

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Why Study the New Testament

Overview: This book approaches the New Testament not as scripture, or a piece of authoritative holy writing, but as a collection of historical documents. Therefore, readers are urged to leave behind their preconceived notions of the New Testament and read it as if they had never heard of it before. This involves understanding the historical context of the New Testament and imagining how it might appear to an ancient person.

Why Study the New Testament?

The first question people should ask themselves when they are taking up the study of the New Testament is why they want to study it. What is the New Testament, and why should one study it? The first answer many people give—and for many, the most obvious—is, “Because I’m a Christian.” Or perhaps, “I believe the New Testament is scripture.”

The problem with that answer, at least as it relates to this book on the New Testament, is that the New Testament isn’t “scripture” for everyone. When we say that the New Testament is “scripture,” we have to identify for whom it is scripture. What does it mean to call a document “scripture”? In Christianity, when people call the Bible scripture, that often means they intend to listen to the text for the “Word of God,” whether read in church or alone at home. Christians often expect the Holy Spirit or God to communicate

to them and to their church, or to some broader community, through this document.

But the text of the Bible is not scripture in itself. It is scripture only to a community of people who take it as scripture. The text itself, any text, is not holy writing. Originally, the word in Latin (*scriptura*) meant simply "something written," but we now take the word to mean holy writing, sacred writing. The writing, however, is not holy in itself. It is holy only to people who take it as holy.

I will not be assuming in this book that the New Testament is holy or sacred writing. In fact, the purpose of much modern scholarship on the Bible has been to avoid, at least momentarily and for the purposes of secular scholarship, taking the Bible to be sacred writing. Thus in my courses in Yale College, I explain that for the purpose of the course we will treat the different documents of the New Testament just as we would any other document from the ancient Mediterranean. Yale College, in spite of some of its traditions and accoutrements that might suggest otherwise, is not a religious community. We must presume that students who take our courses in religious studies are not necessarily religious. Those wanting to learn about Buddhism may not be Buddhist. In fact, for many courses, including many of those on Islam and religions of Asia, most of those taking the courses will not be adherents of the religions they are studying. Therefore, we teach these courses, including courses on Judaism and Christianity, the Hebrew Bible, or the New Testament, from a self-consciously secular, nonconfessional point of view. That means approaching the New Testament not as "scripture" but simply as ancient documents produced by the movement that eventually became Christianity.

Other people want to study the New Testament because they believe it is a "foundational document" for Western civilization. But again, what does that mean? Does that mean that people can't really get along in Western civilization unless they know something about the Bible? We might argue, though, that there are many other things more important for "getting along" than knowing the New Testament. I'd think it more important, for instance, to know how to fix one's car, or how to use computers, or how to speak other languages, or maybe even something about sexual technique. With a bit more reflection, we might decide that the New Testament would rank further down on the list of "things one must know to get along."

And what about the New Testament has been historically or culturally important? Often, the most culturally significant things about the New Testament have been not things that are actually in the New Testament

studied historically, but things people think are in the New Testament. This is easily demonstrated by a little quiz. Here is a list of sayings or ideas that either are or are not in the New Testament. I provide the list first and the answers later, in case you want to play along. Just mark whether something is or is not in the New Testament:

1. The immaculate conception.
2. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."
3. At Jesus' birth, three wise men or kings visited the baby Jesus.
4. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."
5. The doctrine of the Trinity.
6. "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."
7. Peter founded the church in Rome.
8. After his death, Jesus appeared to his eleven disciples in Jerusalem but not in Galilee.
9. After his death, Jesus appeared to his eleven disciples in Galilee but not in Jerusalem.
10. Peter was martyred by being crucified upside down.
11. Jesus taught that if people wanted to be his disciples, they had to hate their parents and even their wives.
12. Satan and his demons were fallen angels who rebelled against God.
13. Jesus taught people that God forbade divorce for any reason.

Now let's check our answers.

1. The immaculate conception is actually not in the Bible. Many people think it is because they (especially Protestants) may think it refers to the virgin birth of Jesus, which is narrated in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. But the immaculate conception refers to the conception of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and teaches that Mary was born without original sin. "Immaculate" means "without stain." This is a doctrine important in Roman Catholicism, but it is not in the Bible and is not accepted by Protestants.¹ The "miraculous conception" of Jesus is in the New Testament (Matt 1:18–25; Luke 1:27–35), but not the immaculate conception of Mary.

2. Yes, this is a quotation from 1 Corinthians 13:7.
3. No, the Bible does not say that three wise men or kings visited Jesus after his birth. Only tradition teaches that there were three of them, no doubt just because in Matthew they are said to have brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matt 2:1–12). Readers saw the three gifts and made up the “fact” that there were three men.
4. This quotation is often taken by people to be from the Bible. Ironically, it is from Karl Marx, although many of us would argue that it expresses a sentiment that should reflect Christianity in its better moments.²
5. The doctrine of the Trinity is not in the Bible if it is read in its historical context. Of course, one can find references to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, even together as a triad in Matthew 28:19. But the actual doctrine, which teaches that the three are different “persons” who each share the same “substance” of full divinity, took centuries to be developed, elaborated, defended, and established as Christian dogma. Christian theologians may be right if they say that the doctrine is at least “hinted at” in the New Testament, and that the later church was correct in “taking” the Bible to teach the doctrine, but that is a theological position, not a strictly historical one.
6. This quotation is from Matthew 16:18.
7. That Peter founded the church in Rome is part of Christian legend, and for Roman Catholics perhaps an important tradition, but it is not narrated in the New Testament.
8. This and the next are a bit tricky. Jesus did appear to his disciples in and around Jerusalem according to the author of Luke and Acts (Luke 24:33–36; Acts 1:4). Moreover, according to that author, Jesus appeared to them only in and around Jerusalem and not in Galilee.
9. But according to Matthew, Jesus appeared to his eleven male disciples not in Jerusalem but only later in Galilee (Matt 28:16–18). I explore this conundrum in a later chapter.
10. That Peter was martyred by being crucified upside down has been important in tradition and Christian art, but Peter’s death is not described in the Bible, and historians actually have no reliable evidence about it at all.³

11. Yes, contrary to much-trumpeted, supposed “family values” of Christianity, Jesus did teach, according to Luke 14:26, that his disciples had to “hate” their family members, including their parents and wives.
12. The idea that Satan was a fallen, rebellious angel who was joined by other fallen angels, who are the same beings as those called “demons” or “evil spirits” in the New Testament, is not actually in the New Testament. It is an invention of Christians that began in the second century C.E. and became important for Christian mythology and lore.⁴
13. Yes, contrary to the teachings and practices of almost all Christian churches today, Jesus, according to Mark 10:2–12, forbade divorce for any reason.⁵

So much for the quiz. My point with this little exercise is that on the one hand, there are many things people may think are in the Bible that are not, and on the other hand, many people are utterly surprised when they learn about other sayings or actions that definitely are in the Bible (Jesus told his disciples to hate their parents?). Many of these ideas, such as the immaculate conception or the imagery of wise men surrounding a manger, are important for Western civilization, for the history of art, and for the furniture of people’s imaginations. So it may be important to know, for example, that legend says that Peter was crucified upside down, but it is not part of the New Testament. And the fact that much ancient Christian tradition is not actually in the Bible raises something of a problem for the study of the New Testament: if we study the New Testament by asking about its meaning in its ancient historical context, which will be the method mostly pursued in this book, are we thereby neglecting the most important historical “meanings” of the Bible—what that text has been taken to mean in the history of culture and interpretation?

The “historical-critical” approach to the Bible, which is the method demonstrated in this book and which will be explained and illustrated throughout, anchors “the meaning” of the text in its ancient context: what the original authors “intended” or the original readers likely “understood.” But one could argue, as I do and have argued in other books, that it is just as important to learn about the impact and interpretation of the New Testament through history—that is, what the New Testament has been taken to mean later in history and culture, regardless of its “original meaning.”⁶

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We can see this also by comparing what the New Testament actually says about some issues with what most people assume that it must say even on matters of significant beliefs. What do most people believe happens to someone after death? Some would say, "You're dead like Rover and dead all over." Some, "You go to heaven." What may we imagine that most people assume religious Christians to believe? Where is Aunt Martha during her funeral? A popular assumption, whether people actually believe it or not, would be, "She's safe in heaven. She's in the arms of Jesus. Her body may be in the casket, but her soul is up there." Many people assume that Christianity teaches the immortality of the soul.

But that, again, is not really something taught by the Bible, and it is not even the best interpretation of "official Christian orthodoxy," as would be contained, say, in the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, according to which afterlife existence is supposed to be experienced in the resurrection of the body or the flesh. Contrary to common opinion, even popular Christian opinion, the New Testament more often teaches a form of the resurrection than the soul's immortality (see, for example, 1 Cor 15).

So where do we get the very common idea of the immortality of the soul? Perhaps much more from Platonism than from the New Testament.⁷ So if one is interested in learning about the origins of central aspects of Western civilization, it may make more sense to study Plato than the New Testament.

The Bible as a Historical Text

My point has been to emphasize that this book will not be approaching the New Testament as scripture, nor will I analyze how important it was for medieval and early modern literature. I will be looking mainly at what it meant in the first and early second centuries. In fact, I will be attempting to approach the New Testament "from the outside," which is not always easy for people in our culture to do because most of us have grown up with some kind of cultural knowledge of "what Christianity is" and "what the Bible is." This is true even for those who are not religious, as well as for those who are Christians.

Most of us live in a post-Christian culture, and both aspects of that term are important. It is post-Christian in the sense that it is hard to live in America without having some exposure to Christianity and seeing its influence on society, politics, culture, and art. It is also post-Christian because we can no longer assume, especially if we live in a multiethnic, pluralistic environment, that everyone we meet will be Christian. In a sense, we live in

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a society that has something of a "hangover" from Christianity, but one in which people do not necessarily know a lot about Christianity in a critical and educated manner.

So let's make an attempt to scrape our brains clean of what we think we know about the New Testament and try to approach it from the outside, as something new and strange. At the very beginning, we find the Gospel of Matthew, which begins like this: "The book of the origin" (*genesis* is the Greek word for "origin" here) "of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. Abraham had a son named Isaac. Isaac had a son named Jacob. Jacob had Judah and his brothers. Judah had Perez and Zerah from Tamar" (Matt 1:1-3). These are "the begats" that figure prominently in certain parts of the Hebrew Bible and begin Matthew. The text goes on like this for many sentences. As a modern person, one might ask, "What is this? Why begin this way?" Then we arrive at the birth narratives in Matthew, the stories of the baby Jesus. If we lived in the time of the writing, this would seem fairly familiar, because people knew other stories about stars appearing as signs of the birth of a great man. In fact, this is part of the propaganda culture of the ancient world. Matthew begins as one would begin the story of the birth of a famous man, and if you lived in that time, you would recognize the genre.

But we continue in our reading and find a story of a man who travels around, giving speeches, talking to people, and teaching. He also exorcizes demons, heals people, and performs a few miracles. For a modern person with no exposure to religious narratives like this, the story would sound odd. In the ancient world, though, it would have sounded familiar because people knew of other stories of teachers who healed and performed miracles. It was not an uncommon way of talking about someone supposed to be great. Of course, in the end the man dies a gruesome death by crucifixion, a form of Roman torture and execution usually reserved for slaves, rebels, and lower-class troublemakers. But even some "philosophers" and moral teachers were known to have been martyred in a "noble death."

We arrive next at the Gospel of Mark. It appears to be something like the same story. It is shorter than Matthew, with fewer teachings. But why do we have a "second chapter" (Mark) of this same book (the New Testament) that looks basically like an abbreviated version of the first chapter? With the Gospel of Luke, we see something of the same thing. With the Gospel of John, though, we see something different. Compared with the first three Gospels we've read, it sounds different and has a different style. But it is still generally a similar story of the same man. That should look odd to us.

The next “chapter” is the Acts of the Apostles. Now we are back on more familiar ground. It starts off like the Gospel of Luke because it is written by the same person. It even begins with a paragraph that recapitulates the ending of Luke, much as different episodes of a television series begin by rehearsing the gist of the preceding episode. Then Acts begins sounding something like a Greek novel. Greek novels were usually about a man and a woman, young, rich, and beautiful, who see one another, fall madly in love, and passionately desire one another.⁸ Usually they do not immediately marry, nor do they “consummate their love.” Instead, one of them may get kidnapped by pirates or have to go off to war; the heroine may be captured and sold into slavery. In one way or another, though, they are separated and go all around the Mediterranean searching for one another chapter after chapter. The novel may be full of shipwrecks, battles, miracles, and meddling gods.

That is something of what the Acts of the Apostles looks like: an ancient Greek novel. But it lacks the one thing every good Greek novel had: sex and passion. An ancient reader may have been disappointed about that. But Acts has things that the novels don't, such as the “Holy Spirit” (meaning what?) serving as the main actor for most of the book. The book of Acts should look odd to us if we are not familiar with biblical texts or ancient novels. And it would look both familiar and a bit odd to an ancient reader.

We may realize, about this point, that the Acts of the Apostles is mistitled. It doesn't depict the actions of all the apostles, but for the most part those of Paul. And Paul is not really considered an apostle by whoever wrote Acts. The author is working with the assumption that an “apostle” is someone who accompanied Jesus during his lifetime (see Acts 1:21–26), and Paul didn't meet that criterion. But the issue of the title brings up another point about the New Testament: the titles these different books now bear in our Bibles were not put there by their authors, but by later Christian scribes. This will prove to be important for most of the New Testament.

Next in our initial tour of the New Testament we come to the letters of Paul. Is it strange that most of the New Testament documents are letters? They are not like modern letters, of course, but they are quite like ancient letters, at least letters passed around in philosophical schools. They are often addressed to groups of people, and they deal with philosophical-sounding issues and ethics. They give advice on group problems.

Next we get to the Epistle to the Hebrews or, in what would be a less formal translation, the “Letter to the Jews.” What is odd, though, is that it isn't actually a letter. In fact, it doesn't claim to be a letter, but a “word of exhortation,” that is, a sermon (13:22). It also, on closer examination, ap-

Paul
not really
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by author
of Acts

pears not to be addressed to Jews, but to gentile Christians to convince them that Jesus provides for them a liturgy that is superior to that of the Jews. It is not a letter, and it may not be addressed to Jews. But it may lead us to another insight in our tour: these letters seem to be meant to be read out loud to groups of people. So what would it mean to read this letter out loud in a community, not alone at home or in a library?

Let's come to 1 Peter. It is not written to one place. Rather, it is a circular letter, meant to be sent around to different churches. Eventually, we get to 2 and 3 John, one of which is addressed to “the elected lady and her children” (2 John 1:1). What does that mean?

Finally, we get to the Revelation of John, the Apocalypse. The word “revelation” is just the latinized and then anglicized version of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means “unveiling,” “uncovering.” This document seems really bizarre, certainly to many of us moderns—as it probably was to many ancient readers as well. It is not really like any other document we've seen in the New Testament. It starts off with a narrative about a vision (Rev 1:1–20). A man named John says something like, “I was on the island of Patmos. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day. I started having this vision and an angel appeared to me and all this happened.” Then we encounter seven different letters, very short, addressed to seven different churches (Rev 2:1–3:22). Then the book turns into something like a wild action movie, a narrative of a heavenly journey of John. He goes up into the heavens. He sees the throne room of God. He sees weird kinds of beasts, animals that have strange bodies, like a lamb with horns and covered in blood. There are terrible catastrophes. The drama ends with a cosmic battle between forces of good and forces of evil. It is like several installments of *Star Wars*. Finally, it ends with the establishment of a new world and a new city of God.

That is the end of the New Testament—and a long way from the little baby Jesus and the kings in Matthew. The New Testament includes diverse literature: twenty-seven different books, probably written anywhere from the year 50 to the year 150 or so, a hundred-year period. They have different points of view, different situations, different theologies, and different genres. They use confusing in-house language, as we will encounter regularly throughout the course of this book.

diversity
of NT
books
written
ca. 50-150

Imagining an Ancient Person's Perspective

In another experiment, we can try not just to look at the documents from the outside but to imagine how an ancient person who encountered an

early Christian church from the outside would think about it. Imagine that you are a seamstress who works in a cloth shop in the city of Corinth, in Greece, in the year 56. Eutychus, a guy who lives next door to you and works in a leather workshop nearby, has just joined a new club, and he tells you about it. First, they don't meet in the daytime, but either early, before light, or after dark. There are only enough of them to fill a decent-sized dining room, but they call themselves the "town meeting." You're not quite sure what they do at these meetings. They don't appear to worship any god or goddess that you can see. They use the term "god" sometimes, but this god doesn't have a name, and to you that would be bizarre. Remember, you are pretending that you're a Greek living in the year 56 in Corinth. To you, these people look as if they don't believe in gods at all; they look like atheists.

The people in this new club have a very high respect for a criminal Jew who led some kind of guerrilla war and was executed long ago, somewhere in Syria. Eutychus says, though, that this Jew is still alive somewhere. In fact, Eutychus says that the Jew "bought" him, although you didn't know that Eutychus was ever a slave. In fact, you're pretty sure he wasn't a slave. So what does it mean that this guy bought him? At these town meetings they eat meals—which is not unusual since most clubs in your society eat meals—but they call the meals the "boss's dinner," or sometimes "the thank-you." Some people say they eat human flesh at these dinners, but you doubt that because for some reason they seem to be vegetarians. You doubt whether vegetarians would eat human flesh. Eutychus says that to initiate new members into their club, they "dip them," naked, and then they "get healthy." Once you're in the club, they call you "comrade," and you have sex with anyone and everyone, because it doesn't matter anymore whether you're a man or a woman; in fact, they kind of figure you're neither—or both.

I constructed this fanciful portrait out of actual data from the New Testament and other early Christian, Greek, and Roman sources. This was, in fact, the way at least a good many ancient people saw early Christian groups. For example, a later Roman governor informs the emperor that Christian groups he knew about met early in the morning or after dark.⁹ As we will see repeatedly, all the early Christian groups were "house churches" and must have been relatively small. The Greek term we translate as "church" (*ekklesia*) in an ancient Greek context also, more commonly, referred to the public meeting of the citizens of a city. We must remember, in spite of our tendencies otherwise, that "god" is not the name of God and in the ancient context would have been used as the generic category for any god. Each god would have his or her own proper name.¹⁰ The Christian "god" did not. And

Eutychus
in Corinth,
26 CE

historical
background
for the
constructed
portrait

we know from many sources that Christians were considered by others to be atheists.¹¹

Most people in Greece likely had no knowledge of Galilee; they would likely have taken it to be simply part of Syria, which was much better known. When Eutychus said that Jesus "bought" him, he would have been using the Greek word *agorazein*, whose older, more "religious" translation was "redeem." The meal they ate regularly would have been the Communion, the "Lord's Supper," which in the earliest days of the Christian movement was observed along with a full dinner, something like a potluck supper (see the way Paul talks about it in 1 Cor 11:17–34, where it obviously was a meal, as we will see in a later chapter). Even the common English term for the Communion, the "Lord's Supper," is actually a more "formal" way of translating the Greek, which less formally could be translated as "the boss's dinner." *Kyrios* could mean "the Lord" or simply someone's master or employer. And if outsiders heard these meals referred to with another ancient designation, the "Eucharist," they may likely have taken that Greek word, *eucharistia*, as having its normal, everyday meaning of "thanks."

We know from Christian defenses against the accusation that Christians were thought to consume human flesh.¹² After all, they do say they are eating the body and blood of this man named Jesus (John 6:53–56; 1 Cor 10:16). We also know that Christians developed a reputation at some times and in some places of avoiding meat, perhaps because they wanted to avoid eating meat that might have been part of a sacrifice to a god, which most Christians carefully avoided.¹³ I said that they initiated one another by "dipping" into water: the word "baptize" in Greek meant simply "dip." We know from later Christian sources that this was often done in private, and the person baptized was naked.¹⁴ To note that the Christians called this "getting healthy," I just translated the Greek word we usually translate as "salvation" into its more mundane, everyday sense of "health" (*sōteria*).

Christians did call one another "brother" and "sister," and without knowing how those terms would later become theologically laden in Christianity, a Greek would likely have heard them as a rather odd, in-house, jargon use of language, much as Americans heard "comrade" during the cold war. As for that part about sex and not being male or female, Paul says that in Christ there is no male and female (Gal 3:28). And hearing Christians talk so much about loving one another, brother and sister, although there was no longer a difference between male and female—well, we may imagine how outsiders could have allowed their imaginations to run wild with salacious rumors, as does seem sometimes to have been the case.¹⁵

Just as early Christian house churches, with their in-house, jargony language and their often odd-seeming practices and sometimes private meetings at night, would have appeared strange to the average inhabitant of Corinth, so the Bible presents us with a strange world if we approach it without our normal preconceptions, if we approach it fresh and from the outside. This is an ancient collection of documents from different times and places, put together much later to form the New Testament.

In the next chapter, I address the process by which these twenty-seven diverse documents came to be included in the New Testament. That is the history of the canon. In much else as well, the history of early Christianity is about how a diverse group of different people—all considering themselves loyal to the man they called Jesus but differing from one another in practices, beliefs, ethnicity, class, and geography—finally became at least somewhat unified into one historical movement and institution, with at least a modicum of uniformity of belief and practice.

*diversity
of early
Christianities*

This book actually runs counter to that historical tendency that attempts to manufacture unity from diversity. This book takes the New Testament and even the different books of the New Testament apart. A major theme of the book, in fact, will be the diversity of early Christianity—in fact, the diversity of early Christianities. I will look at the many different ways Jesus was thought to be either divine or human or some combination of both. I'll highlight different ways early followers of the Jesus movement dealt with the fact that the movement itself came out of Judaism but before long was dominated by gentiles. I'll show how these different Christian communities treated women and their roles in churches; how they treated slaves and other servants in their households; how they related to whatever politics surrounded them; and how they reacted to the powerful Roman Empire. The book takes up not only the documents of the New Testament, but also a few other early Christian texts. Beginning with the New Testament as a now-unified text, the book pulls apart that unity to analyze the diversity of the early Christian movement and its texts.

Ancient and Academic Contexts for the Study of the New Testament