



UNIT I

INTRODUCTION

Your study of this unit will help you to:

- Discuss the literary structure and the major literary forms of the New Testament.
- Describe the process by which New Testament books were transmitted and established as canon of the Christian Church.
- Identify the three worlds of New Testament interpretation.
- Discuss the historical, political, and religious setting of the New Testament.

- What Is the New Testament?
- How Should One Read the New Testament?
- The World of the New Testament





1

What Is the New Testament?

O bjectives:

Your study of this chapter should help you to:

- Describe the literary structure of the New Testament.
- Identify the major literary genres used in the New Testament.
- Discuss the process by which the New Testament canon emerged.
- Discuss the concept of the covenant community as the context and creation of the New Testament.

Q uestions to consider as you read:

1. How is the New Testament organized?
2. What is the significance of the genres used in the New Testament?
3. How does the Church come to agreement on what books belong in the New Testament?
4. What is the significance for us that the New Testament arose from and created a covenant community?

K

ey Words to Understand

Narrative
Gospels
Prophecy
Aramaic
Koine
Papyrus
Parchment
Textual criticism
Variants
Manuscript
Canon

The New Testament may be the most influential book in the history of humanity. The New Testament and the Old Testament form the Christian Scriptures, which have provided inspiration and identity to the Christian faith for almost 2,000 years. For many centuries the Christian faith has had the largest number of followers of any of the world religions. The New Testament has been translated into more languages and read by more people than any other book ever written. It is the primary source of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who has been one of the most influential persons in the history of humankind. It is hard to overestimate the influence the New Testament has had on the world through its influence on Christianity.

Beyond the influence on Christians, the New Testament has provided some of the most famous and significant literature in the history of the world. The “love chapter” found in 1 Corinthians 13 and the “faith chapter” in Hebrews 11 are moving examples of literary composition. The Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12 and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5—7 have been widely studied in ethics classes and as religious resources for comparative religious studies. The Lord’s Prayer (found in different forms in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4) is a model prayer studied and repeated by both Christians and non-Christians alike.

The Structure of the New Testament

Because the New Testament is so influential in both world and Christian history, it is important to understand how it is put together. Twenty-seven different pieces of ancient Christian literature form the New Testament. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament is a collection of those writings, organized according to their respective literary types. The arrangement of the New Testament shows some striking similar-

ities to that of the Old Testament. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament begins with a narrative collection. These narratives describe the life, ministry, and message of Jesus, as well as that story of selected individuals in the earliest Church. This narrative section is followed by a collection of occasional writings written within that narrated history. The New Testament, like the Old, concludes with a prophetic view to the future.

■ The Narratives of the New Testament

The opening narrative collection of the New Testament consists of four books describing the life, ministry, and message of Jesus, and a book that provides highlights of significant individuals and events in the first 30 years of the history of the earliest Christian Church. The four books describing the life and message of Jesus are the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John. The book of Church history is called Acts or the Acts of the Apostles. These narratives possess the basic characteristics of story or **narrative** literature. In each there is a plot or story line. The descriptions of the actions of key characters and their dialogues and monologues carry the plot line forward. In each there is rising conflict and a resolution of that conflict.

For the past two centuries certain scholars have debated whether these narratives were historically accurate or the literary inventions of their authors. There is little substantial reason to doubt the essential historical accuracy of the Gospels and the Book of Acts. On the other hand, it is also important to realize that

these books were not written for the purpose of simply providing historical data. They were written to proclaim the truth of the Christian message about Jesus Christ. They possess a certain sermon character in the best sense of the word “sermonic.”

The Gospels

The Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called **Gospels** and are named after the person traditionally thought to have written or collected the material in them. Though some events and words of Jesus are common to two or three or even all four of the Gospels, each Gospel writer created a unique portrait of the life and the meaning of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew is especially suited to be the first Gospel and to function as the transition book from the Old Testament to the New. It is written with a Jewish perspective in mind and gives special attention to the way Jesus fulfilled various prophecies (and the Law) of the Old Testament. Matthew also contains large blocks of teachings of Jesus. Jesus is portrayed as a teacher or rabbi and as the Son of God. This first Gospel is one of two Gospels that provide a narrative and interpretation of Jesus’ birth.

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and was most likely the first of the four Gospels to be written. Mark is characterized by the energetic activity of Jesus. Mark’s descriptions are actually more detailed than Matthew’s, but Mark contains very few sections of the teachings of Jesus. Teaching is accomplished through the dialogues, parables, and interpreted actions of Jesus. The kingdom of

God, Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus as the Son of God, and Jesus as the Son of Man are common themes treated in Mark. There is also a significant portion of the Gospel devoted to the meaning of Jesus’ death.

The Gospel of Luke is the longest of the Gospels. It is also the only Gospel with a sequel (the Book of Acts). Luke gives special attention to the poor, to the sick, to the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation, and to the participation of women in the work and ministry of Jesus. This third Gospel is noteworthy for its literary artistry and its powerful use of the parables of Jesus. The picture of Jesus begins by portraying Him as the Messiah and Prophet of Nazareth, then develops a picture of Jesus as the servant of God and finally presents an understanding of Jesus as Lord.

The Gospel of John is often characterized as the most “theological” of the four Gospels. There is a strong emphasis on Jesus as Messiah and as Son of God, with a special focus on the unique Father-Son relationship of Jesus and God. John’s Gospel is characterized by long teaching passages in which Jesus reveals the significance of His person and ministry. The parables disappear, and the miracles are described as “signs” pointing to the meaning of Jesus in the work of God in the world. There is an almost philosophical use of abstract terms like “light,” “life,” “truth,” “word,” and “one.”

Each of the Gospels devotes almost a third of its content to the final week, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This focus on Jesus’ final days and the varied ways in which the meaning of Jesus is taught by the four Gospels raises the ques-

tion of what kind of literature the Gospels represent. This question of the literary genre can be expressed by raising an imaginative question. If the chief librarian of the great ancient library of Alexandria, Egypt, had received a copy of the Gospels, with what other literature of the ancient world would the Gospels have been shelved? For much of the 20th century the Gospels were thought to represent a unique kind of literature. The Gospels do not fit very well in any of the genres of either the ancient or modern world. There has been a tendency in recent decades to characterize the Gospels as ancient biographies, but that does not really account for the focus on the death and Resurrection that plays such an important theological role in each Gospel. The same problem undermines attempts to understand the Gospels as collections of miracle stories or collections of virtuous teachings or simply as ancient history. The Gospels are clearly narratives, but they are a unique kind of narrative.

The New Testament History Book

The fifth narrative book is the Book of Acts, which is clearly a second volume by the author of the Gospel of Luke. The prologues of both Luke and Acts make it clear that Luke intended these two volumes to be understood as part of the ancient genre of history. That fact should not lead to the conclusion that these books were written with the modern understandings of history in mind. Luke clearly selects and interprets the historical material he includes to persuade the reader of the truth of the Christian mes-

sage. Part of the purpose of Acts is to portray the expanding mission of the Church as the fulfillment of Jesus' words that when the earliest believers received the Holy Spirit they would be empowered to witness to Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, "and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Thus the themes of witness, power, the Holy Spirit, and the expansion of Christianity play a major role in Acts. The other major purpose of Acts is to show the success of the missionary outreach to Gentiles. The narrative of Acts portrays this success by shifting from describing the ministry of Peter to describing the ministry of Paul as the two major characters of the book.

■ **The Letters of the New Testament**

Following the Gospels and Acts, the New Testament contains two collections of early Christian letters. The first collection contains letters written by the apostle Paul to various churches or individuals. The second collection of letters is often called the General or Catholic Letters. The term "Catholic" comes from the fact that many (though not all) of these letters were written to churches rather than to individuals. All the letters address specific concerns—usually problems or potential problems—which the author was trying to correct by the letter. Most of the letters follow the standardized letter form used in the Greco-Roman world of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. They begin with the author's name, followed by the recipients' name(s) and a greeting. A thanksgiving to God usually forms the next section of the letters, before

the author begins the body of the letter. The body of the letter varies in length a great deal, with some of the longer New Testament letters (such as Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians) having very lengthy bodies compared to the typical letters of that time.

Letter writing was a developing art form during the first century, as travel became safer and international trade expanded to include shipping across the expanses of the Mediterranean Sea. Manuals or handbooks on how to write various kinds of letters were published. These letter handbooks make it clear that ancient letters had three primary purposes. First, letters served as a substitute for the physical presence of the author. This meant the New Testament letters were understood by their recipients as a way in which the author could be present with them even while absent. This contributed to the second purpose of the ancient letter, to establish or improve friendly relationships between the author and the recipients. Even the letters of the New Testament that seem most harsh to us were designed to promote a sense of unity and fellowship between the author and those who first read the letter. The third purpose of an ancient letter was to continue a conversation between the author and the recipient(s). In some cases the letter actually began the conversation. Perhaps as in some other cases it ended the conversation, but an important purpose of ancient letters was to promote conversation and dialogue between the author and the readers. These purposes are clearly at work in the New Testament letters.

The Letters of Paul

The letters of Paul are arranged in order from the longest, Romans, to the shortest, Philemon. Nine of the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament are addressed to churches or congregations. Four are addressed to individuals. Most of the Pauline letters address a particular issue or problem in a church or group of churches. In Romans Paul seeks to overcome a division between Jewish believers and Gentile believers so the Roman church can provide a strong base for Paul's proposed missionary journey to Spain. First Corinthians is written to deal with a series of problems at Corinth: disunity in the church, sexual immorality in the church, worship problems, and a loss of belief in the resurrection of either Jesus or believers. Second Corinthians attempts to repair a relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church that has been damaged by misunderstanding and to defend Paul's ministry at the church in Corinth. Galatians is written to a group of churches that has fallen into the error of thinking believers had to become Jewish before they could become Christian. These first four letters of Paul are sometimes called the doctrinal letters or the head letters.

The next Pauline letters are called the Christological letters. Ephesians may have originally been a circular letter written to several churches in western modern Turkey. It deals with the nature of the church. Philippians was written to the church at Philippi in modern Greece. This church may have been one of Paul's favorite churches. It had provided financial support for his missionary work, and part of the

purpose of Philippians is to thank the church for their support and to give a report of what Paul hoped would be a continuing partnership in ministry. Philippians is noteworthy for a powerful poem about Christ found in Philippians 2:6-11. This is thought to be one of the first great hymns of the Christian Church. Colossians was written to correct erroneous teachings about the nature of Christ in the area of Colossae in western modern Turkey. As is often the case, these faulty teachings about Christ were leading to un-Christlike behaviors in the church.

First and Second Thessalonians are often called the eschatological letters. They were written to the church in Thessalonica (in northern Greece) to address misunderstandings about the second coming of Christ. Once again, faulty theology was contributing to patterns of life that fell short of the purity and devotion expected in the Early Church.

The final four letters attributed to Paul are addressed to individuals. First and Second Timothy and Titus are often called the Pastoral Letters. They focus on issues of pastoral or church leadership in the area of Ephesus and on the island of Crete. The letter to Philemon asks the owner of a runaway slave, Onesimus, to accept him back as a brother in Christ, since Onesimus had become a believer through Paul's ministry.

The General or Catholic Letters

Like the Pauline letters, the general letters address specific problems in some local church or a group of churches. Also like the Pauline letters, the general letters

are arranged in order from the longest, Hebrews, to the shortest, Jude, with the exception that all letters ascribed to the same author (Peter and then John) are kept together regardless of their length. These letters also address specific problems in the life of local churches.

Hebrews is unusual in that the genre of much of the book is similar to the other New Testament letters, but no author, audience, or greeting are mentioned. The book appears to be written to Jewish believers being persecuted or about to be persecuted for their faith in Christ. Their temptation was to return to the protective umbrella of Judaism, which had legal standing in the Roman Empire. The author warns against abandoning their faith in Christ by arguing the superiority of Christ to the great persons and institutions of the Old Testament.

James is the closest piece of New Testament writing to the Old Testament genre of wisdom. This letter contains many of the echoes of Jesus' teachings about justice and mercy to the poor and guarding one's tongue. First Peter, like Hebrews, addresses a group of believers who are either being persecuted or fearful of a soon-approaching persecution. In contrast to Hebrews, 1 Peter seems to address Gentile believers located in the northwestern section of modern-day Turkey.

Second Peter and Jude are similar in content. Both warn against false teachers creating turmoil and confusion in the church. Both address the question of a coming day of judgment and warn their readers to live with the high moral and doctrinal standards that will keep them prepared for

the time of judgment. Jude is unique among New Testament books in quoting from the Jewish pseudepigraphal book of Enoch.

The Books of 1, 2, and 3 John appear to respond to a church undergoing a painful division over the correct understanding of Christ. First John, like Hebrews, lacks any mention of an author, audience, or greetings and so is often considered a sermon rather than a true letter. It emphasizes the love of God but clearly rejects those who do not believe that Jesus was truly incarnate in the flesh and truly the Son of God. Second and Third John are very brief letters (about the length of the typical Greco-Roman letter) addressed to individuals involved in the difficult divisions in the church.

The New Testament Book of Prophecy

The final book of the New Testament is Revelation. Though the interpretation of Revelation is debated more than the interpretation of any other book of the New Testament, it was written with a prophetic purpose. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament concludes with a word of hope for the future. Part of the difficulty in understanding Revelation is that it combines elements from three different genres: apocalyptic, prophecy, and letter. Apocalyptic literature uses visions, symbols, otherworldly creatures, and a devastating picture of final judgment to speak of the coming judgment of God when the present, evil age will be destroyed and God's new and final era for His obedient children comes on the scene. New Testament **prophecy** calls for God's people to turn from their sinful and vacillating

ways to lives of complete obedience to God, even if it costs them their lives. Revelation moves back and forth between the genre of apocalyptic and the genre of prophecy, with letters and occasional letterlike structures woven in also.

■ **The Literary Nature of the New Testament**

It is clear that the New Testament makes use of several different literary genres. Narrative, letter, and prophecy are the primary literary structures used by New Testament authors. Within each genre a variety of literary forms are used. These forms include: admonitions, benedictions or blessings, call narratives, chronicles or historical accounts of events, farewell speeches, brief letters, miracles, parables, prayers, sermons, and many others. The New Testament authors were talented communicators who made use of a wide variety of literary forms to communicate their message.

The Language of the New Testament

With one or two probable exceptions, all the authors of the New Testament books were Jewish in both nationality and religion. The Jewish people were widely scattered across the Roman Empire during the first Christian century. They spoke a variety of languages and dialects and participated in a variety of cultures. However, it is almost certain that each of the books of the New Testament was written in the common Greek dialect that was used throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire at that time.

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Aramaic Echoes in the New Testament

A number of Aramaic words appear in the New Testament and are preserved in the traditional translations.

Talitha cum—Little girl, get up (Mark 5:41)

Ephphatha—Be opened (Mark 7:34)

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthanai—My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15:34)
(Matthew 27:46 uses Hebrew rather than Aramaic.)

The following words are Aramaic but also are used in Mishnaic Hebrew:

Raka—fool (Matthew 5:22)

Corban—an offering for God (Mark 7:11)

Abba—father (Mark 14:36)

The common language of the Jews who lived in Palestine at Jesus' time was Aramaic. **Aramaic** is a Northwest Semitic language, as is Hebrew. The people of Judah who were taken captive to Babylon in 587/586 B.C. learned Aramaic in captivity, and when they returned, it became the common language of the area of historic Israel instead of Hebrew. Hebrew was still read in the Scripture lessons of the worship services of the synagogue during Jesus' time, but an oral translation into Aramaic was made so the people could understand the Scripture. Because Aramaic was the language of Judea, it would have been the primary language of Jesus.

The last half century of New Testament scholarship has increasingly recognized, however, that Palestine was a multilingual society. The publication of the charge on Jesus' cross in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek reflects the variety of languages that were

commonly spoken and understood in Jerusalem during Jesus' time. It is quite possible that Jesus spoke both Aramaic and Greek. A few scholars have suggested that some of the words of Jesus were first written in Aramaic and then translated into Greek when the Gospel writers began to compose their Gospels. However, it is clear that the Gospels themselves were first written in Greek, not in Aramaic or Hebrew.

The New Testament was written in a form of Greek that developed in the three centuries prior to Christ. Classical Greek is the form of the language used by the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the historian Thucydides, and the authors of the Greek tragedies. A new form of Greek began to emerge about three centuries before Christ as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Alexander attempted to impose the Greek language (classical Greek) on all the peoples he conquered. However, in the process the language was changed. Old grammatical usages and terminology disappeared, and new usages and words developed. This new form of Greek was called **Koine** (Greek for "common"), and it became the common language of first the Greek and then the Roman Empires. It is the language of the New Testament, and it was the form of Greek that remained in use for several centuries following the completion of the New Testament.

Koine Greek was not the language of the classical authors but the language of business and international relations during the time of Jesus. Evidence of its use (and thus help in understanding nuances and wordplays of the New Testament authors) comes

from a variety of letters, contracts, official notices, and other documents preserved on papyrus primarily in Egypt. Clearly the New Testament was written in a living, energetic language. Part of the rapid expansion of Christianity in its earliest centuries is due to the Christian use of Koine Greek, since it was the *lingua franca* used throughout the Roman Empire. Though Latin was used by the Romans for military and governmental documents, the empire created a widespread network of those who spoke, understood, wrote, and read in Greek.

The Transmission of the New Testament

The books of the New Testament were written between A.D.

50 and A.D. 100. At that point they existed only as separate documents. As far as we know, only a single copy of each book existed and that copy was at the church to which or for which the book had been written. Second-century documents suggest that these writings were read aloud in the church along with the Old Testament readings. It is clear even from the letters of Paul that many early Christians traveled a great deal and visited churches other than the church in their home city. In the course of visiting other churches, these traveling believers would have heard the book/books written to the church they were visiting. They would have asked for a copy, and the process of copying the New Testament began.

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Minuscules and Uncials

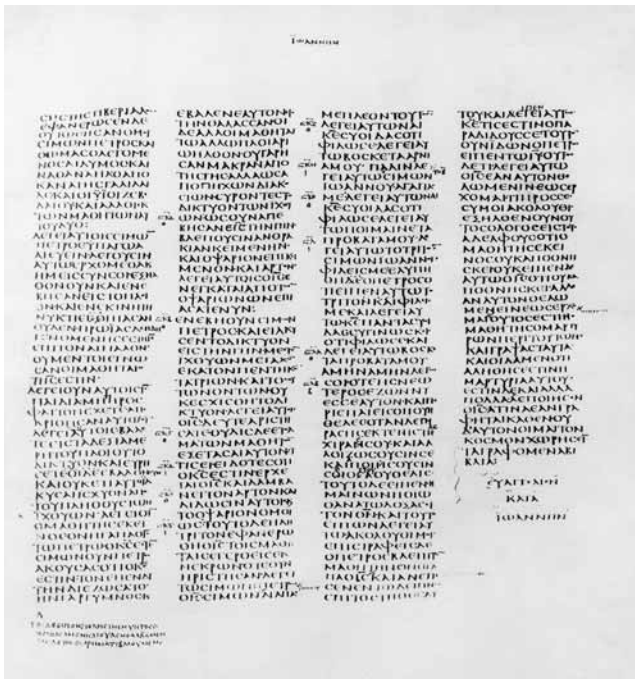
Some of the early manuscripts from the 3rd to 6th centuries are in formal letters, similar to capital letters. These manuscripts are called uncials. The cursive style of writing that connects one letter to another became the dominant method of copying at a later period. Manuscripts in cursive style follow a smaller script known as "minuscule." Since minuscule manuscripts were easier and more economical to produce, we have thousands of manuscripts in the minuscule form. However, scholars regard uncials as the earliest and the most reliable sources of the New Testament.

The following are the key uncials, all on leather parchments in codex form:

Codex Sinaiticus, dated to the 4th century, contains all the 27 books. During his search for biblical manuscripts at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, Constantin von Tischendorf discovered Codex Sinaiticus in 1859. He copied it, and it was first published in 1862. Today it is in the British Library in London.

Codex Vaticanus, also dated to the 4th century, is missing the section after Hebrews 9:13. This manuscript received its name from its association with the Vatican library. Though the manuscript has been known since 1475, it was first published in 1867 by Tischendorf.

Codex Alexandrinus, dated to the 5th century, is missing the Gospel of Matthew. This codex, also kept in the British Museum, was a gift from Cyril Lucar, patriarch of Constantinople, to King James I. It is believed that Lucar, once patriarch of Alexandria, brought this manuscript to Constantinople from Alexandria. It was brought to England in 1627 after the death of King James.



A page from
Codex Sinaiticus.

The earliest surviving copies of books of the New Testament are written on **papyrus**, which was the ancient form of paper created by gluing together strips of the reedlike papyrus stalks. By the first century the Old Testament was copied on **parchment**, which is made of durable leather specially prepared for writing. While it is possible that some books of the New Testament were written on parchment (such as Luke and Acts, which may have been prepared for general publication), it is most likely that the majority of the New Testament was first written and then copied on papyrus.

The process of copying the books of the New Testament inevitably produced errors in copying. Though most believers in the present do not think about this, it is extremely difficult to copy hundreds of pages by hand without some errors creeping in. Some skeptics who are aware of this ar-

gue that it is impossible to determine what the New Testament authors originally wrote since all that remains are copies and probably copies of copies with the resulting variety of copying errors. However, the picture is not nearly as bleak as skeptics often portray it. Fortunately, most copying errors are predictable. If the copying is a visual process, the errors will most frequently consist of letters, words, or lines either omitted or repeated. If the copying is oral (one reads the text aloud and the other[s] writes), most of the errors will be misspellings, confusion of similar-sounding words, or words or short phrases omitted.

Because these kinds of copying errors are so predictable, if one has multiple copies made in different places at different times, it is quite possible to “reconstruct” the copying errors and thus determine the original text. There is a whole field of New Testament scholarship devoted to just that task. The field is usually called New Testament **textual criticism**. It involves comparing copies of ancient manuscripts, analyzing the errors (called **variants** since no original **manuscript** is known to survive), and reconstructing the original words of the New Testament authors. A manuscript refers to a handwritten copy of all or part of the New Testament.

The oldest known copy of a New Testament book is a small piece of papyrus found in Egypt and containing a few verses from John 18. Specialists believe it was written about A.D. 125, within a single generation of the time the fourth Gospel was first written. Several partial papyrus copies of the Gospels, Acts, and Paul’s letters, which were copied between

A.D. 180 and 220, have been found in the last century. Complete copies of the New Testament written on parchment around A.D. 325 have also been found in the past two centuries. New Testament textual critics now have more than 5,000 whole or partial manuscripts (handwritten copies) of the Greek New Testament, most of them discovered in the past 200 years.

Analyzing these manuscripts with the methods developed by textual criticism has enabled the textual critics to “reconstruct” the original text of the New Testament with more than 98 percent certainty. Textual uncertainty about the original reading only exists for a couple of paragraphs (the ending of Mark’s Gospel and the story of the woman taken in adultery found in John 7:53–8:11) and a small number of single words. These have been clearly marked in virtually all modern translations of the New Testament. Given the huge number of handwritten copies of the books of the New Testament that were

made prior to the invention of the printing press in 1452 and the many variants that occurred during the copying process, this high degree of accuracy and confidence is almost miraculous.

The New Testament Canon

The New Testament books were first written and copied individually. The process of how they came to be collected into the 27 books we now know as the New Testament is the story of the development of the New Testament **canon**. The word “canon” comes from a Semitic root word meaning a “reed” or “stalk.” The word came to be used especially for what we might call a measuring stick, a reed or stalk with a standardized length. The word was adapted into Greek, and the meaning of “rule” or “standard” developed. It eventually came to be used to describe a set of books that establish the rule of faith and practice of a religious community. The canon of the New Testament



The earliest copies of the New Testament manuscripts were written on papyrus made from the reedlike stalks of papyrus plants.

H

History of the Printed New Testament

Erasmus of Rotterdam is the first scholar to publish a copy of the New Testament in Greek (1516). He first published this edition with a Latin translation of the Greek text. Later he published four more editions (1519, 1522, 1527, 1535) of this New Testament, the fourth edition in three columns—Greek text, Latin Vulgate translation, and his own Latin translation.

Robert Stephanus, a printer and publisher, published four editions of the New Testament in Greek (1546, 1549, 1550, 1551). Theodore Beza published nine editions of the Greek New Testament between 1565 and 1604. The Elzevir brothers, two Dutch printers, published the New Testament with the claim that their edition provided the “received text,” *textus receptus*, to the readers.

All of these above editions of the New Testament (Erasmus, Stephanus, Beza, Elzevir brothers) were based on a 4th-century manuscript, often called Lucianic, because of its association with Lucian of Antioch, who died in A.D. 312. This text is also known as Byzantine, Antiochian, Syrian, Ecclesiastical, Koine, or Common text. This text tradition remained as the standard text of the New Testament in Greek until the end of the 19th century. For over 400 years since Erasmus first published it in 1516, Christians seldom challenged its authority.

Following the publications of Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus in the mid-19th century, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort published a critical edition of the Greek New Testament in 1881. Their study of thousands of manuscripts and New Testament quotations in the writings of the Church Fathers led them to conclude that Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus contain the most reliable text of the New Testament. The Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies in 1966 is based on the work of Westcott and Hort. This critical edition gives us an “eclectic” text based on the best witness of New Testament passages found in ancient manuscripts and early Christian writings. The United Bible Society edition has become an important source for modern English translations.

consists of 27 books, but it took several hundred years before the picture was completely clear.

The beginning of the canonization process probably began with a couple of churches exchanging copies of letters they had received from the apostle Paul. It is likely that the first collection of books was a collection of the Pauline letters. Some have suggested that this collection was done as early as the A.D. 80s or 90s. Most believe it was accomplished in the first 25 years of the second century. Sometime between A.D. 100 and 150 the four Gospels were collected and bound together for publication. The earliest surviving copies of the New Testament books, other than the fragment of John’s Gospel mentioned above, are parts of collections of either Pauline letters or the four Gospels.

The first list of books regarded as canonical appears to have been developed by Marcion. Marcion was fascinated by the teachings of Paul but eventually interpreted them in such an unbalanced way that he was condemned as a heretic. He began a rival church that competed with the early Christian Church for several decades. Marcion strongly opposed the Law of the Old Testament and eventually the Old Testament in general. He taught that the God of the Old Testament was not the Father of Jesus Christ and was an evil deity. When he formed his list of books, he naturally omitted the New Testament books most reliant on Judaism and the Old Testament.

Marcion’s list consisted of the Gospel of Luke (with the first two chapters edited out) and 10 of the letters of Paul (all but 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). It is not clear that

the Christian Church developed its New Testament canon as a reaction against Marcion, but such a proposal makes sense. The first “lists” of canonical books of the New Testament begin to appear about a generation later than Marcion.

Irenaeus grew up in Asia Minor (modern-day western Turkey), studied in Rome, and became a bishop in France. About A.D. 180 he wrote a major work, *Against Heresies*, in which he attacked the teachings of gnosticism. He argued forcefully for the canonical status of the four Gospels. He was reacting against both a move in Syria to reduce the four Gospels to a single composite Gospel and the widespread springing up of other Gospels written by representatives of several heretical movements in Christianity. It is clear from Irenaeus that he also regarded Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and all the letters of Paul except Philemon as canonical. He described the books of Revelation and the *Shepherd of Hermas* as scriptural.

The oldest list of New Testament books responding to Marcion is found in a document usually called the Muratorian fragment. This document appears to have been written between A.D. 180 and 200. The beginning of the list has been destroyed, but the surviving text begins with a reference to the third Gospel, that according to Luke. This clearly implies that Matthew and Mark were mentioned in the portion of the text that was destroyed. The Muratorian fragment then lists John’s Gospel, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, the letter of Jude, two letters of John, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Revelation of John,

and the Revelation of Peter. It indicates debate in the church about the Revelation of Peter and the *Shepherd of Hermas* and then lists several heretics whose writings are not acceptable for reading in the church.

A generation later, Origen, a priest who served in both Alexandria, Egypt, and Caesarea on the coast of Palestine, compiled a list of New Testament books. He further developed the concept of categories of books that appeared in the Muratorian fragment. Origen listed the books accepted by all the Church as the four Gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and the Revelation of John. Another group of books was described as disputed by some local churches. These books included Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, the Letter of Barnabas, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Didache*, and the gospel according to the Hebrews. He then listed a large group of false or spurious writings that were not accepted by orthodox churches at all.

Thus, by A.D. 200 or shortly after, 21 of the 27 books of the New Testament were clearly recognized as having the authority of Scripture by churches throughout the Roman Empire. About 10 other books were accepted in many churches but rejected in others. Of those, 6 would eventually be recognized by virtually all the churches and 4 would be rejected by all. What is not often understood by modern believers is that there were dozens and dozens of other religious books claimed by a few to be equally authoritative. The Early Church was well aware of these writings and recognized that they contained teachings that

would be harmful to the Church and its mission. A number of these books were “rediscovered” in the late 20th century and promoted as “lost” gospels or other “lost” books of the Bible. The implication was that these “lost” books should be returned to their rightful place as canonical Scripture. However, they were not “lost”; they were rejected as harmful books that were subversive to the Christian faith.

The Early Church did not rush to resolve the disagreements over the canon of the New Testament. Contrary to popular modern opinions, there was not a church council that arbitrarily determined which books should be included in the canon of the New Testament. The decision came about through the life, worship, and teaching processes of the Church through time. The Church lived with the three categories of Origen (accepted, disputed, rejected books) for over a century. It is not until the end of the fourth century that the Church began to arrive at an agreement about the exact 27 books now found in the New Testament.

The first time we find these 27 books, no fewer and no more, listed as the New Testament is in A.D. 367. Each Easter Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, wrote a letter to his churches. The subject of the A.D. 367 letter was the books of Scripture that were authoritative or canonical and thus should be read in the worship of the Church. After listing the 27 books now known as the New Testament, Athanasius also mentioned that the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* were not part of the canon but provided useful devotional material. He also declared

that no place was to be given to “the apocryphal works,” which he described as the “invention of heretics.” The writings of Augustine, the great theologian, and Jerome, the great Bible scholar, whose lives span the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries, both indicated the canonical status of the 27 books now known as the New Testament.

The closing decade of the fourth century was the first time a council of the Church made an official statement regarding the canon of Scripture. It appears that the Synod of Hippo in North Africa officially recognized the 27 books of the New Testament as canonical Scripture in A.D. 393. Unfortunately, the written documents of this council have been lost in the course of history. However, the actions of that council were read again and accepted by the Synod of Carthage in A.D. 397. The notes from this council clearly identified the 27 books we know as the New Testament as canonical Scripture. A few local churches continued to debate books such as Hebrews, Revelation, and 2 Peter for several more centuries, but in effect the question of the canon was finally decided by the end of the fourth century.

It should be recognized that the process of the canonization of the New Testament was neither hasty nor arbitrary. It appears that several criteria of canonization were used to determine which books were to be recognized as the Word of God and which were not to be so accepted. However, these criteria were not applied in a mechanical or rigid way. The most important criterion was that of the use of the Church in general.

When churches in the East and in the West of the Roman Empire used books in worship alongside the Old Testament and considered them as part of the Word of God, then those books were understood to be canonical. When there was disagreement about whether to use some books in the worship and teaching of the Church, then the Church simply waited. Final agreement did not come until the end of the fourth century, but it came without pressure or administrative initiative. It came as a result of the people of God thinking, praying, worship-

ing, and evangelizing together.

At some points the question of whether an apostle wrote or did not write a book was part of the debate. However, this criterion was not a simple one and does not appear to have been applied consistently through the process of canonization. For example, the Gospels of Mark and Luke were not written by apostles, but they were recognized as canonical very early in the process. Later writers tried to explain this by noting that Mark had been influenced by Peter, and Luke was associated with Paul. On the other

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Is the New Testament Canon Closed?

Recent decades have witnessed an increased interest in the canon of the New Testament. One of the questions that is always in the background is whether the New Testament canon is closed. That is, is it possible to change the canon by removing or especially by adding some books? What if we were to discover another letter of the apostle Paul? Should it not be added to the canon of Scripture? Should not the various gospels not included in the New Testament now be added to the canon?

In theory the canon is always open. Since it was the recognition of the Church that established the canon, the Church can theoretically change the canon at any point in history. However, in reality the matter is much more difficult. The Church took almost 400 years to come to an agreement on the existing canon. The Church today is much larger and far more diverse in backgrounds and theological opinions. It would be very difficult to conceive of a consensus of all Christians today agreeing to add a book to the canon of the New Testament.

Further, the fact that the New Testament contains 27 books is not for lack of other candidates. In fact, an awareness of the historical development of the canon makes it clear that the Church purposefully rejected a number of books either because they taught concepts considered heretical and dangerous to the Church life or simply because not everyone in the Church agreed that those books spoke an authoritative word from God. There is no reason for the Church to add books to the canon that have already been rejected because of their false teachings.

Some of the books rejected were considered written by apostles. So even if we should discover another genuine letter of Paul, that does not automatically mean it should be included in the canon of the New Testament. Such books were more likely to have been known in the first four centuries than they are now. Christians today can trust the decision-making process that led to the New Testament canon. So, although in theory the canon is open, in practical terms it is closed. The need of the Church is not to find more books to put in the New Testament but to live up to the standard of holiness and love taught in the books already there.

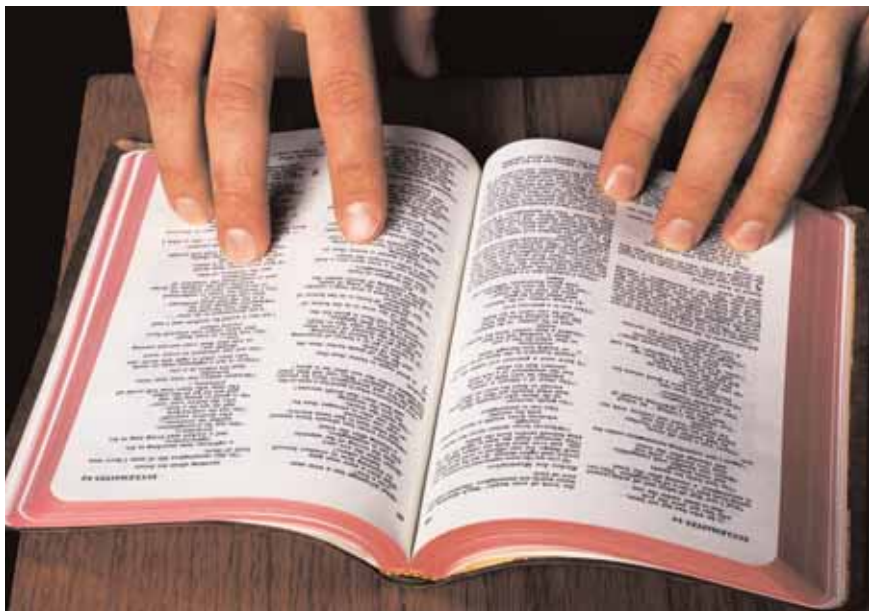
hand, the Revelation of Peter was accepted in some churches for a while but did not end up being recognized as part of the canon. In fact, many of the apocryphal books claimed to be written by apostles, so the Church had to sort through the issues of claims of apostolic authorship and authentic apostolic teaching.

The criterion that the Early Church most often claimed to determine the canonical books was what they called the rule of faith or the canon of truth. This criterion dealt with whether the book taught apostolic truth. The Early Church developed a strong sense of continuity with the teachings of the original apostles. They often described this as that which was taught everywhere by everyone from the beginning. (In contrast, the heresies began as localized movements.) This consensus of orthodox faith is what they called the rule of faith or the canon of truth, and it was the ultimate court of appeal for keeping books out of the canon. No book

containing teaching contrary to the rule of faith was considered canonical. However, there were books that were completely orthodox that did not make it into the canon. So the rule of faith was not an adequate criterion in itself. It functioned in conjunction with apostolic authorship and universal use and acceptance in the churches.

The Covenant Community

It is a serious mistake to assume that one can understand the New Testament simply by studying its literary characteristics and its historical background. The New Testament was not written to inform people; it was written to transform people. Though it is full of fascinating historical, literary, and even theological details that are worthy of study, the New Testament itself intends to form people into a community of fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Its influence throughout the past 2,000 years has not come from its



The Bible is the rule of faith for the Christian Church.

literary qualities or from its historical context. Its influence is the result of the theological truths it proclaims and the vision of transformed lives that it seeks.

The process of canonization makes it clear that the New Testament is a Church book. It is the product of a community of faith. Not only did the Church discern as a community which books belonged in the New Testament and which books would not be included, but the books themselves were written for and to the Church. In only a few cases are New Testament letters addressed to individuals, and even then the content of those letters deals with how the individuals in question provide leadership for the Church. Every book of the New Testament portrays in some way what the Church of Jesus Christ should look like. What the Church believes, how the Church lives its life in community, and how the Church witnesses to its faith in the world all comprise the purpose of the New Testament.

The faith, life in community, and prophetic witness in the world of the Church is neither generic nor formless. It is a specific, intentional, and structured community. Specifically the Church that gave form to the New Testament and was formed by the New Testament understood itself to be in continuity with the Old Testament people of God, the covenant community of Israel. The authors of the New Testament believed that God's saving activity in the Old Testament was part of the story and preparation for God's saving activity in Christ. The covenant that God made with Israel was not rejected or laid aside with the com-

ing of Christ. It was renewed and through the Holy Spirit internalized into human hearts. Thus the community of faith that forms in and through the New Testament does not regard itself as a completely new thing. Rather, it is the logical outcome of what God had been doing through salvation history in response to both human rejection and acceptance of His grace.

Old Testament Israel understood herself to be bound to God by the covenant of Mount Sinai. That covenant came into being because of God's saving works for Israel. The covenant envisioned a people whose life together and whose lives individually would reflect the holiness of the God to whom they were bound. This vision created expectations for the people of God, and the covenant laid out the consequences of living up to those expectations or failing to accomplish them.

In a similar fashion the Church of the New Testament understood that believers were part of a covenant community in continuity with Israel. The renewal of that covenant came into being because of God's saving work for them in Christ. The New Testament envisions a people whose life together and whose lives individually reflect the holiness and the love of the God who revealed himself in Christ. That vision creates expectations for the covenant community, and the New Testament, especially the letters and Revelation, describes the consequences of the Church's living up to or failing to live up to God's vision for them.

Central to this concept of covenant is the community of faith. The

Church of the New Testament never envisioned faith as a purely private matter. Though an individual's relationship with God was intensely personal, it was always lived out in community. Individual believers understood their life together in worship, instruction, and ministry as the context for their personal relationship with God. There are many places in the New Testament where the word "Christ" refers to Jesus as a historical individual who was crucified and raised from the

dead. There are many other places where the word "Christ" means the Church, the Body of Christ, the community expression of Christ.

The New Testament was written by the community of faith for the community of faith. The New Testament also calls the community of faith into being, nurturing and challenging it to become fully like Christ. The New Testament invites its readers into that covenant community.

Summary Statements

- The New Testament has been highly influential in both the Church and the world.
- The New Testament is structured into narrative material, letters, and prophecy.
- The four Gospels represent a unique narrative form focusing on the story of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection.
- The letters of Paul and the general letters address specific problem areas in the life of the Church representing the author's effort to solve the problem at a distance.
- Though Jesus spoke Aramaic, the New Testament was written in Koine Greek.
- The Greek New Testament is only available to us in copies and copies of copies.
- Textual criticism allows us to reconstruct the original reading of the Greek Testament with confidence.
- By the late second century the Church had quickly developed a consensus regarding over three-fourths of the books that would eventually be part of the canon of the New Testament.
- The criteria of consensus and use in the Church were the main qualifications for a book's being included in the New Testament canon.
- The New Testament was written to form a covenant community of those who followed Jesus Christ.

Questions for Reflection

1. How does the structure of the New Testament reflect its "real-to-life" character and its applicability?
2. To what degree do you see the direction of God in the process of canonization? What conclusions does that lead you to?
3. In what ways have you experienced life in a covenant community like that which produced and was produced by the New Testament? In what ways has your life in the Church lacked elements of a covenant community?

Resources for Further Study

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