

Encountering the New Testament

INTRODUCTION

This book is designed primarily as an introduction to the study of the New Testament in an academic setting. The New Testament itself is a collection of religious writings that, along with the Jewish Scriptures (which Christians have traditionally called the “Old Testament”), are sacred and authoritative for the Christian community. Together, the two collections constitute the Christian Bible.

Aims of This Book

Although many of you who enroll in a New Testament course will likely have some sense of identification with Christianity, some of you may be adherents of other faiths—Judaism, Islam, Buddhism—and others may have no religious faith or background at all. Some of you will attach great importance to religion, while others will treat it more casually or even feel no need of it, and some will not be quite sure where they stand. Motives for taking the course, in any case, will be varied. If some of you seek deeper knowledge of the Christian faith or confirmation of your religious views, others may be searching for perspectives they can accept. And still others may have a purely secular interest in the historical development of Christianity or in the New Testament as literature. Neither instructor nor text should presuppose any particular religious commitment, nor should an academic course in biblical studies become a means of indoctrinating students in one religious view.

As diverse as your religious views may be, each of you will have some sense of values and opinions on the meaning of human life. You will have views on human rights, politics, sexuality, ecology, and economics. And because the New Testament addresses the foundational issues of what life is about and how human beings ought to live, it has clear points of contact with the interests not only of religious but also of nonreligious people.

Unfortunately, these points of contact can easily be overlooked. Western education has too often confused the legitimate demand for objectivity with a kind of value-neutrality that discourages personal involvement. But to study the New Testament writings only as relics from the past is to miss their potential to engage the reader in reflection on life's deepest questions. Ultimately, it is up to you to make connections between the course materials and your life. But I have written this text out of the conviction that it is more exciting and much sounder educationally to have students, instructor, and text involved in an ongoing interchange about the possible importance of what is studied than to consign the text (and perhaps the instructor) to the external role of a provider of "bare" information—as if there were such a thing.

The matter is not fundamentally different in other fields of study. Should a history course approach the past as something "dead" or as a means of reflecting on our present and our alternative futures? Can economics (as is often claimed!) be reduced to sheer quantification, or is every economic decision finally an expression of value judgments? It is arguable

that the most subjective, doctrinaire books are actually those that claim to be value free. In fact, the illusion of neutrality may be the subtlest of all the tools of indoctrination.

Although I hope I have maintained an appropriate degree of objectivity, I disavow value-neutrality as an educational ideal. This text, far from addressing readers as disembodied intellects, is written to foster a genuine encounter with the perspectives presented in the various New Testament writings. This means, in part, to inform you about what the New Testament says. But it also means to invite you to ask questions that call for personal involvement: questions as to what the New Testament means by what it says, how one can know what it means, and the possible worth to you, as a human being, of what the New Testament says and means. Chapter 1, which surveys various methods of biblical study, will explain more concretely how the text will proceed and how it will seek to encourage value judgments without relinquishing objectivity.

The New Testament: Origin and Contents

The New Testament writings were produced by many different authors, are of several different literary types, and express varying interests and points of view. It is therefore crucial to study each writing individually and not impose the perspective of one upon another.

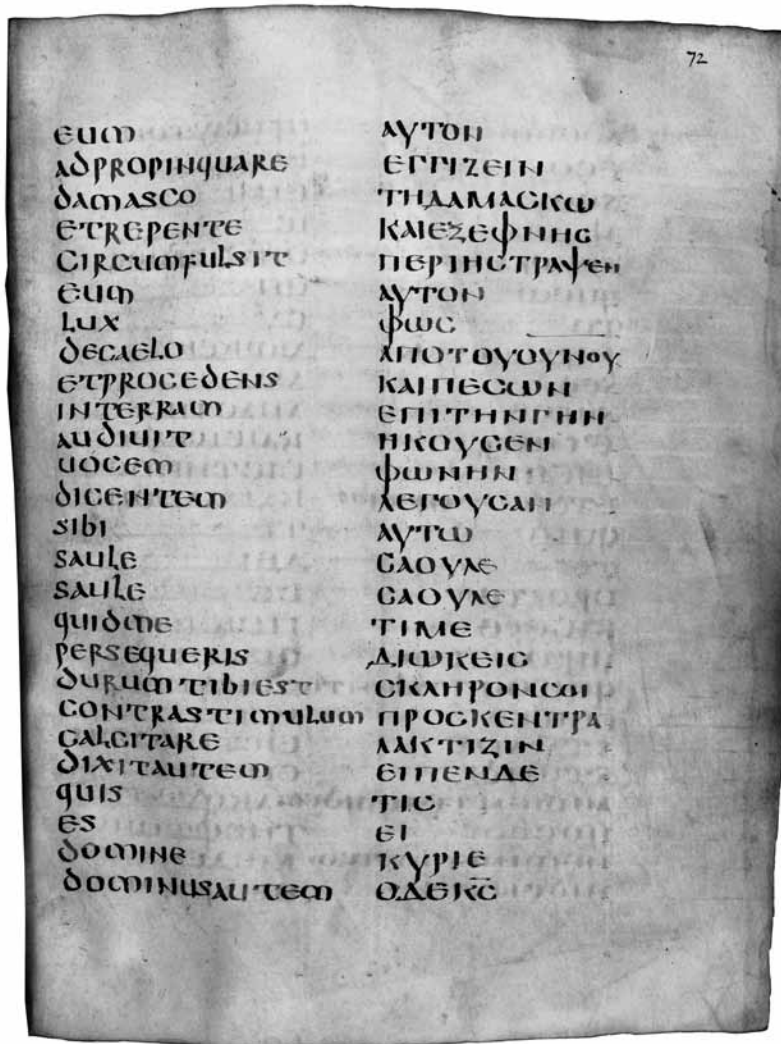


FIG. 0.1 (left) We possess no original writings of the New Testament, only copies like this sixth-century manuscript of the book of Acts (here: Acts 9:3-5 in Latin and Greek). The earliest extant manuscripts of Acts are from the third century. Lines 19-21 in the right column are the heavenly Jesus' words comparing Paul to a stubborn mule: "It hurts you to kick against the goads." Those words are missing from all but a few manuscripts, however, and apparently were inserted by a scribe to make this account line up with the similar account in Acts 26 (see 26:14). Acts 9:3-5 in Manuscript E (Number 08, "Laudianus," MS. Laud Gr. 35). Photo courtesy of Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

FIG. 0.2 (below) The Greek text of Acts 9:3-5 as it appears in a modern critical text, the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (known by scholars as the Nestle-Aland²⁷). The T-shaped mark at the end of v. 4 points the reader to a technical note at the bottom of the page, which indicates that an additional Greek phrase is inserted (following Acts 26:14) in a few manuscripts: E (see Fig. 0.1, above), manuscript 431, and some Syriac manuscripts. Text critics use such information to explore the history of the New Testament text.

3 Ἐν δὲ τῷ πορεύεσθαι ἐγένετο αὐτὸν ἐγγίξειν τῇ Δαμασκῷ, ἐξαίφνης τε αὐτὸν περιήστραψεν φῶς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ 4 καὶ πεσὼν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἤκουσεν φωνὴν λέγουσαν αὐτῷ· Σαοὺλ Σαοὺλ, τί με διώκεις; 5 εἶπεν δέ· τίς εἶ, κύριε; ὁ δὲ· ἐγὼ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὃν σὺ διώκεις·

¶ 9,2 13 12 37⁷⁴ κ A 81. 323. 453. 945. 1739 pc | 1 2 33. 1175. 1891 pc | txt B C E Ψ
 31 • 4 T (26,14) σκληρον σοι προς κεντρα λακτιζειν E 431 sy^{p,h}** mae (cf 6 app)

But who were these authors, and how did their works come to be included in the New Testament? Although these questions will require detailed discussions at later points, a brief overview of the early Christian movement can provide some preliminary answers.

During the reign of the emperor Tiberius, the Roman occupation government in the province of Judea executed a Jew named Jesus from the town of Nazareth. In the following decade, small groups of his followers gathered regularly for worship, inspired in part by their belief that God had raised him from the dead. The movement was originally a small Jewish sect, composed of people who believed that through this Jesus, God had fulfilled the ancient promises to the people of Israel. Soon, however, non-Jews, or Gentiles, joined their ranks. Christians, as the followers of Jesus came to be called, eventually dropped some of their distinctively Jewish heritage, such as laws of ritual purity, although not without controversy. And before long, Jews were a small minority in a predominantly Gentile faith.

In the Roman Empire, Christianity was one among numerous religious cults. Sometimes viewed as oddities, sometimes seen as a threat and persecuted, Christians were nevertheless successful in winning converts to their faith. Slightly less than three hundred years after Jesus' death, the emperor Constantine gave Christianity a favored position in the empire and thus laid the foundation for its role in Western civilization. In time, a new system of reckoning history made the presumed date of Jesus' birth the dividing point of history.

From the beginning, the figure of Jesus was

central to the new faith. But it was no simple matter for Jesus' followers to state who they understood him to be and what his life, death, and resurrection meant. Understanding themselves as heirs to God's promises to Israel, they naturally looked to the Jewish Scriptures as their primary resource. These writings pointed to a hope for God's redemptive action in the future, and Christian interpreters connected that hope to Jesus. But the language of hope in these scriptures took many forms and was subject to varied interpretations. In addition, none of the many religious concepts available in the cultural world of the Roman Empire was fully adequate to the Christian experience of Jesus. Thus, what eventually emerged as the "orthodox" view of Jesus was without exact precedent. It developed through time and was forged only through controversies and splits among groups with various interpretations.

By the middle of the second century, it was apparent that the extreme diversity in doctrine among various Christian groups threatened the continuity of the church's message. One of the ways early Christians sought to define acceptable teaching was through the designation of a body of authoritative Christian writings to set alongside the Jewish Scriptures. The Greek word for a list of authoritative books is *canon*, which means "rule" or "measure." Christianity thus developed its own canon, which became known as the New Testament.

The process of canonization was gradual and informal. Churches in various locales drew up their own lists of authoritative books. These lists differed considerably in the beginning, but

by the middle of the fourth century, the present canon had achieved general acceptance.

Not all the Christian works that circulated during the early years became part of the canon. The churches chose those writings that they found meaningful and helpful in their community life, and they justified their choices (probably after the fact) by appealing to various criteria. One of these criteria was “apostolic” origin: they understood the writings included in the canon as in some sense based upon the testimonies of the apostles, the first generation of church leaders, made up primarily but not exclusively of persons believed to have been called into leadership by Jesus himself.

The canon, as it eventually developed, begins with four narrative portrayals of the life of Jesus, designated in English as “Gospels.” There follows a work called the Acts of the Apostles, which gives account of the early church in mission. Next come thirteen letters that bear the name of Paul, a devout Jew who joined the Christian movement after Jesus’ death and understood himself as the apostle to the Gentiles. Appended to the body of Pauline letters is the book of Hebrews, which bears no author’s name but was attributed to Paul by Christians in Egypt. The remaining eight writings, seven of which are traditionally grouped together as the “General Letters,” were attributed to various other apostolic figures. (Hebrews is sometimes included in this category, a practice I have followed in this text.)

What the early church believed about the authorship of the writings may not have always been accurate, however. Many schol-

ars are convinced that Paul did not write all the letters that bear his name. And the actual identities of the authors of the Gospels are matters of dispute. It is important, in this connection, to understand that the titles by which these writings are known appear as headings to the ancient manuscripts but do not occur in the bodies of the works themselves. These titles are probably the products of tradition and were not supplied by the authors.

In many cases, we do not know who the authors were or when they wrote. We do know that the authentic letters of Paul, most of which were written during the 50s of the first century, are the earliest of all the canonical writings. The Gospels probably did not begin to appear until shortly before or shortly after the year 70—forty years or so after Jesus’ death. We must therefore imagine a long period in which the primary way of transmitting the Christian message was by word of mouth. Jesus’ earliest followers told stories of what he had said and done, and they preached about what God had done *through* him. The authors of the Gospels made use of this oral tradition, as well as of some early written material that is now lost.

Which New Testament? **Translations, Manuscripts, and Textual Criticism**

Because most people who read the Bible today read it in translation, not in the original

languages, it matters which translation one uses. Most students of New Testament are aware of the existence of many versions of the New Testament, particularly the newer ones that seek to capture the meaning of the original texts in clear, contemporary English. The move in this direction is all to the good, but readability is not the only issue. Translation is tricky business, and it is important to know whether the translators have made an attempt at objectivity or have presupposed some particular doctrinal point of view. Another question is whether a given version is a genuine translation of the original or simply a paraphrase that tries only to give the “general sense” of the text. Although all translation involves a measure of interpretation, a paraphrase offers far too much opportunity for the injection of some particular theological perspective.

But what is it that translators translate? What do we mean, in other words, when we speak of “the original”? There is, in fact, no such thing as the original New Testament as such, since each of the writings was produced separately. But neither do we have the original (or “autograph”) copy of any of the individual books. What we do have is a great number of ancient manuscripts, some containing the entire New Testament and others containing portions of varying lengths.

Not surprisingly, there is often considerable variation in the wording of the manuscripts of a given writing. Copyists made errors and sometimes even changed the text intentionally for various reasons. These variations are for the most part fairly minor, but

they are not insignificant. In any case, before setting out to translate a New Testament writing, one must first try to construct the oldest form of the text. And this is the task of a textual criticism. Most textual critics use what is called the eclectic method, which involves comparing the various readings of any given passage and trying to determine which is closest to what the author wrote.

A few scholars speculate that the Gospels were originally written in Aramaic, which was spoken by Palestinian Jews during the time of Jesus. The majority, however, are convinced that Greek was the language of composition of all the books of the Christian canon. What the textual critic must work from, in any case, is nearly five thousand Greek manuscripts, along with many other manuscripts of early versions—translations into such languages as Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. In addition, the writings of early church leaders contain numerous quotations from New Testament writings.

Our answer to the earlier question, then, is rather complex. What New Testament translators translate, and what New Testament interpreters seek ultimately to interpret, are the textual critics’ approximations of the oldest Greek texts. This means there will continue to be some disagreement among scholars as to precisely what the New Testament says at various points. But it does not mean that the tasks of textual criticism and translation are hopeless. However significant the variations might be in individual cases, the general sense of each of the writings is clear enough. The task of interpretation is, of course, a somewhat different matter, and we turn to it in chapter 1.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the educational philosophy presented in the first section of this introduction? State your agreements and/or disagreements with it. Should an academic text be “objective”? Should it be “value-neutral”? Do these two terms mean the same thing?
2. Explain, in a few brief sentences, the steps through which the New Testament came into being. Which writings are the earliest of all the canonical works? When, approximately, did the Gospels begin to appear?
3. After reading this introduction, how would you answer the following question “Who wrote the New Testament?”
4. Define each of the following terms: apostle, canon, Gentile, manuscript.
5. Why is it important to pay attention to which translation of the New Testament one uses?
6. What is the task of textual criticism?
7. In which language were the materials in the New Testament written?

FOR FURTHER READING

Dungan, David L. *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

MacDonald, Lee Martin. “Canon of the New Testament.” In *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.