

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
New Testament

History, Literature, Theology

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN WRITTEN FROM THE following perspectives and convictions:

The New Testament is a book of history. It is not a book of ideas, ideals, and inspirational religious principles, but narrates and interprets the events in the life of Jesus and his followers who became the early Christian community. The New Testament is more (not less) than a history book in that it interprets these events as revelatory acts of God for the salvation of the world. In their interpretations of history, New Testament authors use the ideas of their world (Jewish and Gentile, religious and secular). Each writing of the New Testament is embedded in its own history, the story of the early church. The New Testament as a whole has a history of collection, transmission, translation, and interpretation. The New Testament not only communicates a story; it has its own story. For such texts, historical insight is an appropriate and necessary element in authentic understanding.

Study of the New Testament requires hands-on critical method. As a history book, the New Testament requires critical method. “Who wrote what, when, where, to whom, and why” are unavoidable issues for historical understanding, even if these questions cannot always be definitively answered. This book does not attempt to work through every point in methodological detail, but from case to case intends to provide enough specifics to illustrate evidence and argument. At four points, standard issues of New Testament introduction are treated in extensive

excursuses exploring the evidence and arguments on which typical scholarly conclusions are based: the literary unity of 2 Corinthians, pseudepigraphy, the Synoptic Problem, and the markings of parallels in the Synoptic Gospels. Instead of merely providing students the results of “what scholars think,” the evidence and arguments are given that allow students to judge for themselves the degree of confidence we may have about such conclusions, and what difference they make theologically. Students who follow the details of evidence and argument enhance their ability to navigate and evaluate the ocean of secondary literature about the New Testament, and develop their own skills as interpreters of the New Testament.

“Begin at square one; go a long way.” This book is intended for the beginning student, presupposing only serious interest in the subject matter, but no prior experience in detailed Bible study. It is a fairly technical book, reflecting much of the history and present state of New Testament research. I have sometimes retained citations in Greek, as a reminder that engagement with the New Testament is cross-cultural study and that those who want to understand it need to enter its linguistic world. The book is completely understandable by those with no Greek or Hebrew; everything is translated, often also transliterated to facilitate pronunciation. I have in mind the kind of readers one often finds in seminary and the pastorate, many of whom are second-career students without

an undergraduate major in religious studies or biblical languages. While presuppositions are minimal, the book attempts to lead the student toward an in-depth understanding and competence as an interpreter of the New Testament.

The New Testament is a book of faith and theology. New Testament authors express their faith that God acted in the life of Jesus and events in the early church. When faith expresses itself in conceptual, linguistic form, the result is theology, “faith seeking understanding,” in Anselm’s historic phrase. While faith and theology are not the same thing, there can be no thinking about the faith, no communication of faith, apart from theology. “Theology” does not refer only to abstract systematic second- and third-level discourse, but to first-level discourse, to any articulation of the faith. The New Testament is thus a thoroughly theological book. This means that to understand the New Testament in its own terms requires theological reflection, whether or not its readers share its faith or theology. An introduction to the New Testament must itself be in some sense theological, even if only at the descriptive level.

The New Testament is essentially composed of Letters and Gospels. The historical process that led to the formation of the canon resulted in a New Testament composed of only two types of literature. This is still reflected in the liturgical reading of Scripture, in which all New Testament texts are either “Epistle” or “Gospel.” This bipartite generic structure of the New Testament has often been noted. However, so far as I know, this book represents the first effort to structure an introduction to the New Testament along these lines. This is in step with early Christian history and theology; there is also a pedagogical reason. The Letters are treated first, in the historical order argued here, 1 Thessalonians–2 Peter. Only then do we turn to the Gospels and Acts. About midway in the course, students begin to notice that there was an extensive tradition, complete in itself, of expressing the faith entirely within the confines of the epistolary genre. They become aware that they have

studied most of the books of the New Testament without encountering a single story about Jesus. They come to the later, parallel genre of Gospels with new eyes, new questions, new insights. Near the end of the course they see Epistle and Gospel combined—for the first time—in the Johannine community, the prolepsis of the New Testament canon.

There is a narrative substructure of the New Testament and its theologies. Both Letters and Gospels share a common foundation: narrative. All New Testament documents confess faith within a narrative framework. The Gospels and Acts are obviously narrative. But the Epistles are also a narrative genre; each letter functions by projecting a narrative world. This book is in step with this narrative mode, is itself a kind of narrative. It tells the story of New Testament, from pre-Christian Judaism, through Jesus, the early church, Paul and the letter tradition, Mark and the Gospel tradition, to the combination of Letters and Gospel in the Johannine community. This involves (re)construction of a plausible story line, as does all history. The alternative is to study New Testament documents as free-floating texts not tied to history. As the New Testament is a story, or collection of stories within a larger story, so this book is a narrative. It tells the story of the New Testament.

New Testament theology is best done as diachronic exposition of texts. This book is a synthesis of the traditional genres *Introduction to the New Testament* and *Theology of the New Testament*. New Testament theology is interwoven into the narrative presentation of the formation of the New Testament. Instead of attempting topical essays under rubrics such as the “Christology” and “Ecclesiology” of each book or the New Testament as a whole, an *Exegetical-Theological Précis* of each New Testament document presents its theology structured in the mode of the text itself. The New Testament’s own theologizing is in the narrative mode. The appropriate way to grasp the theology of each book is by working through each text in its own genre and structure.

The New Testament is the church's book. Much of the above is summed up in this familiar phrase, which, of course, is not original with me.¹ Fifty years ago I was impressed by the central importance of this hermeneutical key in Leander Keck's Vanderbilt lectures. Another of my teachers, Fred Craddock (also a student of Keck), often refers to the essential dialogue between Book and Community. The Community needs the Book as norm and anchor point; the Book needs the Community as its context for understanding. I owe Keck, Craddock, and all my teachers an incalculable debt, as I do to all my long-suffering students, from whom I also learned much. I dedicate this book to the students in my "Introduction to the New Testament" classes at the Graduate Seminary of Phillips University (1967–1986), and Texas Christian University and Brite Divinity School (1987–2006).

Over the years my understanding of the New Testament has been broadened and deepened by dialogue about the substance of this book with numerous colleagues and students. I value especially what I have learned from Leander Keck, Fred Craddock, Russell Pregeant, Udo Schnelle, David Balch, and William Baird, both from their writings and from personal conversations.

I am deeply grateful to the editorial and production staff of Westminster John Knox Press, who have provided not only professional expertise, but counsel and encouragement. As this project comes to its conclusion, I offer heartfelt thanks to Jon L. Berquist, who was Executive Editor for Biblical Studies at Westminster John Knox Press when he invited me to write this book in 1994 and accompanied it along the way with many helpful conversations; to Marianne Blickenstaff, Acquisitions Editor for Biblical Studies at WJK, who shepherded it through the final editorial process, and to Julie Tonini, Director of Production, both of whom handled a large and complex manuscript; and to Daniel Braden, Managing Editor, for his editing advice. I am also grateful for the sharp-eyed reading of the penultimate draft by Jerry L. Coyle, Bobby Wayne Cook, and James E. Crouch, whose diligence resulted in numerous suggestions incorporated in the present text, and especially to Victor Paul Furnish, who read the sections on Paul and the Pauline epistolary tradition and offered many valuable suggestions. But, as is rightly said, none of the above should be held accountable for the book's defects, for which I alone take credit.

1. Cf., e.g., Willi Marxsen, *The New Testament as the Church's Book?!* trans. James E. Mignard (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972); Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), chap. 3, "The New Testament as the Church's Book."

1

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

THE NEW TESTAMENT IS THE SELECTION OF early Christian writings that became part—but only part—of the Christian Bible. To open its pages is to enter a story that has been underway a long time, the next-to-last act of a drama approaching its climactic scene, a story that claims to communicate the meaning of the universe and every human life. To be sure, it is not necessary to read this assortment of letters and narratives as Holy Scripture. The same collection of texts can legitimately be called *Selections from the Religious Literature of Antiquity* or some such, and still be read with horizon-expanding educational value. The New Testament is certainly a cultural treasure, the most influential single book in shaping the literature, art, and philosophy of Western civilization. But almost everyone who studies these texts reads them as part of the Christian Bible, as the “New Testament.” To understand why the Bible itself (both Old Testament¹ and New Testament) speaks of

a “new testament,” we must attempt to understand the Bible’s covenant language from the inside. What does it mean to call this collection of documents the “New Testament”?

1.1 “Testament”

A powerful king in the ancient Near East sends an army during the night to surround a town some distance away. In the morning, the king’s messenger speaks to the surprised townspeople: “I am your new king. You are my people. This is my covenant with you. I will protect you from your enemies, and guarantee your peace and prosperity. From now on, you must obey the following laws . . .” The people had no voice, no vote, in the decision to become part of the realm. They do have a choice in how they will respond.

1. Jews, of course, do not refer to their sacred Scripture as the “Old Testament,” a designation these writings first received as part of the Christian Bible. I follow the model of Sandra Schneiders, Walter Brueggemann, and numerous others who speak of “Jewish Scriptures” when referring to the Bible of the Jews, ancient and modern, and “Old Testament” when speaking of the first part of the Christian Bible (Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999], 6; Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and the Christian Imagination* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], 1–3). For a collection of essays that discuss this issue from a variety of perspectives, see Roger Brooks

Terminology. English translations of the Bible use the terms “testament” and “covenant” interchangeably. “Old Testament” and “New Testament” mean the same as “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant” (see the title page of the New Testament in the RSV and NRSV). Contemporary English uses both “covenant”

and John J. Collins, eds., *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity*, CJA 5 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

and “testament” in nonbiblical contexts, but only in restricted senses: “covenant” is used as a synonym for “contract,” and in the traditional marriage ceremony, where it is bilateral and voluntary; “testament” is found in the phrase “last will and testament,” where it is unilateral and imposed. The biblical meaning of the terms cannot be determined on the basis of English usage, but by their usage in the biblical texts. The term consistently used for “covenant” in the Old Testament is בְּרִית (berith); in the LXX and New Testament, it is διαθήκη (diathēkē). The New Testament’s covenant language, like much of its theological terminology and conceptuality, is derived from the Old Testament. Although ancient Israel could speak of a “book of the covenant” (e.g., Exod 24:7; 2 Chr 34:30–31; 1 Macc 1:57), the covenant itself was not a book, but an act binding together two parties.

Unilateral. Covenant terminology was already present in the ancient Near East prior to and alongside Israel, who adopted the term in both its secular and sacred aspects. In the Old Testament, covenants are basically of two kinds, those between humans and those between God and humans. Human covenants were often bilateral, reciprocal, mutual—like “covenant” in the traditional wedding ceremony (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 15:19, where *berith* is a negotiated treaty translated “alliance”; *diathēkē* of 1 Macc 11:9 is mutual and bilateral). However, even on the human level, covenants are often from the superior to the inferior partner. The covenant was thus unilateral and unnegotiated, like our use of “testament” in English, but not like our marriage “covenant.” A covenant was not a contract, not even a sacred contract. In the *berith* between Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18:3), “Jonathan (the royal son) made a covenant with David (commoner, shepherd) that day,” not “Jonathan and David made a covenant.” The royal covenant in which a covenant is granted/imposed on the inferior by the superior serves as the model for understanding the relationship between God and Israel. It is not a matter of equal partners, in which each freely chooses and

negotiates the terms. In the Bible, God always speaks of “my covenant” (56 times), never of “our covenant.” Thus, in the key text Jeremiah 31:31–34 cited in Hebrews 8:8–12, God is the subject throughout, who makes the covenant and speaks of “my” (not “our”) covenant.

Event. In the Bible, the divine *berith* is an event, not an ideal or principle. The covenant is a gracious act of God, taken at the divine initiative for the benefit of humanity. It is often associated with deliverance, validation of life and security, total well-being and peace, *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם), that is, it is a *saving act*. The fundamental saving act of God for Israel in the exodus was then read back into the story of Abraham and Noah, and was seen as the paradigm for God’s dealing with the world as a whole. The Old Testament authors began with the historical act of God in creating Israel by delivering them from Egypt and graciously granting them the covenant—including its obligations—and then used this as their model for understanding the relation of the Creator to the whole creation. Here and elsewhere in biblical theology, act is primary to being, history to ontology, particular to universal. The Bible is not a discussion of God’s being, but the testimony to God’s acts.

Indicative and imperative. God’s grace precedes and is the basis for the call to human responsibility, also in the Old Testament covenant. Judaism understood this. Grace precedes demand; God’s redemptive, covenant-making act precedes human response. Yet the covenant calls for human response, and requires it. The good news of God’s saving, covenant-making act (indicative) carries with it the demand for human response (imperative).

Community. The covenant is not with individuals but with the people of God. Whenever the covenant is made with one person (Noah, Abraham, David, the Servant of Second Isaiah), the individual represents a community. The chosen people are the people of the covenant, who have been constituted what they are by God’s act. This community is charged with a mission, to be the means of God’s blessing of

all (Gen 12:1–3), to be a light to the nations. (Isa 42:6). Thus, in later Israelite history, the covenant with Israel is understood in terms of a covenant with David and his descendants, the means of God’s blessing for the whole world (e.g., 2 Chr 7:18; 13:5; 21:7; 23:3; Ps 89:3; Isa 55:3; Jer 33:21).

Already/not yet. This means there is an already/not yet dimension to Israel’s covenant language from the beginning. God is already and eternally Lord and king of the universe, God’s own creation. But the creation has rebelled against its Creator, and God’s rule is not yet fulfilled within the rebellious creation. In the same way, God’s covenant with the faithful covenant people already exists in this world, but at present it is still partial, fragmentary, and looking for a future consummation. The covenant is not static, not complete, but awaits an ultimate fulfillment. One of the pictures of the consummation of God’s purpose at the end of history is the renewal of the covenant, involving a renewal of humanity, for which God takes the responsibility (Jer 31:31–33).

Unilateral faithfulness, unconditional love. God’s covenant is unilateral, and cannot be nullified from the human side. Like a will, the covenant is simply there by imposition of the one who made it. The covenant people can ignore it or refuse to live by the responsibilities to which it calls them. This is the only sense in which human beings can “break” God’s covenant. They cannot break it in the sense of revoking, annulling, or destroying it. This could be done only by the covenant’s Maker. The faithfulness of God calls for human response, but is not conditional on it. Even though human beings are unfaithful, God remains faithful (Lev 26:44–45; Judg 2:1; Isa 54:10; Jer 33:19–21; Ps 89:19–45).

The covenant and the book. As the redemptive act of God—past, present, and future—the covenant has signs that bear witness to its reality and meaning. Some are *nonverbal* signs, such as the rainbow (Gen 6:18; 9:9–16), circumcision (Gen 17:11–13), and the ark of the covenant that accompanied Israel in their journey and

made God’s holy presence tangible and real (Exod 26:34; Deut 10:8; 1 Sam 4). The “blood of the covenant” (Exod 24:8; Zech 9:11), the covenant bread (Lev 24:5–8), and the wine of the covenant (Deut 7:12–13) point to its reality. There are also *verbal* witnesses to the covenant, the tables of the commandments and the book of the law, called the book of the covenant (e.g., Exod 24:7; Deut 29:21; 31:26; 2 Kgs 23:3; cf. 1 Macc 1:56–57). The book is not the covenant, but the book is placed in the ark, witnesses to the meaning of the covenant, and makes it tangible and real (Exod 24:7; 25:21).

1.2 “New”

THE BARRAGE OF ADVERTISING HYPE FOR the “new and improved” version (“14 percent stronger”) is not the context in which the Bible’s language of newness can be understood. Just as “testament” must not be defined in terms of contemporary English usage, so “new” must not be understood in terms of contemporary culture, where “new” is a generally positive relative term and “old” tends to mean “outmoded, relatively inferior.” The Jewish Scriptures use the language of newness in an absolute sense, as a term for God’s eschatological fulfillment of the divine promises. Thus Second Isaiah, on the basis of God’s covenantal faithfulness, calls for Israel to perceive the “new thing” that God is about to do (Isa 43:19)—not the negation of the past, but its eschatological fulfillment. Ezekiel speaks of God’s intention to implant a new heart and new spirit within his people (Ezek 11:19; 18:31); God does not give up on sinful people who have violated the covenant, but takes responsibility for recreating them according to the ultimate divine purpose. Third Isaiah looks forward to “new heavens and new earth” in which God’s righteousness dwells (Isa 65:17; 66:22). This means not that the Creator abandons the “old” creation, but that he brings it to ultimate fulfillment.

When Paul uses the language of “new creation” to speak of the saving event of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), this does not mean the rejection of the present creation but its redemption. When John pictures ultimate salvation as the descent of the “new Jerusalem” (Rev 3:12; 21:2), this means both continuity and discontinuity with present Jerusalem. In all these illustrations, “new” is not a relative term, but an eschatological one. In the biblical thought world, the new does not supersede the past relatively, but fulfills it absolutely. It is not the abolition of the old but its eschatological renewal.

1.3 “New Testament”

JEREMIAH SPECIFICALLY PICTURES THE eschatological fulfillment of God’s purposes as the making of a new covenant, that is, the eschatological renewal of God’s covenant with Israel (Jer 31:31–34). This vocabulary is not repeated elsewhere in the Old Testament as the expression of Israel’s eschatological hope, but the idea is reflected (cf. Ezek 16:60, 62; 34:25; 36:26; 37:26; Isa 54:10; 55:3; 61:8, and 42:6; 49:8, where the Servant is representative of the covenant).

The Jewish sectarian community at Qumran, contemporary with Jesus and the early church, understood the events of their own history as God’s eschatological act of the renewal of the covenant. The Dead Sea Scrolls show that they understood the reality that was happening in their midst, with the arrival of the Teacher of Righteousness, as the fulfillment and climax of God’s covenant with Israel, and regarded themselves as the people of the new covenant (see, e.g., CD 6:19; 8:21; 19:33; 20:12 [Bar 2.35?; Jub. 1:22–24?]). The members of the Qumran community were Jews who interpreted their own experience in terms of their Scriptures and God’s covenant with Israel. Their language of the new covenant was not a rejection of the old covenant or a claim that it had been superseded.

Analogous to the hermeneutical perspectives of Qumran, the early Christian community interpreted the event of Jesus of Nazareth as God’s definitive revelatory and saving event, saw this Christ event as the fulfillment of God’s purposes for the world, God’s eschatological renewal of the covenant. Thus the earliest document that reports Jesus’ eucharistic words presents him as speaking of his own body and blood as the expression of this new covenant (1 Cor 11:23–26). Covenant language occurs often in the New Testament, with “new covenant” found seven times: Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24. The new covenant is often implied, however, even where “new” is not made explicit. Paul, for example, clearly thinks in these categories (e.g., Gal 4), though he uses the phrase “new covenant” only twice (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6). Covenant connotations are also present in the language of kingship (cf. 1.1 above). Jesus spoke often of the kingdom of God, rarely of the covenant.

Two concluding notes

1. Even though the covenant was never a book, but God’s saving act that founded a community, we now rightly use “New Testament” to refer to a book, a collection of documents. When the Christian community refers to part of its sacred Scripture as the “New Testament,” this is only a shorthand way of saying *the collection of documents that bear authentic witness to the meaning of the Christ event, God’s saving act of eschatological renewal of the covenant with Israel*. In the New Testament, “New Covenant/Testament” never refers to a book. This vocabulary began to be used in the late second century (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.9.1), as the church began to select those documents that bore authentic witness to God’s act in Christ. By the early third century, Origen could refer to the “divine Scripture” as composed of the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament” (*De Princip.* 4.11, 16).

2. The preceding discussion should make clear that Christians need not hesitate to use

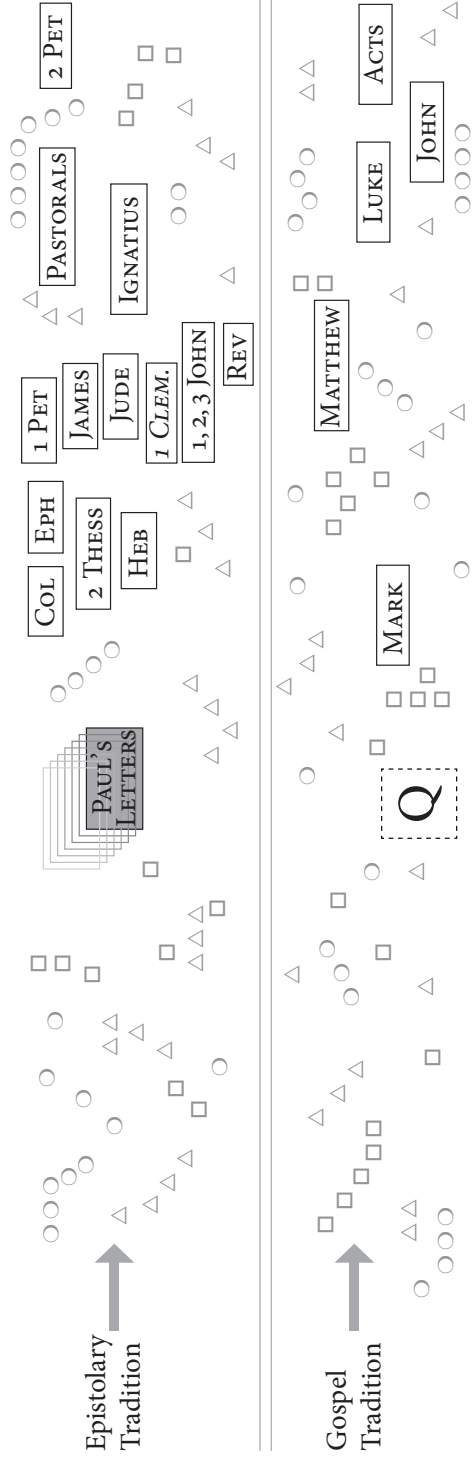
the terminology of “New Testament” and its corollary “Old Testament” to refer to the two sections of the Christian Bible. The terminology does not imply that the “new” supersedes the “old,” or that it is “better” in some relative sense (cf. “old friend” does not refer to one now superseded by some “new friend”). Christians confess that God’s act in Jesus Christ is the eschatological event. One way this is expressed is the declaration that God’s covenant with Israel has been eschatologically renewed, and that believers in Jesus as God’s messiah are incorporated into this covenant by God’s gracious act. The church’s traditional language of “Old Testament” and “New Testament” is an affirmation that both Testaments have a common origin and center, that the God who definitively acted in Jesus Christ is none other than the God of Israel, the covenant God who is faithful to his promises of eschatological fulfillment. Since this terminology has sometimes been misunderstood to imply supersession or the devaluation of the Old Testament, some contemporary interpreters prefer to use such terms as “Hebrew Bible” for the Old Testament and “First Testament” and “Second Testament” for the two sections of the Christian Bible. While rightly wanting to avoid being offensive, such modern substitutions are themselves problematic: “Hebrew Bible” excludes not only the Aramaic portions of the Jewish Scriptures, but some of the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books, not written in Hebrew but considered to be part of the Old Testament by the majority of Christians in the world. The term “Hebrew Bible” likewise ignores the reality of the Greek Septuagint (LXX) as a parallel version of the Jewish Scriptures for many centuries (see below § 4.3.1). “First/Second Testaments” are subject to the same kind of relativizing misunderstanding as “Old/New.” “First” and “second” in biblical terminology are not positioned on a relativizing scale, but “second” means “ultimate,” beyond which there cannot be a “third,” or “fourth” (e.g., 1 Cor 15:45–47; Heb 8:7; 10:9; Rev 20:6). In Christian faith, the New Testament is not a beta version of the “old,” but the

omega of which the “old” is the alpha (Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). The texts Christians have traditionally called the Old Testament certainly belong to the Jewish community as sacred Scripture, but in a Christian context, or in the context of the Christian Bible as a whole, to speak of “Jewish Scriptures” seems to deny that the Old Testament is also Christian Scripture—in fact the original and primary Bible of the Christian Church.

1.4 The New Testament as Epistle and Gospel

IN TERMS OF LITERARY GENRE, THE NEW Testament contains only a narrow selection of the types of literature produced in early Christianity (see below §2.1 on the formation of the canon). Early Christians made collections of Jesus’ sayings, parables, and miracles; they wrote church constitutions to regulate church order and made lists of church laws; they composed myths explaining the origin of evil in a world presumably created and governed by the one almighty God; they assembled collections of Christian hymns and wisdom sayings. None of these were finally included in the Bible. The New Testament contains only texts related to two broadly defined literary genres, both related to particular people and particular situations: *letters* addressing certain groups of Christians, dealing with particular problems in early Christianity, and *narratives* about particular groups of people. It is important from the outset to see that all the books that made the canonical cut are, in one way or another, *narrative*. The Gospels and Acts are obviously narratives; it is often not noticed that letters, including Revelation, are also a kind of narrative. Letters are a narrative genre that presupposes and projects a narrative world (§10.2.4). All New Testament texts are this-worldly narratives that deal with transcendent events and perspectives. There seems to have been an implicit, intuitive, theological force at work in those movements within

FORMATION OF NEW TESTAMENT LITERATURE



0-30

Jesus' teachings and actions

30-50

Sayings
Miracle Stories
Conflict Stories
Songs
Creeds
Worship Materials
Parables
Passion Story

50-70

1 Thessalonians
Philippians
Philemon
1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Romans
Mark

70-90

Colossians
Ephesians
2 Thessalonians
Hebrews
90-100
1 Peter
James
Jude
Revelation
1, 2, 3 John
Matthew
1 *Clement*
Didache

Post-100

Letters of Ignatius
1 & 2 Timothy
Titus
Luke
Acts
Gospel of John
2 Peter
Patristic Writings
Apocryphal Writings

The symbols □, ○, and △ represent the various kinds of oral traditional units and clusters

BOX 1: Formation of the New Testament

early Christianity that became the mainstream, a noncoercive force that tended toward the writing of confessional documents of the Christian faith in the narrative mode expressed in only two genres, Letters and Gospels.² There was an “epistolary pressure” for the church to adapt writings to the epistolary form (§10.2.1), to confess its faith in God’s act in Christ by writing Gospel-like narratives, and finally to accept only such documents into the canonical Scriptures. Believers speak of this theologically as the work of the Holy Spirit (see §§2.2, 5.1.4).

It is historically appropriate and hermeneutically helpful to bring this bipartite, Letter/Gospel structure of the New Testament into sharp focus. This twofold division is represented in our earliest canonical collection, represented in the two codices of the Chester Beatty Papyri \mathfrak{P}^{45} (containing the Four Gospels and Acts) and \mathfrak{P}^{46} (containing the Letters of Paul). The church exercised a true intuition and insight when at an early period it designated all liturgical readings from the New Testament as either Epistle or Gospel.

In early Christianity, the two genres traveled in separate channels: the origin and transmission of Gospels (and Acts) were later and different from that of the letters.

Letters were primary, both in origin and collection. One can read all of Matthew–Acts without ever supposing that there was another genre of Christian confession at work in the church, just as one can read all the Epistles with no hint that there are Gospel documents that narrate the “life and teachings of Jesus.” The genres did not easily mix. Here are two distinct types of Christology, two different approaches to addressing the meaning of Christian faith and life. In the final phase of New Testament history, the Johannine community was the first to bring Letters and Gospels together, but even there the

genres were kept distinct. The Christian community finally united them in one Bible.

1.4.1 The Two Fundamental Genres of New Testament Literature Are Both Narrative Forms

The literary genres appropriate to a historical faith are narrative accounts concerned with concrete events, not philosophical discussions concerned with abstract ideas. The common denominator of Letters and Gospels is that both are narrative forms. This is a fundamentally Jewish mode of theologizing, different from the propositional, discursive thinking expressed in the logic of the Greek world. Both Letters and Gospels project a narrative world larger than the plotted narrative they directly present. New Testament documents address their readers as living their lives within the narrative worlds they project, whether or not the readers see their own lives in this perspective. Narrative implies ethic. The Letter or Gospel challenges its readers to accept the narrative world it projects as the real world, to accept that story as their own story, and to live accordingly. The New Testament does not meet its readers with a moralistic list of “ought” and “should,” but with a strange, new world.³ The structure of the narrative world projected by the New Testament documents constitutes a silent, persistent call for conversion, the reconfiguring of one’s own narrative world that makes sense of one’s life.

1.5 The New Testament as Narrative: History, Stories, and the Story

AS A BOOK OF FAITH, THE NEW TESTAMENT narrates events in the real world of space and time, understood as God’s saving acts in history. The New Testament is a history book in

2. Acts is volume two of a Gospel; Revelation is a letter. All New Testament documents fit within the broad categories of Letter and Gospel. See the introductions to each genre and each book below.

3. Cf. Karl Barth, “The Strange New World within the Bible,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, ed. Karl Barth (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), 28–50.



FIGURE 1: In 1961 Italian archaeologists unearthed a statue of Pontius Pilate in Caesarea, the capital of the Roman province of Judea. PHOTO CREDIT: M. EUGENE BORING.

at least three senses: (1) the central figure of the New Testament is a historical figure; (2) like the Bible as a whole, the New Testament is about this-worldly history; and (3) the Bible projects a macronarrative that embraces its individual stories in a comprehensive whole.

1.5.1 The Central Figure of the New Testament Is a Historical Figure, a Human Being Who Lived and Died in the World of Actual History.

Luke 3:1–2 sets the beginning of his narrative of Jesus’ mission in the realities of political history:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas . . .

Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, who had been installed and backed by the Romans. Jesus lived and worked in Galilee under the Roman lackey Herod Antipas, and was executed by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea (see fig. 1). Such a narrative projects a different world from “once upon a time . . .”

1.5.2 From Beginning to End, the Bible is about This-worldly History.

The Bible as a whole is not a book of timeless principles, of casuistic law, or otherworldly mythology. The Bible contains laws, wisdom materials, poetry, hymns, and the like, but everything is set in a narrative framework. Thus the Ten Commandments are not presented as abstract laws or ideals to be striven for, but are prefaced with “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2). All readers of the Bible know that it is mainly composed of stories: Adam, Eve, and the snake; Cain’s murder of Abel; Noah and the flood; Moses and the exodus from Egypt; David and Goliath; Daniel in the lions’ den; the baby Jesus and the magi; Jesus healing a blind man; Peter denying Jesus while the rooster crowed; Jesus executed by the Roman authorities; the appearance of the risen Jesus to the women running to tell the disciples on Easter morning; Paul preaching in Athens; Peter miraculously delivered from prison. Not all readers recognize, however, that the Bible not only contains a multitude of stories, but as a whole, from Genesis to Revelation, can be read as one Great Story.

1.5.3 The Bible Projects a Macronarrative that Embraces its Individual Stories in a Comprehensive Whole.

The plethora of local and micronarratives are subsumed under one great metanarrative, a drama in five acts. The biblical narrative begins with the creation of this world, with a pointed lack of interest in what went on in the heavenly world prior to creation, and concludes with the end of this world, but without describing what sort of things will occur in the age to come. Even when “otherworldly” events occur, they occur in this world. The New Testament world includes stories of angels and demons and of the acts of God. But these are acts of God in *this* world, between creation and eschaton, not myths of the goings-on in the transcendent

world before, after, and above history. Here is a streamlined, rough-and-ready outline of the encompassing biblical drama (see Box 2).

BOX 2: The Bible as a Historical Narrative in Five Acts

- I. **Creation (Genesis):** The one God created all that is.
- II. **Covenant (Exodus–Malachi):** When creation was spoiled by rebellious humanity, God created a people, Israel, to be God’s agents and witnesses, and bearers of the promise of God’s present-and-future salvation.
- III. **Christ (Matthew–John):** The definitive event of all history is the act of God, in the person of his Son the Messiah, to accomplish salvation and mediate reconciliation.
- IV. **Church (Acts–Jude):** God has continued Israel’s mission in the church by creating an inclusive community from all nations, to be witnesses and agents of his saving act already accomplished for all people.
- V. **Consummation (Revelation):** God will bring history to a worthy conclusion, when the creation, which de jure belongs to God’s kingdom, will de facto “become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15).

The New Testament presupposes and retells its own variation(s) of Israel’s and Judaism’s grand narrative of universal history from creation to eschaton. To say “New Testament” (=New Covenant) or “Jesus is the Christ” is to place each paragraph of its contents within the sweep of this macronarrative.

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Covenant and New Covenant

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2

FORMATION: “THE NEW TESTAMENT AS THE CHURCH’S BOOK”

DISCLAIMERS: BY CALLING THE NEW TESTAMENT the church’s book, I do not intend anything esoteric, smug, or off-putting; in the first place, I intend only to express a historical reality. The expression is somewhat analogous to referring to the Qur’an as Islam’s book, or to the Jones family album as the Joneses’ book. It is not necessary to belong to the Islamic community or the Jones family to read their significant texts with insight and appreciation. But Muslims and the Joneses read their books with different eyes than others, and see things there that others do not see. Those who would understand these texts must hear the voices of those who confess them as their own faith. Hearing the confession in its own terms is indispensable to understanding, whether or not interpreters share this confession—though the texts are written by authors who believe they are witnessing to ultimate truth, and call readers to share that confession, written for “insiders” but always indirectly calling “outsiders” to share the “insider” perspective.

By “church” I do not mean any particular institution or denomination, but I do mean the publicly recognizable ecumenical community of Christian faith that exists around the world and through the centuries. I do not mean the individualistic admirers of Jesus or advocates of private “spirituality” who contrast these with “institutionalized religion”—though they too, of course, have every right to study and evaluate the New Testament on their own terms. By the

common phrase “the church’s book,” I do not mean that the New Testament is the church’s property and subject to the church’s understanding, as if the church can hear from it only that which does not challenge its own dogmas, ideologies, and presuppositions. Nor do I intend to suggest that only those in the Christian community have a right to interpret it.

The New Testament can in fact be legitimately interpreted in a variety of ways. What one gets from it depends to a great extent on what one is looking for. Linguists can study it as representing samples of Hellenistic Greek, analyzing its vocabulary and grammar and locating its various documents at the appropriate place in the development of the Greek language. Sociologists can study the family and social structures reflected in its writings, their power structures, and the various ways first-century Mediterranean communities came to terms with them, as important windows into the Hellenistic world. Historians of religion can examine it for the light it sheds on the status of religious institutions in the first-century Mediterranean world, including the new Christian group. Representatives of various ideologies (e.g., nationalism, cosmopolitanism, racism, antiracism, feminism, antifeminism, militarism, pacifism, communism, capitalism) can comb the New Testament texts for data relevant to their own beliefs, as can advocates of every Christian denomination and sect. The perspectives are overlapping, and some bring to light data that might be missed, important for

any understanding of the New Testament. But all bring their own agenda to the text, and none purport to interpret the New Testament in terms of its agenda (on “agenda,” see below §5.1.4). To interpret the New Testament as the *New Testament* means to attempt to understand it from the point of view of the community for which it became the foundational and normative set of documents that bear authentic witness to the meaning of God’s eschatological, covenant-renewing act in Jesus Christ.

No one today receives the documents of the New Testament directly from the hands of the authors. In notes for a 1940 lecture to pastors, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded them, “One cannot overlook the reality that between us and the Bible stands the church, a church that has a history.”¹ The reader who wants to understand the Bible cannot disdain church history. The New Testament is the church’s book in the sense that it has been *written, selected, edited, transmitted, translated, and interpreted* by the Christian community. These statements need to be grasped as an integrated group and then explored one by one (see Box 3).

BOX 3: The Church’s Book

- The New Testament is the church’s book in the sense that the church *wrote* it.
- The New Testament is the church’s book in the sense that the church *selected* it.
- The New Testament is the church’s book in the sense that the church *edited* it.
- The New Testament is the church’s book in the sense that the church *preserved* and *transmitted* it.
- The New Testament is the church’s book in the sense that the church *translated* it.
- The New Testament is the church’s book in the sense that the church *interprets* it.

2.1 The New Testament Is the Church’s Book in the Sense that the Church Wrote It.

JESUS WROTE NOTHING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, nor is there any suggestion in the Gospels that Jesus instructed his disciples to record his words or deeds. In terms of authorship, the New Testament is not Jesus’ book.

Nor is the New Testament the apostles’ book. There is a real sense in which the whole of the New Testament is apostolic, in that it represents the faith of the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” of the Nicene Creed. But the documents of the New Testament do not come to us exclusively from the hands of the apostles. Titles of New Testament documents attribute them not only to the apostles Matthew, John, Peter, and Paul, but also to Jesus’ brothers who did not belong to the group of the Twelve apostles (James and Jude), and to the nonapostles Mark the companion of Peter and Luke the companion of Paul.

The present titles of all New Testament books were given to them not by their authors but by the later church. In the community of faith, people write anonymously. We do not know, for instance, who wrote most of the Old Testament books, which are anonymous, presented in the name of the community itself, not as the product of an individual author. The New Testament is Jewish on this point, not Greek or Roman, where individual authorship was important for establishing the authority or reputation of a literary work. One-third of New Testament books are anonymous: the four Gospels and Acts, Hebrews, 1–3 John. Of the eighteen books attributed to particular authors, only seven are undisputed. From the time of Jesus to the earliest Gospel’s portrayal of his life and teaching, the message from and about Jesus was transmitted not by a few illustrious individuals, but in the worship, preaching, teaching, and life of the community of believers (see below §19.3). Taken as a whole, the New Testament does not represent the product of a few brilliant

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible: Human Word and Word of God*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 90.

individual writers, but the faith statements of the Christian community. Said theologically, the New Testament documents derive from the work of the Spirit of God at work in the Christian community as a whole. The New Testament is the church's book because the church wrote it.

2.2 The New Testament Is the Church's Book in the Sense that the Church *Selected It*.

THE CHURCH HAS ALWAYS HAD A BIBLE, but it has not always had a New Testament. The New Testament is the church's book as *part* of the canon of its sacred scripture.² The church was born in the matrix of Judaism, which by the first century CE had a solid core of normative documents on the way to becoming a closed, official canon. The first followers of Jesus that became the earliest church found themselves in a community that already revered a collection of texts as Holy Scripture. As Christian leaders and teachers composed texts that became authoritative within the church, they were added to the developing canon of Judaism; they did not replace it as an independent Christian canon.

Early Christianity produced much literature, much more than is included in our New Testament. We are aware of at least sixty-three documents that circulated as "Gospels" in the early church, as well as numerous "Acts," "Epistles," and "Apocalypses." This is not new or suppressed information, despite the sensationalizing claims sometimes made about the "lost books of the Bible."³

2. The most significant exponent of this point of view in the last generation was Brevard Childs. A thorough review of Childs's contribution, with bibliography, is provided by Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church's One Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

3. These documents are readily available, with critical introductions. The best collection in English is Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991).

Our New Testament is thus a selection made by the Christian community from a much larger pool of writings. Much of the New Testament was composed by the end of the first century CE, all of it by the middle of the second century. Though functioning as normative texts, the collection did not attain canonical status until generations later. The selection was not firmly fixed until the fourth century CE, and even then the decision was not absolute in all branches of Christianity. At first, it was not clear which authors and documents could be trusted as authentic interpreters of the faith. One thinks of the churches addressed in Revelation at the end of the first century, who had to decide between competing "apostles" and "prophets" (Rev 2:2, 20; 16:13; 18:20; 19:10), or the situation in Corinth, in which the church had to decide whether Paul or his rivals were true apostles representing Jesus (2 Cor 10–13). That we have Revelation and not the writings of John's opponents, that we have Galatians and 2 Corinthians and not the writings of Paul's opponents, shows that the church affirmed and selected these writings of Paul and John.

To read the New Testament is to enter into a decision already made by a particular community of faith. The selection was a gradual process in which some books came to be acknowledged by what became the mainstream of the whole church, and others were neglected or intentionally excluded. The formation of the Christian Bible is illuminated by a sketch of the history of this process.

2.2.1 Historical Sketch

The Jewish Scriptures as the Bible of Earliest Christianity

The church lived for generations without a New Testament, but was never without a Bible. The Christian community began in Judaism and assumed the authority of the Jewish Scriptures from the beginning, as had Jesus. From the beginning, early Christianity assumed without

argument that its own story was in continuity with the story of Israel and that Israel’s Scriptures were normative for the life of the church. One of the earliest fragments of Christian tradition, which Paul received from the pre-Pauline church only a few years after Jesus’ crucifixion, twice declares that the Christian gospel is “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–5). Marcion’s challenge to this in the second century (see below) was considered an aberration, and was rejected by the developing protocatholic church.⁴

The Jewish Scriptures themselves were the result of a long process of selection, so that all the New Testament authors did not necessarily work with the same understanding of which books are to be considered Scripture.⁵

Early Christianity thus lived for more than a century with the Jewish Scriptures as its only Bible. The New Testament as a book is not necessary for the existence of the church, and is not its foundation or constitution. For the first four Christian generations, the church had as its Bible the Jewish Scriptures, which it interpreted in the light of the Christ event, the eschatological renewal of God’s covenant with Israel (cf. §1.3 above and §9.2.2 below). The church also had its growing collection of authoritative Christian documents, but these were not placed alongside the Jewish Scriptures as “Old Testament” and “New Testament” until late in the second century. When this did happen, the New Testament did not become *the* canon for the

church. The New Testament has always been a part of the Christian Bible only in combination with the Old Testament. In the church, these two collections of writings can never be separated from each other and interpreted independently of one another. In the Christian community, the Old Testament has always been interpreted in the light of the Christ event; the New Testament has always been interpreted in the context of and in continuity with the Old Testament.

Earliest Christian Community

New Testament documents were not available for individual, private perusal, nor were they intended for such reading. The Scriptures were appropriated by being read aloud and heard in the Christian community with one’s fellow believers, in the context of worship. One went to church to hear the Bible. This reading-in-worship was part of the selection process, and a criterion for the later formation of the canon.

1 Clement (ca. 95 CE)

Clement, a leader in the Roman church at the end of the first century CE, still reflects the perspective of the New Testament itself. He knows Paul’s writings and Hebrews, but reflects no knowledge of the Gospels or Acts, though Mark, and perhaps other Gospels, were in circulation by Clement’s time. Yet it is clear that by “Scripture” Clement means the Jewish Scriptures; there is as yet no Christian New Testament. Clement cites Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Hebrews, but never as “Scripture.”

2 Peter and the Pastorals (ca. 100–150 CE)

Second Peter, among the latest New Testament documents to be written (ca. 130 CE; see below §18.3), seems to place (some of) Paul’s letters on a par with “the other scriptures” (3:16). This statement makes clear that by this

4. The phrase “catholic church” was first used in extant literature about 110 CE by Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrneans* 8:1. The group of churches that became “mainline Christianity” in the second century called itself “catholic” (“universal”). I use “protocatholic” for this emerging mainstream.

5. Our New Testament documents make several citations from and allusions to “Scriptures” not finally adopted as canonical in Judaism, and thus not appearing in the Christian Old Testament. A complete list is found in Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Eberhard Nestle, and Erwin Nestle, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 800–806. As examples, see Matt 2:23; Luke 11:49; John 7:38; 12:34; 19:28; 20:9; 1 Cor 2:9; Jas 4:5; Jude 14–16.

time Paul's writings were considered authoritative in some streams of early Christianity outside the Pauline tradition itself. The author of 2 Peter seems to have a "canonical" interest, since he purges his sources of statements that could rank *1 Enoch* as "Scripture" (cf. Jude 11–14; 2 Pet 2:14–17). First Timothy 5:18 cites the saying of Jesus in Matthew 10:10//Luke 10:7 along with Deuteronomy 25:4, and may include both under the rubric of "Scripture."

Justin (ca. 150 CE)

Justin Martyr, a Christian philosopher from Samaria who taught in Rome about the middle of the second century (martyred 165 CE), cites Scripture often. Each of his seventy-six explicit citations or allusions refers to the Old Testament as his written authority. He understands them allegorically as teaching the doctrines of the Christian faith, for the Logos, the Word of God as the preexistent Christ, speaks in them (e.g., *1 Apol.* 36–38). He establishes points of Christian doctrine, and even events in the life of Jesus, on the basis of (his interpretation of) the Old Testament, not from Christian writings.⁶ Justin is acquainted with several Christian documents, which he regards as important and authoritative. He indicates that the Gospels ("Memoirs of the Apostles") were read in Christian worship alongside "the Prophets," that is, the Jewish Scriptures (*1 Apol.* 66–67). Yet he has no list of authoritative Christian writings, and gives no indication that there is anything like a "New Testament" as part of the Christian Bible.

Marcion (ca. 150 CE)

Marcion too was a teacher in the Roman church, a contemporary of Justin. He understood himself to be a radical follower of the Pauline

gospel of grace, which compelled him to reject the God of the Jewish Scriptures as a different God from the God of Jesus and Paul. He did not accept the Jewish Scriptures as authoritative for Christians, but he did not reject the concept of sacred Scripture as such. Some Christian writings had been steadily growing in authority (see above), without having their official status clarified and designated. Marcion was apparently the first to make a particular set of Christian writings the norm of Christian faith. His twofold canon was the "Gospel" (a form of the Gospel of Luke) and the "Apostle" (ten Pauline letters, without the Pastorals or Hebrews). This bipartite canon corresponded to the Torah and Prophets considered Scripture by Judaism and the church. Like them, it consisted of narrative, recounting the saving acts of God (Torah/Gospels), and discursive documents delineating the meaning of the saving event and the human response it requires (Prophets/Epistles). The later catholic church was basically to accept Marcion's understanding of the canonical shape of the church's New Testament, Gospel and Epistle.

Marcion's influence was widespread. One aspect of catholic Christianity's response was to reaffirm the role of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture within the church, and to clarify the status of Christian documents that had long been considered authoritative. *In the wake of Marcion, the church discovered that it had a canon, but rejected Marcion's canon as too narrow.* The Christian Bible includes, and must include, the Old Testament. The Christian Bible includes, and must include, documents that bear authentic witness to the meaning of God's eschatological renewal of the covenant, the New Testament. This New Testament includes, and must include, more than one Gospel, and a plurality of Epistles representing more than one apostle. The church's intuition—believers would say "guided by the Holy Spirit"—constituted a limited pluralism as normative. More than one thing is acceptable, but not just anything. The remaining issue was to determine the boundaries of this pluralistic canon.

6. E.g., he knows that the colt on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem was found "tied to a vine" not because this detail occurs in any Gospel, but from Gen 49:11 (*1 Apol.* 32).

Irenaeus (ca. 180 CE)

The line of development leads directly from Marcion to Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the last quarter of the second century. His multi-volume *Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So Called (Against Heresies)* is no longer content to defend orthodox faith on the basis of the Old Testament alone. He distinguishes the Old and New Testaments, regarding both as Christian Scripture. In defense of the catholic faith he quotes, interprets, and appeals to New Testament documents, explicitly naming them, defending their authenticity, and arguing that they are normative for Christian faith. For Irenaeus, the church already has a canonical core accepted by all catholic Christians—four Gospels and Acts, plus the letters of Paul—but its edges are not firm, and its authority is far from universally acknowledged. Irenaeus has a “New Testament,” but no fixed list.

Gospels, Pauline Letters, Acts and Catholic Letters as Three Separate Preliminary Collections Later United

We ought not to suppose that the canon was formed on one great day when some pope, bishop, or council chose, from the vast sea of early Christian writings, the twenty-two letters and five narratives that became the twenty-seven books of the New Testament canon. The Pauline letters were the first to be collected and circulated, apparently as a corpus of seven letters, or letters to seven churches. With the later inclusion of secondary Pauline writings and Hebrews, the Pauline corpus became a fourteen-letter authoritative collection. The use of seven and its multiples is not accidental, but reflects the symbolic meaning of seven as “complete.”

As a counterpart and complement to this exclusively Pauline collection of fourteen letters, a collection of seven Catholic Letters was made that included the letters of the three “pillar apostles” James, Peter, and John (see Gal

2:6, 9), framed by the letters of James and Jude, the brothers of Jesus, all presumably representing the Jerusalem Christianity in tension with Paul. The collection was assumed to be composed by authors who, unlike Paul, had known the earthly Jesus. This collection was later prefaced by the book of Acts, in which Peter and Paul are two complementary leaders of early Christianity. Still later, this fourfold Gospel collection, which had a separate history, was combined with the two epistolary collections to form the New Testament canon.

Muratorian “Canon” (ca. 200 CE?)

In 1740 a fragment from an ancient Christian list of accepted books was discovered embedded in a codex from the seventh or eighth century CE. Until recently, most scholars were convinced that the fragment comes from Rome, about 170–200 CE. An alternative view argues the list derives from fourth-century Eastern Christianity.⁷ The list begins in mid-sentence, and its abrupt conclusion may mean that the ending is lost as well. Since Luke is the first Gospel mentioned (as “the third book of the Gospel”), the initial sentence fragment apparently referred to Matthew and Mark. The list continues with John, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul (excluding Hebrews), Jude, 1 and 2 John, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Apocalypses of John and Peter (with the comment that not everyone accepts them). There is no reference to James, 1 and 2 Peter, or 3 John. Gnostic,

7. See, e.g., A. C. Sundberg Jr., “Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List,” *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973): 1–41. Sundberg’s arguments are effectively met by Everett Ferguson, “Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance,” *Studia Patristica* 17, pt. 2, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Oxford Pergamon, 1982): 677–83. According to the careful study of Peter Lampe, the extant Latin translation may have been made later than the third century and outside Rome, but it is clearly a translation of a Greek text made in Rome before 200 CE (Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser; ed. Marshall D. Johnson [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003], 145).

Marcionite, or Montanist writings are categorically rejected.

Eusebius (ca. 325 CE)

Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25) distinguishes four classes of Christian writings for which normative claims had been made:

1. "Recognized" (*homologoumena*, "confessed" by the catholic church as representing Christian truth): Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles (no number named), and one Epistle each bearing the name of Peter and John. Eusebius notes that some also place Revelation in this group.
2. "Disputed" (*antilegomena*, "spoken against" by some and accepted by some): James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John.
3. "Spurious" (*notha*, "not genuine"): *Acts of Paul*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Didache*. Eusebius indicates that some place Revelation and the *Gospel of the Hebrews* here. This is a somewhat peculiar and imprecise category, containing books considered orthodox but still not canonical, showing that Eusebius and early Christianity did not consider the emerging canon to include all that was worth reading.
4. "Heretical" (*hairetikos*, i.e., divisive, representing another faith than that of the catholic church): As samples of a larger group he names the *Gospels of Peter*, *Thomas*, and *Matthias*, the *Acts of Andrew*, and the *Acts of John*.

In Eusebius's day, at the time of the legalization of Christianity and the Council of Nicaea, the church throughout the empire already had virtually the same collection of authoritative documents, but some books remained disputed. Hebrews was early "recognized" in the East, but continued to be "disputed" in the West; the opposite situation prevailed for Revelation: the Western churches accepted it early, but it continued to be disputed in the East for generations.

Codex Alexandrinus (ca. 400 CE)

This major manuscript of the whole Bible is a codex (bound book) that includes all the books of the present New Testament canon, as well as *1 and 2 Clement*, books included by numerous Coptic manuscripts, and a Syriac manuscript as late as the twelfth century.

Codex Sinaiticus (ca. 350 CE)

This codex, a well-written parchment manuscript of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, represents the Bible of some large church about the middle of the fourth century. It is one of our major witnesses to the text of the New Testament. The New Testament contains the standard twenty-seven books, plus the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, with no indication that the latter two belong to a separate category. Hebrews is located between 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy.

Athanasius (367 CE)

The bishop of Alexandria followed the local tradition of writing, shortly after Epiphany, a Festal Letter to the Egyptian churches and monasteries informing them of the date of Easter for that year, which thus also fixed the dates of other Christian festivals. Such letters were the occasions for other edifying instructions. In Athanasius's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter (367 CE), he gave his episcopal declaration on the list of canonical documents in the Christian Bible. His list of New Testament books is—for the first time in extant records—exactly the same as our present New Testament. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament have a penumbra, a list of books valuable for edification but not considered canonical.⁸ But the list

8. For the Old Testament: Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Ben Sirach, Esther, Judith, and Tobit. For the New Testament: *Didache* and *Shepherd of Hermas*.

of canonical books themselves appears crisp and firmly established. Only minor variations persisted after Athanasius.

This brief survey has illustrated (1) that it was important in the life of the early church to establish the canon; (2) that this was a gradual process; and (3) that it was never completed consistently and absolutely. Each of these points has its own theological significance. What does it mean for the Christian community to have a canon? If it is so important, why isn’t the canonical list clear and consistent?

2.2.2 Theological Reflections

What Does It Mean to Have Such a Historically Ambiguous Canon?

This question must be preceded by a consideration of what it means to have a canon at all. “Canon” comes from the Greek *κανών* (*kanōn*), itself a loanword from Hebrew *קנה* (*qaneh*). Both words mean “reed,” and were used in the sense of “stick,” “walking stick” (cf. Eng. “cane,” from the same root), and especially “measuring stick,” “yardstick,” “ruler.” The canon is thus the norm by which other things are measured. To claim that the biblical documents are canonical does not mean that all divine revelation is contained within them, but that this collection of documents is the normative collection by which other claims are measured. To have a canon means that the Christian community acknowledges it has been given a norm for its own testimony to the faith.

Were There Criteria Used in “Closing” the Canon?

The canon gradually emerged, and the church found itself gradually acknowledging that some documents functioned as authority for what could be counted as God’s revelation, and other documents could not be so regarded. This process was not random or arbitrary. But

did the church apply specific criteria to determine its selection?

1. *Inspiration*. The church has always regarded the Spirit of God as at work in the process by which its Bible came to be. The later church regarded the canonical books as inspired by the Holy Spirit in a way that noncanonical books were not. However, this is an *ex post facto* judgment about books that had already been acknowledged as canonical, not a criterion by which canonicity could be determined in the first place.

2. *Liturgical reception by major churches*. Documents were accepted as canonical partly on the basis that leading Christian communities had adopted them as authoritative documents to be read in worship. In the synagogues from which earliest Christianity originated, the reading from specific documents in the worship service affirmed them as Holy Scripture. The earliest churches not only continued this practice, but alongside “the Law and the Prophets” began to read the letters from Paul and other Christian leaders, which were written for this purpose. At first, such letters were not considered on a par with Scripture, but represented the homily or “word of exhortation” that would have been delivered by an apostolic preacher, had he or she been present. After the apostolic period this practice continued, and Christian documents read aloud in worship began to be accepted as on a par with Scripture (see 2 Pet 3:15–16). It was then that the issue of which documents legitimately could be read as part of the Christian liturgy became an important issue. This distinction continues in the contemporary church. Edifying texts (e.g., Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”) might be read in a worship service, but not from the lectern as Holy Scripture, as the norm and basis for the church’s proclamation. For us, the question of which books can be regarded as Scripture is settled by looking at a printed Bible. Any Bible that has “extra” books printed would be immediately

obvious. For the early Christians, “publication” was a matter of books being read in the common worship. This was not done casually. Today, we look between the covers of a *book*. The earliest Christians *listened* for what was read in *church*.

3. *Date, purported or real*. In general, earlier books were considered to be more authoritative than later ones. To be accepted as canonical, a document had to have some claim to mediate the meaning of the original revelatory events. A document known to have been written in the third century, for example, could never have been acknowledged as canonical. The Muratorian Canon respected the *Shepherd of Hermas* as valuable, but not canonical, because “it was written in our own time.” Yet date was not the determining criterion, as if all the documents finally accepted as canonical were earlier than all those rejected. *First Clement*, for example, is almost certainly earlier than 2 Peter, yet the former never became canonical, while the latter did.

4. *Authorship, purported or real*. It is not the case that documents of apostolic authorship were accepted and documents not written by apostles were rejected. On any understanding of authorship, the church accepted into its canon documents for which apostolic authorship was not claimed (Mark, Luke, Acts). Presumed apostolic authorship was validated by the theological content of the document, not vice versa. In the late second century Serapion, bishop of Antioch, heard that the *Gospel of Peter* was being read in the church at Rhossus, in his diocese. Serapion registered no objection, since he had never read the *Gospel of Peter*. Upon visiting the congregation and learning the contents of the document purportedly written by the apostle Peter, he rejected it on the basis of its theology, without raising the question of authorship *per se*. His judgment was that since its content did not represent the apostolic faith, it was not by Peter (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.12).

5. *Theological adequacy*. “Authorship” was thus a designation, conscious or not, for the

church’s judgment as to whether the document in question represented the apostolic faith, that is, its theological adequacy as an interpretation of the meaning of the Christ event. Attribution or denial of apostolic authorship was not primarily a historical claim, but a theological one. In the case of Hebrews, for example, despite initial reservations in the Western churches, the document was finally accepted on the grounds that the ecumenical church acknowledged its implicit claim to communicate the word of God and to represent the apostolic faith.⁹

These developments in the final stages of the canonizing process are not merely the church’s defense mechanism. The canon was not formed only as a reaction to Marcion, Montanus, and other movements judged later to be heretical. The formation of the canon was not primarily reactive, but proactive, as the church sought for adequate means to express its own developing faith. The fixing of the canon in the fourth century represents the culmination of the struggle already begun in the first century to discern true from false apostles. The canon is thus one manifestation of the “one, holy, catholic, apostolic church” affirmed in the Nicene Creed about the same time as the final defining of the canon.

The Christian community had more or less intuitive reasons for accepting some books and rejecting others (theologically said: the *sensus fidei* of the church as it makes its journey through history under the guidance of the Holy Spirit). In establishing the canon, the church recognized that it was grasped by the Word of God and the understanding of the Christian faith that came through these documents, and that it had no higher “criteria” by which to

9. Cf. Luther’s often-cited dictum, “Whatever does not teach Christ [*was Christum treibet*] is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it” (cited from Martin Luther in Heinrich Bornkamm and Karin Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel* [Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1983], 216–17).

prove to itself or to outsiders that some books belonged “in” and others remained “out.”¹⁰

This in turn means that, although there has never been an official action that closed the canon, the canon is by definition closed. To speak of reopening the canon implies that we claim to have in hand criteria by which to judge that some books should be added (and that some present ones should be removed). This would mean that our own criteria, not the Bible (either in present or projected form) function for us as canon. As the apostles are a closed circle, so the canon is a closed book. The New Testament canon bears witness to the apostolic faith. The apostolic faith is the canonical faith. The New Testament is the church’s book in the sense that the church selected it.

2.3 The New Testament Is the Church’s Book in the Sense that the Church Edited It.

THE PRESENT FORM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT is an anthology composed of twenty-seven documents written over a period of about a hundred years in a variety of locations in the Mediterranean world. This has profound implications for interpretation. When reading a letter of Paul, for instance, we can only read it as part of a collection, selected and edited by the Christian community, which is very different from the situation of its first readers. The New Testament did not come together by itself, but is the result of an editorial (redactional) process. What is involved in editing such a book?

1. *Collection and copying.* The scattered documents were at first collected into small collections. Paul’s letters were the first to be collected.

10. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. T. Thompson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 111–24, and Luke Timothy Johnson’s “Canonical Theses,” in “The Authority of the New Testament in the Church: A Theological Reflection,” in Charles R. Blaisdell, ed., *Conservative Moderate Liberal: The Biblical Authority Debate* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1990), 87–118.

Churches such as Corinth would already have more than one letter of Paul’s, and would be aware that he had written to other churches. Churches in the Pauline tradition came to regard all Paul’s letters as addressed not only to their original addressees, but to the wider church (see 1 Cor 1:1–2; Col 4:16). Marcion’s writings indicate that by about 140 in Rome, ten Pauline letters were known as a collection. The Muratorian Canon, probably also representing the Roman church about 200 CE, includes the Pastorals, making a Pauline collection of thirteen letters. The papyrus codex \mathfrak{P}^{46} shows that by about 200 a codex of Pauline letters was circulating containing all the traditional Pauline letters except the Pastorals. Our present collection is the end product of a process that included smaller prior collections: the Pauline Letters, the Gospels, the Catholic Letters (prefaced by Acts).

2. *Labels, titles, and concluding notes.* The documents were originally without titles. In the process of collection and editing, the documents were given titles that may or may not represent original authorship, readership, and literary genre. The author of the Gospel of Mark, for instance, begins at 1:1 with his own title, just as Matthew 1:1 represents the original author’s title. The titles—“According to Mark,” “According to Matthew,” with their elaborations such as “The Gospel according to Saint Matthew”—were added in the process of editing and canonization. Concluding “amen,” benedictions, and notes about the writing of the document may sometimes have been added to individual writings in the process of combining them into an anthology. This is often suggested, for example, concerning Romans 16:25–27.

3. *Order.* Someone, or some group, placed the books in their present order beginning with Matthew and ending with Revelation. All known manuscripts of the whole New Testament begin with the Gospels and have Revelation at or near the end, but otherwise there is considerable variety. Both Gospels and Epistles are preserved in a variety of orders. The present

order of the Pauline letters is determined by their relative length, with letters to churches preceding letters to individuals. Though Luke and Acts represent two volumes of a single work, Acts was early separated from Luke and became the initial narrative framework for the collection of the Catholic Epistles. In the formation of the whole New Testament from smaller collections, Acts remained separated from Luke and became the transition narrative to the epistolary literature as a whole. While many ancient manuscripts, but not all, have something like the present order of books, the first canonical list that agrees with our present New Testament lists the books in a different order. Through the centuries, there have been only minor variations in the order of New Testament books.

4. *Editorial combinations.* It is likely that either prior to or in the process of their collection, some letters or letter fragments were editorially combined to form our present letters. Many scholars believe, for example, that our present 2 Corinthians is composed of more than one letter; a smaller number argue the same for Philippians (see introductions to 2 Corinthians and Philippians).

5. *Glosses and annotations.* The collectors and editors made explanatory comments or glosses to make the particular details of the original letters more understandable or more relevant to a wider readership than originally intended, or to harmonize what was said with other documents in the collection (possible examples: 1 Cor 1:2b; 14:34–36; Rom 7:25b).

6. *Interpolations.* More extensive additions to the original documents, called interpolations, may have been made in the process of editing. For example, 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 is sometimes regarded as a post-Pauline addition that became a part of the letter at the point when it was edited into the Pauline corpus.¹¹

7. *Word, verse, and chapter divisions.* The original authors did not write in chapters and verses; these formal markers were later placed in the text to facilitate reference. In the fourth century, Bishop Eusebius devised a numbering system of dividing the pericopes (paragraphs) in the Gospels to facilitate reference and comparison; his numbers are found in the margins of many later manuscripts, and still indicated in some printed editions of the Greek New Testament. Sometime after the fourth century, divisions somewhat corresponding to later chapter divisions and lectionary sections were marked. It was not until the early thirteenth century, however, that Stephen Langdon, archbishop of Canterbury, made our present chapter divisions. Since they often do not come at appropriate points in the structure of the text, and since he is reported to have done some of the work while on a trip, presumably on horseback, it has been suggested that some of the present chapter divisions are the result of marking the text while bumping along in the saddle. The 1551 edition printed by Robert Stephanus introduced the present verse divisions (adopted for the first time by an English translation in the 1560 Geneva Bible)—again not always corresponding to the literary structure of the text.

It is not so well understood that not only chapter and verse divisions, but sentence and even word divisions, are not original but are editorial decisions made much later. Our earliest manuscripts are without accents, punctuation marks, or spaces between the words, as were the original texts. So long as the original Greek of the texts continued to be a living language and the mother tongue of the reader who was interior to both the language of the text and its meaning, this rarely presented a problem. Modern native speakers of English, for example, have little difficulty in correctly understanding

11. That interpolations exist in the present form(s) of the New Testament is almost universally acknowledged. The extent of such interpolations, and of our ability to identify them, is a disputed point among critical

interpreters. See William O. Walker Jr., *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*, JSNTSup 213 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

a text such as the following, printed in the style of our oldest Greek manuscripts:

TWINKLETWINKLELITTLES
TARHOWIWONDERWHATYO
UAREUPABOVETHEWORLD
SO
HIGHLIKEADIAMONDINT
HESKY

As long as the reader already knows the content, “what the text is supposed to say” is clear because he or she belongs to the community in which the text is living tradition. Even in such situations, however, there is sometimes ambiguity and the possibility of misunderstanding: SHEIS-NOWHERE can be read more than one way.

Sometimes differences in English translations are the result of different editorial decisions on how the letters of the Greek manuscripts should be divided into words, or how they are to be punctuated (e.g., John 1:3–4). These manuscripts had already been edited when they became the basis for modern printed editions of “the” Greek New Testament. We thus do not and cannot receive New Testament texts from the hands of their original authors in their original form; we receive them in an edited form from the hands of the church. Who were these “editors” responsible for the formation of the New Testament as one book? They are entirely anonymous; we do not know the name of a single individual who contributed to this process. Many scholars believe there is good evidence that already in the New Testament period there were such groups as a “Pauline school,” a “Matthean scribal community,” and a “Johannine school” that cultivated the

developing tradition and played a role in the formation and editing of the documents that eventually became our New Testament (see the introductions to Matthew, the deuteropauline letters, and the Johannine texts below).

2.4 For Further Reading

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