradually, as church leaders limited the contents of the New Testament to twenty-seven books, these other writings declined in importance. New copies were

seldom made and the old copies wore out or were destroyed. As a result, some of the works have disappeared while others are preserved in only a few copies.

In the modern period, as some of these writings were rediscovered, a new interest arose in the early literature that did not make it into the New Testament. In 1672 an editor named J. B. Cotelier assembled a collection of early Christian writings that he called “Works of the holy Fathers who flourished in apostolic times.” In 1699 the next editor renamed the collection a library of “**Apostolic Fathers**,” a title that it has borne since that time.

Most of these writings are letters from church leaders to various churches instructing them in what the author considers to be true faith and practice. The Didache is a church manual that gives directions for the rituals and organization of the church. The Shepherd of Hermas, an apocalypse, consists of a series of visions and revelations that a Christian prophet claimed to receive.

Contents of the Apostolic Fathers

Letters of Ignatius	Other letters
Ephesians	1 Clement
Magnesians	Epistle of Barnabas
Trallians	Polycarp to the Philippians
Romans	
Philadelphians	Manual of church order
Smyrnaeans	The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)
To Polycarp	
	Apocalypse
	The Shepherd of Hermas

Three other writings in this collection are later than the period we are studying and will not be considered here: 2 Clement, Martyrdom of Polycarp, and Epistle to Diognetus.

OTHER RELEVANT LITERATURE

New Testament Apocrypha

The writings of the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers do not exhaust the literary output of early Christianity. In the second century

and afterward, Christian writers turned out other letters, Gospels, Acts, and apocalypses. Some of these disappeared. We know they existed either because later writers quoted from them or because small fragments of them survived. Other works survived in more complete form. Such quotations, fragments, and more complete works have been collected and published under the heading “**New Testament Apocrypha.**” Originally the term “apocrypha” meant “hidden writings,” but it has come to refer to the writings that belong to neither the New Testament, nor the Apostolic Fathers, nor the collection of later authors known as the “Church Fathers.”

Some of these apocryphal writings develop the portrayal of Jesus found in the New Testament. For example, the Infancy Gospel of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas provide further stories about Jesus’ birth and childhood. The Gospel of Peter has an account of Jesus’ trial, death, and resurrection that differs somewhat from those in the New Testament. Other apocryphal writings preserve legends about Jesus’ earliest followers, the apostles. The Acts of John, the Acts of Paul, and the Acts of Thomas, for example, tell various stories about these apostles. Still other apocryphal writings claim to be revelations of heaven or the afterlife. In the Apocalypse of Peter, for instance, Jesus describes to the apostles the rewards and punishments of the final judgment.

The Nag Hammadi Library

Christianity in the second century came in several varieties, one of which has come to be called “Gnostic.” In 1945 an Egyptian digging in the sand at a place called Nag Hammadi discovered a large sealed jar that contained forty-five different writings in the Coptic (ancient Egyptian) language, the contents of a Gnostic Christian library. Though in their present form these texts date from the fourth century, some are translations of earlier Greek texts from the second century or at least reflect ideas that were current in the second century. These texts have now been translated and published in English as *The Nag Hammadi Library*.

Many different types of literature are found among these texts. For instance, the Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. The Apocryphon (secret book) of John purports to be a revelation given by Jesus to John concerning the origin of the world from a Gnostic perspective. The library also includes other such revelatory discourses, sermons or treatises on religious subjects, and accounts of otherworld journeys. To examine all of this literature would require a separate book, but I have included a discussion of one such work, the Gospel of Thomas.

THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

In our study of early Christianity, some of the writings we will examine belong to the Christian Bible and are thus considered scripture by Christians. Since most Christians are accustomed to studying these writings from a religious perspective, as scripture, it is important to stress from the beginning that we will be taking a different approach.

The New Testament can be studied either confessionally (i.e. religiously, theologically, devotionally) or academically. In the confessional approach, the reader is a Christian who takes these writings as scripture, as a norm or standard for Christian belief and practice. The reader seeks guidance for life, edification, and instruction in the Christian faith. This is how most Christians read the New Testament, either in private devotion or as part of a believing community.

In an academic setting, we approach the New Testament in such a way that both Christians and interested non-Christians can participate. We seek to understand the New Testament without necessarily ascribing normative status to it. This approach is like that of a Christian student who wishes to study the scripture and religion of Islam or Hinduism. The student may want to have a description of these religions without necessarily adopting them. In an academic setting, then, we treat Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and all other religions in the same way: we seek to understand them, not necessarily to adopt or practice them.

Since the period of Christianity that we are studying belongs to the ancient past, the method that scholars use to understand it is the same as that used to understand any period of ancient history. The method used to understand the documents from that period, including the New Testament, is the same as that used to understand any other documents from the past. This method, called the historical-critical method or historical criticism, has been the primary method by which scholars have studied the New Testament academically for the last two hundred years. Today this method is employed not only in secular colleges and universities, but also in many religious institutions – seminaries, divinity schools, and schools of religion. It is a method of studying the New Testament that can be employed by Jews, Christians, and people of other or no religious persuasion. It is the primary method that will be employed in the present textbook.

Differences from the confessional approach

As the two parts of its name suggest, the historical-critical method has two aspects. First, the scholar who uses this method is concerned with history;

and second, the scholar exercises his or her critical faculties, the faculties of reason and judgment. This historical-critical method differs from the confessional approach in several ways.

1. The confessional approach transports a text out of the past into the present. The reader is concerned not so much with what it meant then but with what it means now – what guidance or encouragement it gives to the reader in the present. In contrast, the historical method transports the reader out of the present into the past. It is concerned with what the text meant then, to the person who wrote it and the people to whom it was originally written. The goal of historical study is to understand and explain the past, to find out what happened and why. This involves locating events in time and space and understanding them in the context of the culture and beliefs of that time and place. The scholar of early Christianity working with the historical method therefore seeks to understand the political, cultural, and religious climate of the lands where Christianity originated and spread: first-century Palestine and the Greco-Roman world. The scholar then uses this background knowledge to interpret particular texts from that time, to help understand the events, ideas, and customs expressed in these texts. In this approach, one seeks to understand how the New Testament came about, who wrote it, why it was written, when it was written, what historical circumstances led to its writing, what the original writers intended to say, and what literary forms they used to express themselves.

2. The confessional approach is a theological approach. That is, a person who takes it often speaks about the activities of God: what God thinks, says, does, or intends. By contrast, the historical approach is non-theological. The historian speaks only about history, and since God would be outside of history, the historian cannot speak about the activities of God. History, as historians understand it, consists of the events in the world that could be observed by anyone, whether religious or not, who stood in the right place at the right time. What historians are able to observe in history is not divine activity but human activity. For example, a person speaking from the confessional perspective might make a statement of faith about what God did: “God came to earth in the person of Jesus.” The historian, however, can only observe and state what human beings did or said: “Many early Christians claimed that God came to earth in the person of Jesus.” A historian who is also a Christian might make a statement of faith such as “God came to earth in the person of Jesus”; but if so, he or she would be speaking as a Christian, not as a historian.

3. This non-theological character of the historical method affects the way the historian deals with the New Testament. From the confessional point of view, many Christians regard the New Testament as the inspired word of God. This perspective is equivalent to making a theological statement about the activity of God: "God inspired the authors of the New Testament to write the word of God." But as we have seen, the historian cannot make statements about what God said or did, only about what human beings in history said or did. The historian therefore focuses on the human character of the documents in the New Testament, asking who wrote them, when, where, and why. The historian does not work with any theory of inspiration, since this is a theological claim, a claim of religious faith, rather than a historical claim.

4. The Christian who regards the New Testament as the inspired word of God gives it a privileged status over all other literature. Often such a person has the view that the New Testament contains no error or inconsistency and should not be questioned but simply accepted at face value. The historian, working with no theory of inspiration, but focusing on the human character of the documents, cannot operate by these theological principles. The historian does not take any text from the past at face value, but questions it and evaluates it to determine whether it is authentic, whether it is accurate and reliable, whether it has been altered from what the author originally wrote. The text is like a witness in a court of law, and historical criticism is the method by which the witness is questioned and evaluated. In this respect, the historian gives no special status to the New Testament writings, but treats them like every other document from the ancient past. The critical scholar does not come to the documents with the assumption that they are necessarily authentic, necessarily reliable, necessarily free from errors. The scholar makes judgments about these matters not beforehand, but only after investigation. Nor does the scholar assume that all the New Testament documents agree with one another. The historian is open to the possibility that different authors of the New Testament may present different perspectives.

5. Since the purpose of the confessional approach is to benefit the believer's religious life, and since it regards New Testament scripture as the primary source of such benefit, it makes the New Testament its primary focus of attention. Other early Christian literature is disregarded because it is not scripture. Since the historian, however, has a different purpose, to study history, he or she cannot focus only on the New Testament but must examine all the literature that sheds light on the history of early Christianity. Christian writings that did not become scripture may be as

valuable or more valuable for the historian than writings that did. Non-Christian writings may be equally valuable.

Christian responses to historical criticism

The critical examination of the Bible may disturb some Christian students. Such disturbance may stem from a feeling that the Bible should not be questioned, but simply believed. Frequently it stems from the belief that every writing in the Bible is inspired by God verbally (word for word) and contains no possible error. From this viewpoint, it is not acceptable to find inaccuracies, contradictions, or inconsistencies in the Bible. Those students who have doubts about examining the Bible critically should keep one thing in mind: this textbook does not intend simply to substitute one set of authorities (critical scholars) for another (parents and church leaders). Rather, in keeping with the goal of a liberal arts education, it aims to help you think for yourself. It provides you with the information you need to make an informed evaluation of one method of reading the Bible. What you appropriate or do not appropriate from it ultimately remains your own decision to make.

Other Christian students have less trouble with the historical-critical method, since they recognize the human element in the Bible. While most Christians acknowledge a human element in the writing and formation of the Bible, some acknowledge it more fully than others. From this viewpoint, the Bible was written and collected by people who had religious experiences, but who nevertheless remained limited and fallible. For these Christians, Christian faith depends not upon a perfect, error-free Bible, but only upon the validity of its central message, whatever that is understood to be. From this perspective, it is important to question and examine the Bible critically and historically: critically, since what is true should stand up to scrutiny; historically, lest ideas and practices that simply reflected a particular situation or culture be exalted to the status of eternally valid truth.

One value of a historical perspective

The problem just mentioned, that of elevating a particular historical situation to the status of eternal truth, is illustrated by the role the New Testament has played in promoting anti-Jewish sentiment. The New Testament was produced during a time of strife between the followers of Jesus and the Jewish establishment. The New Testament writings reflect that strife. They include some rather severe denunciations and criticisms of the Jewish people and religion. In times past, Christians who take the

New Testament as scripture have been influenced to adopt a similar negative attitude toward Judaism. During the Inquisition of the Middle Ages, for example, Christians persecuted Jews, forcibly converting them or expelling them from Christian countries. Less severe forms of anti-Jewish sentiment have been more frequent.

Many contemporary Christian leaders, aware of the problem, have sought ways of establishing more positive Jewish–Christian relations. Part of the solution lies in recognizing the historically limited nature of the New Testament. A historical perspective helps make us aware that the conflicts between early Christians and Judaism belong to a particular historical time and situation. They should not serve as a model for Jewish–Christian relations today.

Abbreviations for dates

In the present textbook, the abbreviation CE (“common era”) is used instead of AD (“in the year of our Lord”) to refer to dates after the birth of Jesus. The abbreviation BCE (“before the common era”) appears instead of BC (“before Christ”) to refer to dates prior to the birth of Jesus. Most scholarly writing has abandoned the abbreviations AD and BC out of deference for non-Christians, who do not consider Jesus as “Lord” or “Christ.”

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define or identify: scriptures, Hebrew Scriptures, Old Testament, Christian Bible, CE, BCE.
2. Describe the four types of literature that the New Testament contains.
3. Distinguish between the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, the New Testament Apocrypha, and the Nag Hammadi Library.
4. Explain the two aspects of historical criticism.
5. Explain how the historical-critical method differs from the confessional approach to studying the Bible.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Primary sources

Elliott, J. K., ed. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Clarendon, 1993).

One-volume collection of apocryphal writings in English translation, with brief introductions.

- Lightfoot, J. B., J. R. Harmer, and Michael W. Holmes, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers* (2nd edn.; Baker, 1989). Holmes' revision of Lightfoot's translation of the Apostolic Fathers, with introductions and bibliography.
- Robinson, James M., ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (3rd edn.; Harper & Row, 1988). Standard English translation of the writings discovered at Nag Hammadi.
- Schneemelcher, Wilhelm, ed. *New Testament Apocrypha* (rev. edn.; 2 vols.; Westminster John Knox, 1991, 1992). Substantial collection of apocryphal writings in English translation, with extended introductions.

Other suggestions

- Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday, 1997). A comprehensive introduction to the literature of the New Testament.
- Goodspeed, Edgar J. *A History of Early Christian Literature* (revised and enlarged by Robert M. Grant; University of Chicago Press, 1966). A survey of the first three centuries of Christian literature.
- Koester, Helmut. *Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edn.; 2 vols.; De Gruyter, 1995, 2000). Volume II surveys the history and literature of early Christianity.
- Krentz, Edgar. *The Historical-Critical Method* (Fortress, 1975). A brief introduction to the rise of historical criticism, its goals, techniques, presuppositions, and achievements.