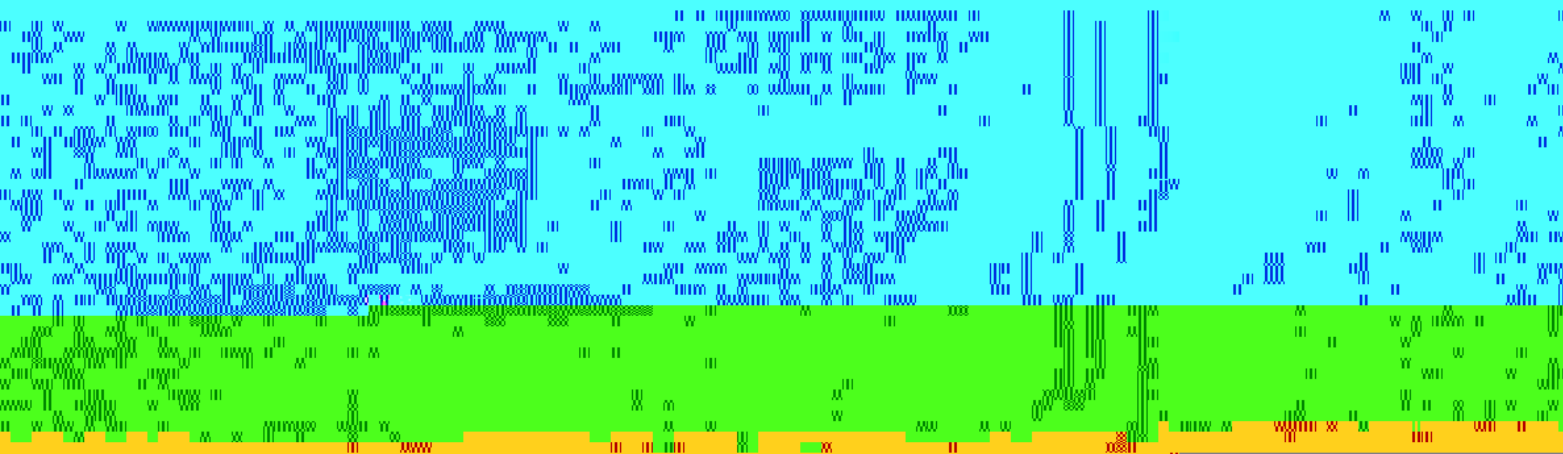


A VOYAGE THROUGH THE NEW TESTAMENT

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota



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INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The Bible, the Scriptures of Christianity
Divisions of the Old Testament

Divisions of the New Testament
The Question of Canon

Welcome to a most exciting adventure! We are about to launch into the study of the New Testament, a body of literature that is already almost two thousand years old. It comes from a part of the world that is little known to Western cultures like our own, but amazingly it continues to have wide-ranging appeal to people all over the world, scholars and nonscholars alike. Some are drawn to the New Testament as a historical document that provides a window into the sociopolitical world of the ancient Middle East. Others use the New Testament as source material for understanding the role of religion in cultural anthropology. Still others investigate the New Testament to see how literature creates meaning for its readers and how various literary genres and rhetorical techniques affect the meaning of a text. Of course, many Christians look to the New Testament to inspire faith and to provide guidance for the way they live their lives.

At first glance, these might sound like contradictory or competing interests and concerns, but they are not. People of faith can come to better understand the message of the New Testament by drawing on the insights of historical analysis, cultural anthropology and literary theory. In fact, teachers and scholars of the New Testament would argue that we cannot fully comprehend this literature without investigating its historical setting, the sociopolitical environment in which it was composed, the cultural conventions that were in place at the time of its writing, and the literary forms and techniques, that first-century writers had at their disposal.

Perhaps we can use the analogy of travel to a distant location, like India or China, to make our point. Using modern means of transportation, you can get to India without too much trouble. If you are visiting some of its major cities, you may encounter many things that look and sound familiar to you. You may even find a number of people who

covenant, basically one that is no longer valid or effective. In fact, such a view would be entirely wrongheaded for at least two reasons. First, these books include the sacred scriptures of Judaism, which proclaim a living and enduring covenant between God and God's chosen people.

4 Introduction

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Whether for study or personal and spiritual enrichment, the Bible is perhaps the most frequently read of all Christian books.

Already by the third century B.C.E., Jews were translating their scriptures in a Greek transliteration that came to be known as the Septuagint.

CALENDAR DESIGNATIONS

As you probably know, people of different cultures in today's world use different ways of marking time. The

historical or documentary accounts of the events of Jesus' life, but rather as proclamations of believing communities' faith in Jesus and celebrations of their experience of Christ in their midst.

The New Testament contains four gospels. Although Matthew's gospel appears first, most biblical scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark was written first and that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are dependent on it. These three similar gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are called synoptic gospels, from the Greek *synoptikos*, because they can be "seen together" or they read the same. In other words, these gospels tell the same general story of Jesus in the same kind of way and with more or less the same chronology.

Biblical scholars think that the Gospel of John was written somewhat later and by an author who did not have access to the synoptic gospels in their written form. When you read the Gospel of John, you will see that it is quite different from the other three canonical gospels in terms of style, content, chronology, and theological perspective, and, therefore, it must be read with different expectations.

2. Acts of the Apostles. This book is the second part of a two-part salvation history and a continuation of Luke's gospels. Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the origins of Christianity from the time immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus through the time of Paul's preaching in Rome—the period covering approximately 35–64 C.E. Its date of composition is usually given as the last quarter of the first century, after the destruction of Jerusalem (70 C.E.).

At first glance, Acts of the Apostles looks like a relatively uncomplicated history (as modern people understand history) or an eyewitness documentary of the early church. However, a closer examination reveals that something quite different is going on in this book. For example, the reader will notice that the author of Acts is being very selective in his telling of the story because he focuses on only two principal characters, namely Peter and Paul.

We have now accounted for thirteen letters. What about the other eight letters of the New Testament? The Letter to the Hebrews has no named author, though it was sometimes (wrongly) associated with Paul. We probably should not even call it a letter since it does not follow the typical pattern of a letter. However, since it has traditionally been included among the letters, we will treat it there. Seven other letters are called catholic, meaning "general or universal," because they were intended not for a single faith community but generally for all churches. These are also sometimes called apostolic letters because they are attributed to some of Jesus' disciples and apostles. This group consists of one letter attributed to James, two letters attributed to Peter, three letters attributed to John, and one bearing the name of Jude.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to make many generalizations about this section of the New Testament. Some of these letters are addressed to communities, while others are addressed to individuals. Most follow the conventional style of a letter, but some do not. Some are formal in style and content, but others are very informal and personal. Thus, as we shall discover, each must be addressed individually and in its own context in order to be properly understood.

4. Revelation. This book consists of a series of visions given to John—not the gospel writer but an otherwise unknown Christian prophet with the same name. The Greek word for "revelation" is *apocalypsis*, and, therefore, this book is sometimes called the Apocalypse. It belongs to a special type of literature known as apocalyptic, which employs language and imagery associated with the events of the ~e. However, if we were to think of the BOOK of Revelation simply as a "road map" of the end time, we would miss its primary message. The Book of Revelation, and apocalyptic literature in general, addresses some important questions about the problem of evil in the world, and it asserts the sovereignty of God in all things. Thus, it conveys a message of hope and a promise of a return to the paradise of the Genesis creation stories—a fitting way to end the New Testament and the Bible.

THE QUESTION OF CANON

Another introductory question to be considered is how the collection of documents now called the New Testament was compiled. Why did some religious writings get into the New Testament, while others did not? Implied in this question is the assumption that the books of the Bible did not suddenly appear bound together as we see them today. We can safely say that none of the biblical authors expected that his book would become part of the New Testament when he wrote it. Rather, early Christian communities had access to a variety of religious literature from which they chose the books that would later become the New Testament. Likewise, biblical scholars agree that early Christian communities did not sit down with a predetermined set of rules to decide "This one stays," but "This one goes." However, we may be able to reconstruct, to some extent, the criteria of canonicity, that is, the principles that guided the selection of books to be included in the New Testament. Before we get into the question of the criteria of canonicity, let's take a moment to define terms.

also have firm evidence that the letters of Paul had earned the status of sacred Christian scripture, much like the TaNaK was sacred scripture for Judaism.

Third Stage: Eventually, the early Jesus traditions were organized into written

by c. 100. It included the four gospels, the *utad to B' aul* (excluding Hebrews), *juuc*, *mon*, *toer*, *toer*, *toer* (included in the Old Testament apocrypha), Revelation, and the *Anapokrypha* (later Testament apocrypha). Other lists or partial lists can

be found in the part of the second century. Acts 15: 23, 3 apostles, *thirteen letters* (1 John, 2 John, the Wisdom of Solomon, *anocrumha* or deuterocanonical books) (today included among New

Factors that affected the development of the New Testament canon:

- (a) Apostolic origin
- (b) Theological correctness
- (c) Authority of church leaders to determine what was appropriate
- (d) Widespread appropriation by the churches

The first criterion, apostolic origin, suggests that only books written by an apostle or a disciple of an apostle should be included in the Christian canon. However, the application of this criterion is not as straightforward as it might appear on the surface because many of the early Christian texts that later came to be viewed as sacred scripture were not autographed. For example, none of the four gospels of the New Testament was signed by its author. Instead, the names of apostles or disciples of apostles were attached to these anonymous works sometime in the second century C.E. in order to help establish their authority among the churches. Other writings, like the letters of Paul, are problematic because Paul was not an apostle, at least not in the usual sense of the word.

Sometimes it appears that this criterion was used in reverse fashion. For example, some early church historians and theologians questioned whether the Letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation ought to be included in the Christian canon because they could not verify that Paul and John, the son of Zebedee, were their respective authors. However, apostolic origin was probably not their primary concern. Instead, it may have been that how and where the books were written

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