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CHAPTER

What Is the New Testament?

The Early Christians and Their Literature

WHAT TO EXPECT

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

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

early
christianities

Christianity in the modern world is a richly diverse phenomenon. Ask any Pentecostal preacher who has attended a Roman Catholic mass, or Greek Orthodox monk who has happened upon a Baptist tent revival, or Episcopalian nun who has visited a Jehovah’s Witness prayer meeting. There is, to be sure, common ground among many Christian groups, but when you compare the beliefs and practices of an

Appalachian snake handler with those of a New England Presbyterian, you may be more struck by the differences than the similarities.

Is this kind of rich diversity a modern development? Many people appear to think so. For them, Christianity was originally a solid unity, but with the passing of time (especially since the Protestant Reformation) this unity became fractured and fragmented. Historians, however, recognize that in

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BOX 1.1 The Canon of Scripture

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

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

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

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

The New Testament also contains books that were thought to have been written by Jesus’ own apostles. These books, however, do not teach that there are several gods, or that the creator of the world is evil, or that Jesus did not have a real body. Are there historical grounds for thinking that the New Testament books actually *were* written by Jesus’ apostles and that books supporting contrary views were forgeries? Indeed, how is it

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

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

THE DIVERSITY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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

Jewish-Christian Adoptionists

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

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

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

to be his son, the savior of the world. Hence the name bestowed upon this group by others: they were “**adoptionists**.” For them, to call Jesus God was a blasphemous lie. For if Jesus were God, and his Father were also God, there would be two Gods. But the Jewish Scriptures emphatically state otherwise: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4).

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

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

Marcionite Christians

The Jewish-Christian adoptionists were by no means unique in not having our New Testament. Consider another Christian group, this one scattered throughout much of the Mediterranean in the mid- to late second century, with large numbers of congregations flourishing especially in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Their opponents called them “Marcionites”

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BOX 1.2 The Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament

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

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

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

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

Even within Christianity there are different numbers of books included in the “Old Testament.” The Roman Catholic Church, for example, accepts an additional twelve books (or parts of books)—including such works as Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees—which they call “Deuterocanonical” (meaning that they came into the canon at a later time than the books of the Hebrew Bible). Protestant Christians usually call these books the “Apocrypha.” Since they did not form part of the Hebrew Bible, I will not be including them in this chart or discussing them at any length.

The Hebrew Bible

The Torah (5 books)

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

The Prophets (8 books)

Former Prophets

Joshua
Judges
Samuel (counts as 1 book)
Kings (counts as 1 book)
Later Prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
The Twelve (count as 1 book)
Hosea
Joel
Amos

The Writings (11 books)

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

The Christian “Old Testament”

The Pentateuch (5 books)

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon

Prophetic Books (17 books)

Historical Books (12 books)

Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 and 2 Samuel
1 and 2 Kings
1 and 2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther

Major Prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel

Minor Prophets

Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Poetry and Wisdom Books (5 books)

Job
Psalms
Proverbs

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

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

Marcionite Christians maintained that Jesus did not belong to the wrathful and just God of the Jews, the God who created the world and chose Israel to be his special people. In fact, Jesus came to save people from this God. Moreover, since Jesus had no part in the Creator, he could have no real ties to the material world that the Creator-God made. Jesus therefore was not actually born and did not have a real flesh-and-blood body. How, then, did Jesus get hungry and thirsty, how did he bleed and die? According to Marcionites, it was all an appearance: Jesus only seemed to be human. As the one true God himself, come to earth to deliver people from the vengeful God of the Jews, Jesus was never born,

never got hungry or thirsty or tired, never bled or died. Jesus’ body was a phantasm.

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

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

Gnostic Christians

The Jewish-Christian adoptionists and the Marcionites were not the only two Christian groups vying for converts in the second century. In fact, there were many other groups supporting a wide range of other beliefs on the basis of a wide range of other authorities as well. Some of the best known are the various sects of Christian **Gnostics**, so named because of their claim that special “gnosis” (Greek for “knowledge”) is necessary for salvation.

We know that Gnostic Christians were located in major urban areas throughout much of the

adoptionists
and
marcionites
compare

Mediterranean during the second and third centuries, especially in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Rome, and Gaul. Gnostics were themselves wildly diverse, with different groups believing radically different things (see Chapter 13). Some Gnostics agreed with Marcion that Jesus was totally divine and not at all human, and for much the same reason that he did: Jesus represented a different God from the one who created this world. Others, however, claimed that Jesus Christ consisted of two distinct beings, the human Jesus and the divine Christ. These Gnostics agreed with the Jewish-Christian adoptionists that Jesus was the most righteous man on earth and that something special had happened at his baptism. They did not think, however, that God adopted him to be his son; instead, they maintained that his baptism was the moment at which the divine being, the Christ, came into the man Jesus, empowering him for his healing and, especially, teaching ministry. At the end of Jesus' life, immediately before his death, the Christ then departed from him once again to return to heaven. This is why Jesus cried out in such anguish on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you left me behind?" (cf. Mark 15:34).

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

Gnostics felt a sense of alienation from this world and knew that they did not belong here. They were spiritual beings from the divine realm who had become entrapped in the realm of matter by the evil God and his subordinates. Salvation meant escaping from this material world. Thus a god from the divine realm entered into the man Jesus, and left him prior to his death, so that he

could impart to the imprisoned spirits the knowledge (gnosis!) that is necessary for escape.

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

Since Gnostic Christians were not tied to the literal meaning of their texts, they were not as compulsive as other Christians about collecting a group of books and ascribing special authority to them (in contrast, for example, to the Marcionites). Various Gnostics nonetheless did have their own favorites. We know that many of them were especially drawn to the Gospel of John and that others cherished Gospels that most modern people have never heard of: the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Judas*, and the *Gospel of Truth*. Some of these books have only recently been discovered by archaeologists. Each of them was thought to convey the true teachings of Jesus and his apostles.

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

"Proto-Orthodox" Christians

The "proto-orthodox" Christians represent the forerunners (hence the prefix "proto") of the group that became the dominant form of Christianity in later centuries. When this group later acquired more converts than any of the others (say, by the begin-

ning of the fourth century) and stifled its opposition, it claimed that its views had always been the majority position and that its rivals were, and always had been, "heretics," who willfully "chose" (the Greek root of the word "heresy") to reject the "true belief" (the literal meaning of "orthodoxy").

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

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

Proto-orthodox Christians agreed with the Jewish Christians who said that Jesus was completely human, but disagreed when these people denied that he was divine. They agreed with the Marcionites who said that Jesus was completely divine, but disagreed when they denied that he was human. They agreed with the Gnostics who said that Jesus Christ taught the way of salvation, but disagreed when they said that he was two beings rather than one and when they claimed that his true teachings had been secret, accessible only to the elect few. In short, proto-orthodox Christians argued that Jesus Christ was both divine and human, that he was one being instead of two, and that he had taught his disciples the truth. They claimed that the apostles had written the teachings of Jesus down and that, when interpreted in a straightforward and literal fashion, the books that were passed on from the apostles to their followers revealed the truth necessary for salvation.

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

The proto-orthodox position, then, attempted to counteract the claims of the groups that they opposed. In part, this meant that the proto-orthodox group had to reject some documents that claimed to be written by apostles but that advanced beliefs contrary to their own, for example, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Philip*, or the *Gospel of Thomas*, all of which appeared to support Gnostic perspectives. Some of the writings used by the opposing groups, however, were quite popular among the proto-orthodox Christians as well. For example, the Gospel of Matthew was well loved by Jewish Christians, and the Gospel of John was a favorite of many Gnostics. Indeed, by accepting and ascribing authority to both of these Gospels, the proto-orthodox believers were able to balance the "heretical" claims that could be made when only one of them was taken to be the ultimate authority.

In other words, if Jesus appears to be completely human in one Gospel and completely divine in another, by accepting both authorities as Scripture the proto-orthodox were able to claim that both perspectives were right, and that an exclusive emphasis on Jesus as only human, or purely divine, was a perversion of the truth. The development of the canon of Scripture within proto-orthodox circles is in large part an attempt to define what true Christians should believe by eliminating or compromising the views of other groups.

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



THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON OF SCRIPTURE

The purpose of the preceding sketch was not to give a complete account of Christianity in the second century but simply to indicate how early Christianity was extremely diverse and to show how this

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

The New Testament: Some Basic Information

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

The first four books are "**Gospels**," a term that literally means "good news." The Four Gospels of the New Testament proclaim the good news by telling stories about the life and death of Jesus—his birth, ministry, miracles, teaching, last days, crucifixion, and resurrection. These books are traditionally ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Proto-orthodox Christians of the second century claimed that two of these authors were disciples of Jesus: Matthew, the tax collector mentioned in the First Gospel (Matt 9:9), and John, the beloved disciple who appears in the Fourth (e.g., John 19:26). The other two were reportedly written by associates of famous apostles: Mark, the secretary of Peter, and Luke, the traveling companion of Paul. This second-century tradition does not go back to the Gospels themselves; the titles in our Bibles (e.g., "The Gospel according to Matthew") were not found in the original texts of these books. Instead, their authors chose to remain anonymous.

The next book in the New Testament is the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author as the Third Gospel (whom modern scholars continue

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

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

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

Other Early Christian Writings

The books I have just described were not the only writings of the early Christians, nor were they originally collected into a body of literature called the "New Testament." We know of other Christian writings that have not survived from antiquity. For example, the apostle Paul, in his first letter to the

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BOX 1.3 The Common Era and Before the Common Era

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

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

Corinthians, refers to an earlier writing that he had sent them (1 Cor 5:9) and alludes to a letter that they themselves had sent him (7:1). Unfortunately, this correspondence is lost.

Other noncanonical writings, however, have survived. Among the best known of these are writings by authors collectively called the "**Apostolic Fathers**." These were Christians living in the early second century, whose writings were considered authoritative in some proto-orthodox circles, some of them on a par with the writings of the Gospels or Paul. In fact, some of our ancient **manuscripts** of the New Testament include writings of the Apostolic Fathers as if they belonged to the canon. Other, previously unknown, Christian writings have been discovered only within the twentieth century. Some of these writings clearly stand at odds with those within the New Testament; some of them appear to have been used as sacred scripture by certain groups of Christians. A number of them claim to be written by apostles. The most spectacular find occurred in 1945 near the town of **Nag Hammadi**, Egypt, where some peasants digging for fertilizer accidentally uncovered a jar containing thirteen fragmentary books in leather bindings. The books contain anthologies of literature, some fifty-two treatises altogether, written in the ancient Egyptian language called Coptic. Whereas the books themselves were manufactured in the mid-fourth century C.E. (we know this because some of the bindings were strengthened with pieces of scratch paper that were dated), the

treatises that they contain are much older: some of them are mentioned by name by authors living in the second century. Before this discovery, we knew that these books existed, but we didn't know what was in them.

What kind of books are they? I earlier indicated that Gnostic Christians appealed to written authorities that did not make it into the New Testament, some of them allegedly written by apostles. These are some of those books. Included in the collection are epistles, apocalypses, and collections of secret teachings. Yet more intriguing are the several Gospels that it contains, including one allegedly written by the apostle Philip and another attributed to Didymus Judas Thomas, thought by some early Christians to be Jesus' twin brother (see box 14.2).

These books were used by groups of Christian Gnostics during the struggles of the second, third, and fourth centuries, but they were rejected as heretical by proto-orthodox Christians. Why were they rejected? The question takes us back to the issues raised earlier concerning how Christians went about deciding which books to include in the New Testament and when their decisions went into effect.

The Development of the Christian Canon

Proto-orthodox Christians did not invent the idea of collecting authoritative writings together into a sacred canon of Scripture. In this they had a

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BOX 1.4 The Layout of the New Testament

Gospels: The Beginnings of Christianity (4 books)

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John

Acts: The Spread of Christianity (1 book)

The Acts of the Apostles

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

Pauline Epistles
Romans
1 and 2 Corinthians
Galatians

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

Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 and 2 Thessalonians
1 and 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
General Epistles
Hebrews
James
1 and 2 Peter
1, 2, and 3 John
Jude

Apocalypse: The Culmination of Christianity (1 book)

The Revelation of John

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

precedent. For even though most of the other religions in the Roman Empire did not use written documents as authorities for their religious beliefs and practices, Judaism did.

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

books; we can assume that he accepted them as authoritative.

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

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

It appears then that our New Testament emerged out of the conflicts among Christian groups, and that the dominance of the proto-orthodox position was what led to the development of the Christian canon as we have it. It is no accident that Gospels that were deemed heretical—for instance, the *Gospel of Peter* or the *Gospel of Philip*—did not make it into the New Testament. This is not to say, however, that the canon of Scripture was firmly set by the end of the second century. Indeed, it is a striking fact of history that even though the four Gospels were widely considered authoritative by proto-orthodox Christians then—along with Acts, most of the Pauline epistles, and several of the longer general epistles—the collection of our twenty-seven books was not finalized until much later. For throughout the second, third, and fourth centuries proto-orthodox Christians continued to debate the acceptability of some of the other books. The arguments centered around (a) whether the books in question were ancient (some Christians wanted to include *The Shepherd* of Hermas, for example; others insisted that it was penned after the age of the apostles); (b) whether they were written by apostles (some wanted to include Hebrews on the grounds that Paul wrote it; others insisted that he did not); and (c) whether they were widely accepted among proto-orthodox congregations as containing correct

Christian teaching (many Christians, for example, disputed the doctrine of the end times found in the book of Revelation).

Contrary to what one might expect, it was not until the year 367 C.E., almost two and a half centuries after the last New Testament book was written, that any Christian of record named our current twenty-seven books as the authoritative canon of Scripture. The author of this list was **Athanasius**, the powerful bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. Some scholars believe that this pronouncement on his part, and his accompanying proscription of heretical books, led monks of a nearby monastery to hide the Gnostic writings discovered 1,600 years later by bedouin near Nag Hammadi, Egypt.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR STUDY

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

These are among the most difficult and controversial issues that we will address in our study of the New Testament writings. In order to anticipate my approach, I might simply point out that historians who have carefully examined the New Testament have found that its authors do, in fact, embody remarkably diverse points of view. These scholars have concluded that the most fruitful way to interpret the New Testament authors is to read them individually rather than collectively. Each author should be allowed to have his own say,* and should

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



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

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

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

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

AT A GLANCE

BOX 1.5 The New Testament Canon

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

EXCURSUS

Some Additional Reflections: The Historian and the Believer

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

Here is the question: how can a Christian who is committed to the Bible affirm that its authors have a wide range of perspectives, and that they sometimes disagree with one another? I can address the question by stressing that this book is a historical introduction to the early Christian writings, principally those found in the New Testament, rather than one that requires the reader (you) to accept any particular set of beliefs about God, Jesus, salvation, and so on. This is an important distinction because the New Testament has

always been much more than a book for Christian believers. It is also an important cultural artifact, a collection of writings that stands at the foundation of much of our Western civilization and heritage. These books came into existence at a distant point in time and have been transmitted through the ages until today. In other words, in addition to being documents of faith, these books are rooted in history; they were written in particular historical contexts and have always been read within particular historical contexts. For this reason, they can be studied not only by believers for their theological significance but also by historians (whether or not they happen to be believers) for their historical significance.

Historians deal with past events that are matters of the public record. The public record consists of human actions and world events—things that anyone can see or experience. Historians try to reconstruct what probably happened in the past on the basis of data that can be examined and evaluated by every interested observer of

diversity of early Christianity cannot be stressed enough

EXCURSUS continued

every persuasion. Access to these data does not depend on presuppositions or beliefs about God. This means that historians, as historians, have no privileged access to what happens in the supernatural realm; they have access only to what happens in this, our natural world. The historian's conclusions should, in theory, be accessible and acceptable to everyone, whether the person is a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, an atheist, a pagan, or anything else.

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

Does that mean that historians cannot be believers? No, it means that if historians tell you that Martin Luther King Jr. had a better theology than Gandhi, or that God was on the side of the Protestants instead of the Catholics, or that Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world, they are telling you this not in their capacity as historians but in their capacity as believers. Believers are interested in knowing about God, about how to behave, about what to believe, about the ultimate meaning of life. The historical disciplines cannot supply them with this kind of information. Histo-

rians who work within the constraints of this discipline are limited to describing, to the best of their abilities, what probably happened in the past (as discussed further in Chapter 16).

Many such historians, including a large number of those mentioned in the bibliographies scattered throughout this book, find historical research to be completely compatible with—even crucial for—traditional theological beliefs; others find it to be incompatible. This is an issue that you yourself may want to deal with, as you grapple intelligently with how the historical approach to the New Testament affects positively, negatively, or not at all your faith commitments. I should be clear at the outset, though, that as the author of this book, I will neither tell you how to resolve this issue nor urge you to adopt any particular set of theological convictions. My approach instead will be strictly historical, trying to understand the writings of the early Christians from the standpoint of the professional historian who uses whatever evidence happens to survive in order to reconstruct what happened in the past.

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

TAKE A STAND

1. Discuss all the ways that early Christians (and Christian groups) differed from one another. In your opinion, is there any belief or practice that all the groups held in common? That is to say, is there some one thing (or more than one thing) that made all the groups that called themselves Christian Christian? Or not?
2. Pick one of the early Christian groups other than the proto-orthodox and suppose that it had won out to become the dominant form of Christianity. How would the world we live in today be different? Would it be a better place or worse, in your opinion? Why?



KEY TERMS: CHAPTER 1

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

adoptionists
apocalypse
Apocrypha
apostle
Apostolic Fathers
Athanasius
B.C.E./C.E.

canon
Ebionites
epistle
Gentile
Gnostics
Gospel
heretic

Law
manuscripts
Marcion
Nag Hammadi
proto-orthodox Christians
scribe, Christian
Torah



SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Bauer, Walter. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Trans. Robert Kraft et al. Ed. Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971. The classic study of the wide-ranging diversity of second- and third-century Christianity, suitable only for more advanced students.
- Dunn, James D. G. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2d ed. London: SCM Press, 1990. A very informative discussion that applies Bauer's view of early Christian diversity to the New Testament itself; highly recommended for students who have already completed a course in New Testament.
- Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. An examination of the early conflicts among various Christian groups (Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics,

- proto-orthodox) and the various "Scriptures" they produced—including noncanonical Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses. For popular audiences.
- Ehrman, Bart D. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Chapter 1, "The Text of Scripture in an Age of Dissent," explores the diversity of early Christianity on a more introductory level than Bauer.
- Gamble, Harry. *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. A clearly written and informative overview of the formation of the New Testament canon.
- Harnack, Adolph von. *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*. Trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma. Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1990. The classic study of the life and teachings of Marcion.

Hultgren, Arland J. *The Rise of Normative Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994. A book that disagrees with Bauer's understanding of early Christianity and argues that early Christian diversity was not as wide-ranging and pervasive as some have thought.

Marjanen, Antti, and Petri Luomanen. *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics."* Leiden: Brill, 2008. An up-to-date discussion of all the second-century Christian groups and teachers mentioned in this chapter—and many more!—by internationally renowned scholars in the field.

Metzger, Bruce M. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1987. The authoritative discussion of the formation of the canon, for advanced students.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1976. An enormously popular and provocative account of the views of some of the early Gnostics in relation to emerging Christian orthodoxy.

Pearson, Birger. *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. An up-to-date overview of the various kinds of ancient Gnostic religions, by one of America's foremost Gnostic scholars.

2

CHAPTER

Do We Have the Original New Testament?

WHAT TO EXPECT

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

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

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

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

PUBLISHING BOOKS: NOW AND THEN

To explain why we don't have the original New Testament writings we should begin by considering how books were published in the ancient world. It was a very different process from what happens