

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION
TO THE
NEW TESTAMENT

FOURTH EDITION



BART D. EHRMAN

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A Brief Introduction
to

THE NEW TESTAMENT



ΟΙΣ ΤΥΛΙΣΘΗΝΑ ΔΟΧΗΤΗΡΙΑ ΧΥΘΗ
ΥΟΙΧΑΙΝΩΣΘΙ ΠΙΤΕΣΘΑ
ΑΜΗΝ ΑΓΕΘΥΜΙΝΟΤΙΕΙΣ
ΕΖΥΜΩΝ ΠΑΡΑΛΩΣΣΙΜΕ

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FOURTH EDITION

Bart D. Ehrman

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
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To My Students at Rutgers
and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

When I started doing research on the first edition of my original New Testament textbook, twenty years ago now (the book on which this *Brief* version is based), I had very clear ideas about what I wanted it to be. First and foremost, I wanted to approach the New Testament from a rigorously historical perspective. It is not that I had any difficulties at the time, either professionally or personally, with introductions that were more geared toward theology, or exegesis, or literary criticism. But I wanted my book to be different. I wanted to situate the writings of the New Testament more thoroughly than was typically done in the historical, cultural, social, political, literary, and ideological worlds from which it emerged; I wanted to plow beneath the surface to find clues not only about such traditional issues as authorship, sources, and dates, but also about what was then still a vibrant field of study, social history; I wanted to ask historical questions of the texts and of the events that they either narrated or presupposed. I was interested in the history of the text and the formation of the canon of the New Testament; in the historical Jesus; in the historical Paul; in the history of the Johannine community; in the historical realities lying behind Matthew, and 2 Corinthians, and Revelation.

Relatedly, I wanted the book to be highly comparative: how does John compare with the Synoptics? How do they compare with each other? How does the preaching of Jesus compare with the accounts of the Gospels? Or the theology of Paul? How does Paul's theology stack up against the letter of James? Or the book of Hebrews? How does the book of Revelation compare with everything else? And on and on. In my view, these questions are central to the historical study of the New Testament and are inherently interesting.

I also wanted the book to be critical, engaged in rigorous scholarship so that students reading it

could see what the critical questions were and what evidence was typically adduced to answer them. I absolutely did *not* want to emulate some of my predecessors in trying to introduce students to the prominent scholars of the past who took one position or another and pretend that this is the same thing as introducing them to actual evidence. In my experience, 19- to 20-year-olds are simply not all that interested, and do not need to be, in the different positions taken on the nature of justification in Paul by Bultmann, Käsemann, J. Louis Martyn, E. P. Sanders, N. T. Wright, and Douglass Campbell. They have never heard the names of these scholars (fine ones, all of them); and, so far as I'm concerned, in an introductory class, they have no need to hear of them. Far more interesting than a list of names of modern scholars is grappling with the texts themselves to try to make sense of Romans or Galatians.

Finally, I thought this kind of approach could be achieved at a level that a 19- or 20-year old might appreciate. The really difficult task was satisfying that audience *and* the other audience of a textbook: the university professors who decide whether to use it. My goal was to make the book interesting, even intriguing, for beginners and yet fully competent in its scholarship. As far as making it interesting, I realized that the choice of content was fundamental: the study of the New Testament is absolutely fascinating if you know where to look but dreadfully dull if you look elsewhere. At least as important was the style of writing and the layout of the page.

In any event, those were some of my guiding principles when I first imagined writing a textbook on the New Testament. This is now the fourth iteration of the briefer version of the book. Every time I set about to do a revision, I wonder if it is really necessary. And every time I have the same experience. I read through the book carefully for the nine-thousandth time, and I start finding problems and mistakes. These start out



small: badly worded sentences, ambiguities, faulty reasoning, minor factual errors. (Surely these are typos. Aren't they?) But then I start seeing larger issues and bigger concerns, and I begin to imagine ways to make the book better than it was. And as I work on it, these things add up. What results is a book that, in my opinion, really is much better. So it is too this time around.

I can explain the changes in this fourth edition in short order. I have added a number of features to improve its pedagogical usefulness:

- ❖ A brief Introduction that asks the student why it is important to study the New Testament in the first place. (I give religious, historical, and literary reasons.)
- ❖ An excursus on various ideological methods (feminist, postcolonial, liberationist, etc.), written for the purpose by my student Shaily Patel (at the end of chap. 8).
- ❖ A new photo essay dealing with material remains for the “Cities and Roads of Paul.”

There are other things that I have altered or rewritten in this new edition that are very much, in my opinion, to its improvement:

- ❖ One key reconceptualization involves the study questions at the end of each chapter. For my previous edition, I decided to ask thought-provoking questions on which a student was required to “Take a Stand.” For many instructors, this was a very bad idea. I thought the questions would be interesting and engaging, but often they were considered loaded and leading. When I received this feedback, I took a long hard look at the questions and saw the point. And so I've completely reworked the questions to make them neutral, challenging (in the academic sense), and pedagogically useful.
- ❖ I have made other smaller but still significant changes, including the renaming of one of the critical methods I use for studying the Gospels, especially Mark. Until now I have called it the “literary-historical method”

because it establishes the “literary” genre of a writing and sees how that genre worked in its own “historical” period. But students never could get their minds around the term because it seems that *all* the methods I use are, in some sense, literary and historical. And so, to give it a more descriptive name, I now simply have labeled this method “genre criticism.”

- ❖ I have updated bibliographies where needed.
- ❖ And I have corrected numerous mistakes (some of them real howlers) and sundry infelicities of wording—and so on, the never-ending task of revision and improvement.

I have incurred many debts in producing this fourth edition. Special thanks go to two of my graduate students who helped in a variety of ways: Luke Drake and especially Shaily Patel, the latter of whom performed a real service by (among other things) producing that helpful synopsis of other ideological methods, found as the Excursus to chapter 8. I am also grateful to the following scholars who took on a thankless job for which I now thank them (I know, it's irony): reading the third edition of the book and suggesting, urging, and sometimes pleading for important revisions. I am deeply in their debt.

Gordon Brubacher	Creighton University
Terry Burden	University of Louisville
Donald Denton	Southwest Baptist University
Benjamin Dunning	Fordham University
Steven Hunt	Gordon College
Nicole Kelley	Florida State University
Jordan Smith	University of Iowa
Michael Thompson	Oklahoma State University

I would especially like to thank my long-term editor and good friend Robert Miller, Senior Executive Editor at Oxford University Press, for driving me to keep at it after all these years. Many thanks are also due Alyssa Palazzo, Editorial Assistant at OUP, for all her hard work and good cheer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to previous scholars whose labors make such introductory textbooks possible.

Most of the quotations of the Bible, including the Apocrypha, are drawn from the New Revised Standard Version. Some, however, represent my own translations.

The reconstruction of the Testimonium Flavianum in chapter 13 comes from John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 61.

The correspondence between Paul and Seneca in chapter 18 is taken from Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965). The material from Fronto in chapter 19 comes from *The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix*, ed. and trans. G. W. Clark (Mahwah, NJ: Newman, 1974); the inscription from the Lanuvium burial society, also in chapter 19, comes from N. Lewis and M. Rheinhold, *Roman Civilization*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

NOTES ON SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The bibliographical suggestions at the end of each chapter are meant to guide beginning students who are interested in pursuing one or more of the issues raised in this book. To avoid overwhelming the student with the enormous quantity of literature in the field, for most chapters I have limited myself to seven or eight entries (more for longer chapters, fewer for shorter ones). All of the entries are books, rather than articles, and each is briefly annotated. Some of the entries are more suitable for advanced students, and these are indicated as such. For most chapters I have included at least one work that introduces or embraces a markedly different perspective from the one that I present. I have not included any biblical commentaries in the lists, although students should be urged to consult these—either one-volume works such as the *HarperCollins Bible Commentary* (revised edition, ed. James Mays) or commentaries on individual books as found in the Anchor Bible, Hermeneia, Interpretation, and New International Commentary series.

For some of the issues that I discuss, there are no adequate full-length treatments for beginning-level students to turn to, but there are excellent discussions of virtually everything having to do with the New Testament in Bible dictionaries that are readily available in most college libraries. Students should browse through the articles in such one-volume works as the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (2nd edition, ed. Mark Allen Powell). In particular, they should become intimately familiar with the impressive

six-volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman), which is destined to be a major resource for students at all levels for years to come. (Just with respect to chapter 1 of this text, for example, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* presents full-length treatments, with bibliographies, of early Christianity, Christology, the Ebionites, Marcion, Gnosticism, Nag Hammadi, heresy and orthodoxy, and the New Testament canon.)

There are numerous online resources available for the study of the New Testament. The difficulty with Web pages generally, of course, is that anyone—trained professional, interested amateur, well-meaning crank—can construct one; and often it is difficult, if not impossible, for the student to know whether the information provided is reliable, disputed, or zany. One other difficulty is that Web pages come and go like summer storms. Rather than provide an entire list of useful pages then, I have chosen to recommend just two. The first is one that I believe will be around for a very long time and that provides trustworthy scholarly information (through carefully chosen links) on just about everything one might want to know about the New Testament. This is the page created and maintained by Dr. Mark Goodacre at Duke University: www.ntgateway.com. The other has been produced by the Society of Biblical Literature and is also chock-full of interesting and important information provided by top-level scholars in the field and updated regularly: www.bibleodyssey.com.

C R E D I T S

Frontispiece: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 1.1: British Library. Fig. 2.1: Numismatic Museum, Athens/Hellenic Republic Ministry of Culture. Fig. 2.4: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 2.5: Forum, Pompeii/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 2.6: Louvre/Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 3.1: Ritmeyer Archaeological Design, England. Fig. 3.2: Eric M. Meyers. Fig. 3.3: British Museum. Fig. 3.5: Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Fig. 4.3: The Art Archive/Archaeological Museum, Piraeus/Gianni Dagli Orti. Fig. 5.2: The Art Archive/Collection Dagli Orti. Fig. 5.4: British Museum. Fig. 6.1: British Museum. Fig. 6.2: British Museum/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 7.1: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 7.2: Staatsbibliothek, Munich/Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 7.3: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 8.2: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 8.3: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 9.1: akg-images/André Held. Fig. 9.3: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 9.4: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 10.1: Dr. Jürgen Zangenberg. Fig. 10.2: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 11.2: akg-images/André Held. Fig. 11.3: Sonia Halliday Photographs. Fig. 11.4: V&A Images, London/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 12.2: University of Michigan. Fig. 12.4: Copyright 2012 property of Dr. Carl Rasmussen, www.HolyLandPhotos.org. Fig. 13.1 Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 13.2: Vanni/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 13.3: C. M. Dixon/Ancient Art & Architecture Collection Ltd. Fig. 13.4: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 14.1: André Held. Fig. 14.2: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 14.3: Bart D. Ehrman. Fig. 14.4: akg-images/André Held. Fig. 15.2: Robert Miller. Fig. 15.3: Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris. Fig. 16.1: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 16.2: Photo by Fred Anderegg. Fig. 17.1: British Library. Fig. 17.2: akg-images/André Held. Fig. 17.3: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 18.1: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 18.2: Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome/Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 18.3: Robert Miller. Fig. 19.1: British Museum. Fig. 19.2: Scala/Art

Resource, NY. Fig. 19.3: Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., www.cngcoins.com. Fig. 19.4: Gilles Mermet/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 21.2: Hirmer Verlag München. Fig. 21.3: akg-images/André Held. Figure 21.4: Robert Turcan.

Photo Essay 1: Ancient Manuscripts of the New Testament (between pages 13 and 14)

Fig. 1: Reproduced by courtesy of the University Librarian and Director, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester; Fig. 2: Digitally Reproduced with the Permission of the Papyrology Collection, Graduate Library, University of Michigan; Fig. 3: By permission of the British Library; Fig. 4: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana; Fig. 5: University of Cambridge, University Library; Fig. 6: Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen; Fig. 7: Leningrad State Public Library; Fig. 8: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

Photo Essay 2: The Material World of Jesus and the Gospels (between pages 167 and 168)

Fig. 1: Scala/Art Resource, NY; Fig. 2: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY; Fig. 3: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY; Fig. 4: Archaeological Exploration of Sardis/Harvard University; Fig. 5: SEF/Art Resource, NY; Fig. 6: Bart Ehrman; Fig. 7: Bart Ehrman; Fig. 8a (Psalm scroll): The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Fig. 8b (copper scrolls): Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority; Fig. 9: Bart Ehrman; Fig. 10: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY; Fig. 11: Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority; Fig. 12: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Fig. 13: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Fig. 14: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Photo Essay 3: The Cities and Roads of Paul (between pages 267 and 268)

Fig. 1: Lefteris Papoulakis/Shutterstock; Fig. 2: meunierd/Shutterstock; Fig. 3: Sonia Halliday Photos; Fig. 4: Nick Pavlakis/Shutterstock; Fig. 5: © Ancient Art & Architecture/DanitaDelimont.com; Fig. 6: Dimitrios/Shutterstock; Fig. 7: Michael Avory/Shutterstock; Fig. 8: Bart Ehrman; Fig. 9: Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com; Fig. 10: S.Borisov/Shutterstock; Fig. 11: Matteo Gabrieli/Shutterstock; Fig. 12: Asier Villafranca/Shutterstock; Fig. 13: Image courtesy of www.HolyLandPhotos.org; Fig. 14: vlas2000/Shutterstock; Fig. 15: LianeM/Shutterstock.

MASTER TIME LINE



History of Hellenistic and Roman Times

History of Palestine

History of Christianity

800 B.C.E.

753 B.C.E. Traditional date for the founding of Rome

700 B.C.E.

600 B.C.E.



510 B.C.E. Expulsion of kings from Rome and beginning of Roman Republic

587–586 B.C.E. Final conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, destruction of the Temple, Jewish leaders taken into exile

559–332 B.C.E. Palestine ruled by the Persians



500 B.C.E.

400 B.C.E.

332–323 B.C.E. Conquests of Alexander the Great

333–332 B.C.E. Palestine conquered by Alexander the Great

300 B.C.E.

264–241, 218–201, and 149–146 B.C.E. Punic Wars, Rome against Carthage for domination of the Mediterranean

300–198 B.C.E. Palestine ruled by the Ptolemies (of Egypt)



200 B.C.E.

198–142 B.C.E. Palestine ruled by the Seleucids (of Syria)



History of Hellenistic and Roman Times

History of Palestine

History of Christianity



167–142 B.C.E. The Maccabean revolt

142–63 B.C.E. Palestine ruled by the Hasmoneans, formation of the Jewish sects: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes

100 B.C.E.

44 B.C.E. Assassination of Julius Caesar

27 B.C.E. Octavian (Caesar Augustus), emperor; beginning of Roman Empire

63 B.C.E. Palestine conquered by Roman General Pompey

40–4 B.C.E. Herod made king of the Jews by the Romans

4 B.C.E. The Birth of Jesus

4 B.C.E. The Birth of Jesus

4 B.C.E.–30 C.E. Life of Jesus



1 C.E.

14–37 Tiberius, emperor

37–41 Caligula, emperor

41–54 Claudius, emperor

54–68 Nero, emperor

68–69 Year of four emperors

4–6 Judea ruled by Herod's son Archelaus

4–39 Galilee ruled by Herod's son Antipas

6–41 Judea governed by Roman Prefects (Pontius Pilate, prefect in 26–30 C.E.)

41–44 Agrippa 1, king over most of Palestine

44–66 Most of Palestine ruled by Roman procurators

66–70 First Jewish revolt

27–30? Public Ministry of Jesus

30? Crucifixion of Jesus

30–120 Oral Traditions of Jesus and initial spread of Christianity throughout the empire

31–32 Conversion of Paul

34–64 Paul's missionary activities

49 1 Thessalonians, Paul's earliest letter and the earliest surviving Christian Writing



History of Hellenistic and Roman Times

History of Palestine

History of Christianity

69–79 Vespasian, emperor

79–81 Titus, emperor

81–96 Domitian, emperor

96–98 Nerva, emperor

98–117 Trajan, emperor

70 Destruction of Jerusalem/Temple



100 C.E.

117–138 Hadrian, emperor

132–135 Second Jewish revolt (under Simon bar Cochba)



49–62 Paul's letters

64 Death of Paul and Peter

65–70 Gospel of Mark

80–85 Gospels of Matthew and Luke

80–110 Deutero-Pauline Epistles, Pastoral Epistles, General Epistles

90–95 Gospel of John

95 1 Clement

95–100 Book of Revelation

100 The Didache

110 Letters of Ignatius

100–130 Rise of Gnosticism

110–120 Gospels of Thomas and Peter

120–140 Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter

130 Epistle of Barnabas

130–150 Rise of Marcionites

155 Martyrdom of Polycarp



The Roman Empire: Central and Eastern Provinces.



INTRODUCTION



WHY STUDY THE NEW TESTAMENT?

The New Testament is the most commonly purchased, widely read, and deeply cherished book in the history of Western civilization. It is also the most widely misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused. These facts alone should make it worth our time to study it. But there are other reasons as well—religious reasons, historical reasons, and literary reasons.



RELIGIOUS REASONS

Most people who study the New Testament do so, of course, for religious reasons. Many people revere the Bible as the word of God and want to know what it can teach them about what to believe and how to live. In this book, we will not study the New Testament to promote any particular religious point of view or theology—Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, Jewish, agnostic, atheist, or anything else. We will instead be approaching the New Testament from a historical point of view. But even from this alternative perspective, there are solid religious reasons for studying the New Testament—even for those people who are not themselves religious or interested in becoming religious. That is because to understand our world, and the religious people in it, we need to have a firmer grasp on the book that stands at the heart of the Christian religion.



HISTORICAL REASONS

Arguably the most important reason for studying the New Testament—especially from a historical point of view—is because of its importance

for the history of Western civilization. The dominant religion of Europe and the New World for the past 2,000 years has been Christianity. This religion continues to assert an enormous influence on our form of culture. This is true not only on the individual level, as people are guided in their thoughts, beliefs, and actions by what they learn in this religion; it is true on the broadest historical scale imaginable. Christianity has had the single greatest impact on Western civilization of any religion, ideology, or worldview, whether looked at culturally, socially, politically, or economically. There is no other institution that can even come close. And at the foundation of Christianity—at its heart, one could argue—stands the New Testament. If one does not understand the New Testament, one cannot fully understand the course of the history of the world we inhabit.

And more than that, there can be no doubt that the New Testament has influenced millions of people's lives. It is widely known that the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible—that is, the Christian Old Testament—and the New Testament) is the best-selling book of all time, without any serious competitor. What is not always appreciated is that the Bible is the best-selling book every year, year in and year out. So many copies of the Bible are sold every year that no one has been able to add them all up. One estimate from the year 2005 indicated that just in the United States, some twenty-five million copies of the Bible were sold. But what is most astounding is that the vast majority of those Bibles were sold to people who already *had* Bibles: over nine out of ten American households own at least one copy of the Bible, and the average household has four. As an article in the *New Yorker* magazine of December 18, 2006, put it, this “means that Bible publishers manage

to sell twenty-five million copies a year of a book that almost everybody already has.”¹

Americans not only like owning and buying Bibles. They like reading them. A Gallup poll taken in the year 2000 indicated that 16% of Americans claimed to read the Bible every day; 21% at least once a week; and 12% at least once a month.² That means that fully half the population of the United States reads the Bible every month. About how many other books can *that* be said?

What is even more impressive is the number of people who actually believe the New Testament. Another, more recent, Gallup poll shows that three out of ten Americans think that the Bible is the absolute word of God and is to be interpreted literally. Another five out of ten do not think it is to be interpreted literally, but that it is nonetheless the word of God. This means that eight out of ten Americans—fully 80 percent—believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God.

The vast influence of the New Testament on Americans may be seen as a positive set of reasons for why the Bible should be studied: whether or not we ourselves are believers or are committed to the New Testament, it is important to know more about this book that is affecting so many of our fellow citizens. Moreover, no one can doubt that sincere believers who follow what they understand to be the key teachings of the New Testament have frequently done a world of good throughout history, sometimes through enormous sacrifice to themselves. The New Testament teaches to “love your neighbor as yourself,” to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and many other selfless ethical principles. Anyone who follows such teachings is obviously going to do real service to the human race and work to make society better.

But the New Testament has not only had a positive effect on people: it has had very serious negative effects as well, as just about everyone knows. The

New Testament (along with the Hebrew Bible) has been used for extremely harmful and malicious purposes over the years—for example, in helping to justify war, murder, and torture during the Crusades and Inquisitions of the Middle Ages. In the American South, the New Testament was used to justify slavery and white supremacy. The New Testament continues to be used to justify war, the slaughter of innocent lives, the oppression of women and of gays, and of just about everyone else that others in society do not like or approve of. In part, this is because the Bible itself is, in places, a very violent book—not just in the Old Testament (e.g., with the slaughter of the Canaanites by the Israelites, as mandated by God, in the book of Joshua) but also in the New Testament (as in the destruction of the human race by God in the Book of Revelation). And so, in the opinion of many, people not only use the Bible but also misuse it. This gives us all the more reason to want to study it.



LITERARY REASONS

In addition to religious and historical reasons for studying the Bible, there are literary reasons. For anyone interested in great literature, it is essential to have a grasp on the writings found in the New Testament. This is for two reasons. For one thing, the New Testament contains some of the great literary gems of the world’s literature. Here are some examples:

- ❖ The Gospel of Matthew: this is the first book of the New Testament that contains the famous “Sermon on the Mount,” arguably the most moving and significant collection of Jesus’s ethical and religious teachings, including the Golden Rule and the Lord’s Prayer.
- ❖ The Gospel of John: long a favorite among Christian readers, this account of Jesus’s life portrays him as a divine being come to earth for the salvation of all who believe in him.
- ❖ The Letter to the Romans: the most prominent author of the New Testament, the apostle Paul, describes in this letter how a person

¹Daniel Radosh, “Why Publishers Love the Bible,” *New Yorker*, December 18, 2006; see http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa_fact1#ixzz1nstdNqma

²<http://www.gallup.com/poll/2416/Six-Ten-Americans-Read-Bible-Least-Occasionally.aspx>



can be made right with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

- ❖ The Revelation of John: this, the final book of the New Testament, indicates how all of human history will come to a climactic end with the destruction of the world as we know it.

A second literary reason for studying the Bible is that it is impossible to understand a good deal of Western literature without it, as many of its stories and themes and phrases are cited, alluded to,

paraphrased, reworked, and explored in many of the greatest authors of our civilization: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, Tolstoy, T. S. Elliott, and hundreds of others.

There are, in short, numerous compelling reasons to study the New Testament; whether you are a believer or not; whether you are a Christian, Jew, Muslim, agnostic, atheist, or something else. It is the most important book in the history of our form of civilization; and in this course of study, you will get to know it and its teachings in a deep and intimate way.

What Is the New Testament?

WHAT TO EXPECT

This chapter is concerned with some hard but intriguing questions that many people have never thought to ask about the New Testament: Where did this book—or, rather, this collection of books—come from? How did the twenty-seven books of the New Testament get gathered together into a “canon,” a collection of authoritative books? Why were these books included in the Scriptures, but other Christian books—some of them written at the same time—were not? Who made the decisions? On what grounds? And when?

What is the New Testament? The short answer is that it is the second part of the Christian Bible, which along with the **Old Testament** (see box 1.1), is considered by Christians to be the sacred **canon** (see box 1.2) of Scripture. And why should we study it? Because it is the most frequently purchased, commonly read, passionately believed, and widely misunderstood book in the history of Western civilization.

Christianity is the largest religion in the world today, with some 2 billion adherents. Throughout the history of Western civilization for the past 2,000 years, the Christian church has been by far the most powerful and influential institution—not just religiously but also socially, culturally, economically, and politically. And the New Testament is the book that stands at the foundation of this religion. Whether you are a Christian believer or not,

whether you have a personal attachment to the New Testament or not, whether you base your life on the teachings of Jesus or not, the New Testament has profoundly affected your life and will continue to play an enormous role in the world in which you, and all of us, live.

This textbook on the New Testament is not written only for believers, but for all people of every kind. And so, I will not be approaching our study from a particular theological point of view (e.g., Baptist, Episcopalian, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, atheist; see the Excursus at the end of this chapter). I will be approaching it from a historical perspective, asking what we can know about the teachings of the New Testament, the authors of its books, the times within which they wrote, and the issues they were trying to address. My assumption throughout is that this kind of historical investigation into the


 ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

BOX I.1 The Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament

The terms “Jewish Scriptures” and “Hebrew Bible” both refer to the collection of books considered sacred in the religion of Judaism, books that were written almost entirely in Hebrew. Many of these writings were regarded as holy even before Jesus’ day, especially the first five books of Moses, known as the Torah or Law.

About a century after Jesus, the collection of books into the Hebrew Scriptures was more or less fixed. Altogether, the collection comprised twenty-four different books. Because of a different way of counting them, they number thirty-nine books in English translation (the twelve minor prophets in English Bibles, for example, count as only one book in the Hebrew Bible).

Christians have long referred to these books as the “Old Testament,” to set them apart from the books of the “New Testament” (the new set of

books that reveal God’s will to his people). Throughout our study, I will use the term “Old Testament” only when referring explicitly to Christian views; otherwise, I will call these books the Jewish Scriptures or Hebrew Bible.

Even within Christianity there are different numbers of books included in the “Old Testament.” The Roman Catholic Church, for example, accepts an additional twelve books (or parts of books)—including such works as Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees—which they call “Deuterocanonical” (meaning that they came into the canon at a later time than the books of the Hebrew Bible). Protestant Christians usually call these books the “Apocrypha.” Because they did not form part of the Hebrew Bible, I do not include them in this chart or discuss them at any length.

The Hebrew Bible
The Torah (5 books)

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

The Prophets (8 books)

Former Prophets
Joshua
Judges
Samuel (counts as
1 book)
Kings (counts as
1 book)
Later Prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
The Twelve
(count as 1 book)
Hosea
Joel
Amos

Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

The Writings (11 books)

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ruth
Song of Solomon
Ecclesiastes
Lamentations
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah
(1 book)
Chronicles (1 book)

The Christian “Old Testament”
*The Pentateuch
(5 books)*

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

*Historical Books
(12 books)*

Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 and 2 Samuel
1 and 2 Kings
1 and 2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther

*Poetry and Wisdom
Books (5 books)*

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon

*Prophetic Books
(17 books)*

Major Prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Minor Prophets
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi



ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

BOX 1.2 The Canon of Scripture

The English term “canon” comes from a Greek word that originally meant “ruler” or “measuring rod.” A canon was used to make straight lines or to measure distances. When applied to a group of books, it refers to a recognized body of literature. Thus, for example, the canon of Shakespeare refers to all of Shakespeare’s authentic writings.

With reference to the Bible, the term canon denotes the collection of books that are accepted as authoritative by a religious body. Thus, for example, we can speak of the canon of the Jewish Scriptures or the canon of the New Testament.

New Testament will be valuable for all people, believer and nonbeliever alike.

We will begin in this chapter by considering some basic information about the New Testament, seeing how the books within it came to be collected together into a canon of Scripture, and then considering whether we actually have the original books of the New Testament themselves, or only later copies of them, occasionally modified by the ancient scribes who did the copying.



THE NEW TESTAMENT: SOME BASIC INFORMATION

The New Testament contains twenty-seven books, written in Greek, by fifteen or sixteen different authors, who were addressing other Christian individuals or communities between the years 50 and 120 C.E. (see boxes 1.3 and 1.4). As we will see, it is difficult to know whether any of these books were written by Jesus’ own disciples.

The first four books are “**Gospels**,” a term that literally means “good news.” The four Gospels of the New Testament proclaim the good news by telling stories about the life and death of Jesus—his birth, ministry, miracles, teaching, last days, crucifixion, and resurrection. These books are traditionally ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Christians of the second century claimed that two of these authors were disciples of Jesus: Matthew, the tax collector mentioned in the First Gospel (Matt 9:9), and John, the beloved disciple

who appears in the Fourth (e.g., John 19:26). The other two were reportedly written by associates of famous apostles: Mark, the secretary of Peter, and Luke, the traveling companion of Paul. This second-century tradition does not go back to the Gospels themselves; the titles in our Bibles (e.g., “The Gospel according to Matthew”) were not found in the original texts of these books. Instead, their authors chose to remain anonymous.

The next book in the New Testament is the **Acts of the Apostles**, written by the same author as the Third Gospel (whom modern scholars continue to call Luke even though we are not certain of his identity). This book is a sequel to the Gospel in that it describes the history of early Christianity beginning with events immediately after Jesus’ death; it is chiefly concerned with showing how the religion was disseminated throughout parts of the Roman Empire, among Gentiles as well as Jews, principally through the missionary labors of the apostle Paul. Thus, whereas the Gospels portray the *beginnings* of Christianity (through the life and death of Jesus), the book of Acts portrays the *spread* of Christianity (through the work of his apostles).

The next section of the New Testament comprises twenty-one “**epistles**,” that is, letters written by Christian leaders to various communities and individuals. Not all these epistles are, strictly speaking, items of personal correspondence. The book of Hebrews, for example, appears to be an early Christian sermon, and the epistle of 1 John is a kind of Christian tractate. Nonetheless, all twenty-one of these books are traditionally called


 ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

BOX 1.3 The Common Era and Before the Common Era

Most students will be accustomed to dating ancient events as either A.D. (which does not stand for “After Death” but for “anno domini,” Latin for “year of our Lord”) or B.C. (“Before Christ”). This terminology may make sense for Christians, for whom A.D. 1996 is indeed “the year of our Lord 1996.” It makes less sense, though, for Jews, Muslims, and others for whom Jesus is not the “Lord” or the “Christ.” Scholars have therefore

begun to use a different set of abbreviations as more inclusive of others outside the Christian tradition. In this book, I will follow the alternative designations of C.E. (“the Common Era,” meaning common to people of all faiths who utilize the traditional Western calendar) and B.C.E. (“Before the Common Era”). In terms of the older abbreviations, then, C.E. corresponds to A.D. and B.C.E. to B.C.

epistles. Thirteen of them have been claimed to be written by the apostle Paul; in some cases, scholars have come to question this claim. In any event, most of these letters, whether by Paul or others, address theological or practical problems that have arisen in the Christian communities they address. Thus, whereas the Gospels describe the beginnings of Christianity and the book of Acts its spread, the epistles are more directly focused on Christian beliefs, practices, and ethics.

Finally, the New Testament concludes with the Book of Revelation, the first surviving instance of a Christian **apocalypse**. This book was written by a prophet named John, who describes the course of future events leading up to the destruction of this world and the appearance of the world to come. As such, it is principally concerned with the culmination of Christianity.


OTHER EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

The books I have just described were not the only writings of the early Christians, nor were they originally collected into a body of literature called the “New Testament.” We know of other Christian writings that have not survived from antiquity. For example, the apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, refers to an earlier writing that he had sent them (1 Cor 5:9) and alludes to a letter that

they themselves had sent him (7:1). Unfortunately, this correspondence is lost.

Other noncanonical writings, however, have survived. The best known of them are by authors collectively called the “**Apostolic Fathers**.” These were Christians living in the early second century whose writings were considered authoritative in some Christian circles, some of them on a par with the writings of the Gospels or Paul. In fact, some of our ancient manuscripts of the New Testament include writings of the Apostolic Fathers as if they belonged to the canon. Other, previously unknown, Christian writings were discovered only within the twentieth century. Some of these writings clearly stand at odds with those within the New Testament; some of them appear to have been used as sacred scripture by certain groups of Christians. A number of them claim to be written by apostles. The most spectacular find occurred in 1945 near the town of **Nag Hammadi**, Egypt, where some peasants digging for fertilizer accidentally uncovered a jar containing thirteen fragmentary books in leather bindings. The books contain anthologies of literature, some fifty-two treatises altogether, written in the ancient Egyptian language called Coptic. Whereas the books themselves were manufactured in the mid-fourth century C.E. (we know this because some of the bindings were strengthened with pieces of scratch paper that were dated), the treatises that they contain are much older: some of them are mentioned by name by authors living in the second century. Before this discovery, we knew



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BOX 1.4 The Layout of the New Testament

Gospels: The Beginnings of Christianity (4 books)

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John

Acts: The Spread of Christianity (1 book)

The Acts of the Apostles

Epistles: The Beliefs, Practices, and Ethics of Christianity (21 books)

Pauline Epistles (13 books)

Romans
1 and 2 Corinthians
Galatians

Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 and 2 Thessalonians
1 and 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

General Epistles (8 books)

Hebrews
James
1 and 2 Peter
1, 2, and 3 John
Jude

Apocalypse: The Culmination of Christianity (1 book)

The Revelation of John

This schematic arrangement is somewhat simplified. All of the New Testament books, for example (not just the epistles), are concerned with Christian beliefs, practices, and ethics, and Paul's epistles are in some ways more reflective of Christian

beginnings than the Gospels. Nonetheless, this basic orientation to the New Testament writings can at least get us started in our understanding of early Christian literature.

that these books existed, but we didn't know what was in them.

What kind of books are they? Included in the collection are epistles, apocalypses, and collections of secret teachings. Yet more intriguing are the several Gospels that it contains, including one allegedly written by the apostle Philip and another attributed to Didymus Judas Thomas, thought by some early Christians to be Jesus' twin brother. These books were accepted as Scripture by *some* groups of early Christians.

Why were they—and other books like them—finally rejected from the canon of Scripture, and others accepted? Who made the decisions about which books to include? When did these decisions get made and on what grounds?



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN CANON

Christians did not invent the idea of collecting authoritative writings together into a sacred canon of Scripture. In this they had a precedent. For even though most of the other religions in the Roman Empire did not use written documents as authorities for their religious beliefs and practices, Judaism did.

Jesus and his followers were themselves Jews who were conversant with the ancient writings that were eventually canonized into the Hebrew Scriptures. Although most scholars now think that a hard-and-fast canon of Jewish Scripture did not yet exist in Jesus' own day, it appears that most Jews

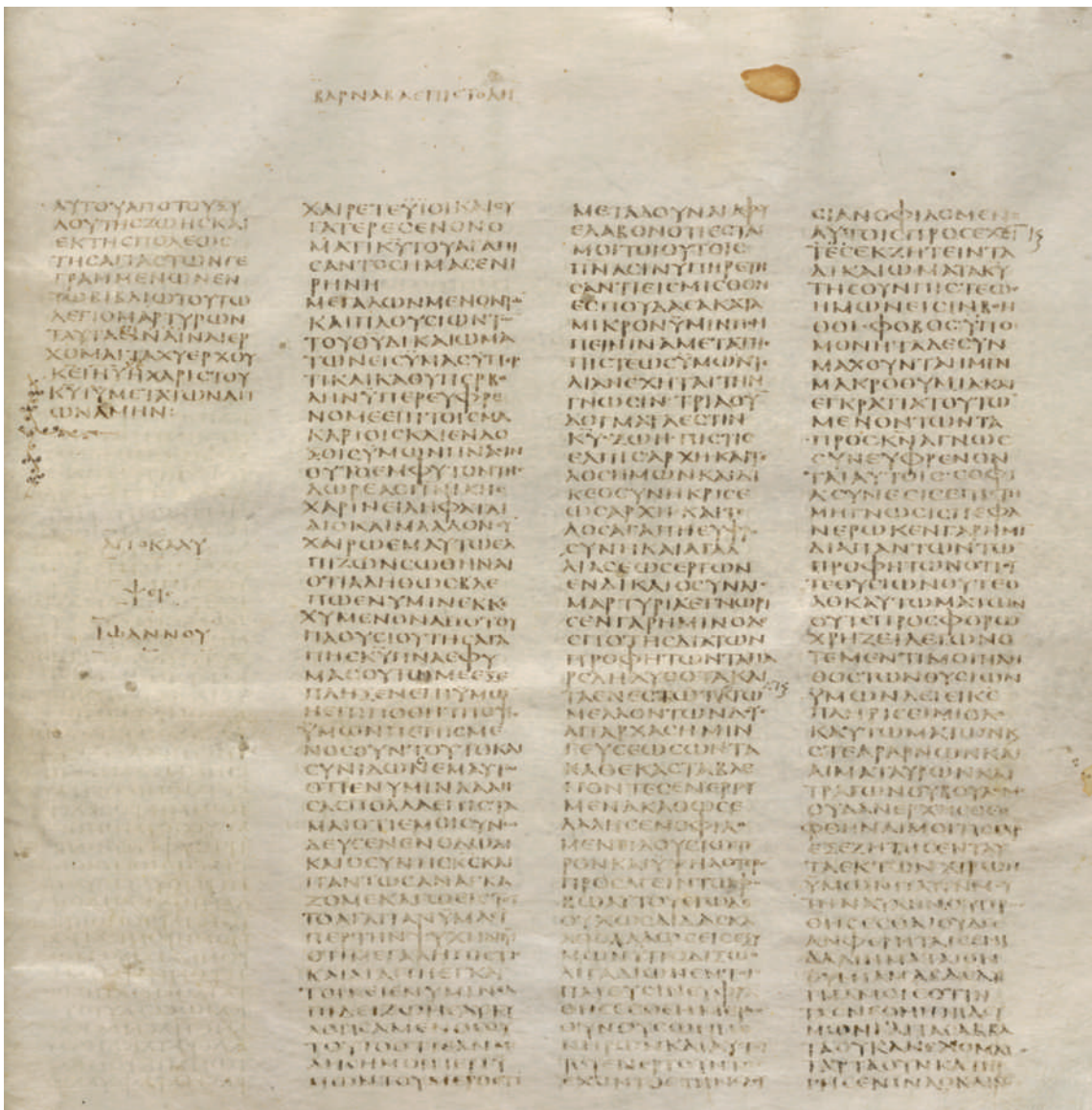


Figure 1.1 Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest surviving manuscript of the entire New Testament. This fourth-century manuscript includes *The Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (the first page of which is pictured here), books that were considered part of the New Testament by some Christians for several centuries.

did subscribe to the special authority of the Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Hebrew Bible; see box 1.1). Also, many Jews accepted the authority of the Prophets as well. These writings include the books of Joshua through 2 Kings in our English Bibles, as well as the more familiar prophets Isaiah,

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets. According to our earliest accounts, Jesus himself quoted from some of these books; we can assume that he accepted them as authoritative.

Thus Christianity had its beginning in the proclamation of a Jewish teacher who ascribed

authority to written documents. Moreover, we know that Jesus' followers considered his own teachings to be authoritative. Near the end of the first century, Christians were citing Jesus' words and calling them "Scripture" (e.g., 1 Tim 5:18). It is striking that in some early Christian circles, the correct interpretation of Jesus' teachings was thought to be the key to eternal life (e.g., see John 6:68 and *Gosp. Thom.* 1). Furthermore, some of Jesus' followers, such as the apostle Paul, understood themselves to be authoritative spokespersons for the truth. Other Christians granted them this claim. The book of 2 Peter, for example, includes Paul's own letters among the "Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16).

Thus by the beginning of the second century, some Christians were ascribing authority to the words of Jesus and the writings of his apostles. There were nonetheless heated debates concerning which apostles were true to Jesus' own teachings, and a number of writings that claimed to be written by apostles were thought by some Christians to be forgeries.

It appears then that our New Testament emerged out of the conflicts among Christian groups and that the dominance of the position that eventually "won out" was what led to the development of the Christian canon as we have it. It is no accident that Gospels that were deemed "heretical" (i.e., false)—for instance, the *Gospel of Peter* or the *Gospel of Philip*—did not make it into the New Testament. This is not to say, however, that the canon of Scripture was firmly set by the end of the second century. Indeed, it is a striking fact of history that even though the four Gospels were widely considered authoritative by proto-orthodox Christians then—along with Acts, most of the Pauline epistles, and several of the longer general epistles—the collection of our twenty-seven books was not finalized until much later. For throughout the second, third, and fourth centuries, proto-orthodox Christians continued to debate the acceptability of some of the other books. The arguments centered on (a) whether the books in question were ancient (e.g., some Christians wanted to include *The Shepherd of Hermas*, see fig. 1.1; others insisted that it was penned after the age of the apostles); (b) whether they were written by apostles (some wanted to include Hebrews on the grounds that Paul wrote it; others insisted that he did not); and (c) whether they were widely accepted

among proto-orthodox congregations as containing correct Christian teaching (e.g., many Christians disputed the doctrine of the end times found in the book of Revelation).

Contrary to what one might expect, it was not until the year 367 C.E., almost two and a half centuries after the last New Testament book was written, that any Christian of record named our current twenty-seven books as the authoritative canon of Scripture. The author of this list was **Athanasius**, the powerful bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. Some scholars believe that this pronouncement on his part, and his accompanying proscription of heretical books, led monks of a nearby monastery to hide the Gnostic writings discovered 1,600 years later by Bedouin near Nag Hammadi, Egypt.



IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR STUDY

Understanding the process by which the New Testament canon came into being raises a highly significant issue. The various books of the New Testament are typically read as standing in essential harmony with one another. But do the books of the New Testament agree in every major way? Or are they thought to agree only because they have been placed together, side by side, in an authoritative collection that is venerated as sacred Scripture? Is it possible that when these books are read in their original settings, rather than their canonical context, they stand at real tension with one another?

These are among the most difficult and controversial issues that we will address in our study of the New Testament writings. To anticipate my approach, I might simply point out that historians who have carefully examined the New Testament have found that its authors do, in fact, embody remarkably diverse points of view. These scholars have concluded that the most fruitful way to interpret the New Testament authors is to read them individually rather than collectively. Each author should be allowed to have his own say* and should not be too quickly reconciled with the point of

*Throughout this book, I will be using the masculine pronoun to refer to the authors of the early Christian literature, simply because I think all of them were males. For discussion of some of the relevant issues, see chapter 18 and box 4.1.



view of another. For example, we should not assume that Paul would always say exactly what Matthew would, or that Matthew would agree in every particular with John, and so on. Following this principle, scholars have been struck by the rich diversity represented within the pages of the New Testament. This point cannot be stressed enough. The diversity of Christianity did not begin in the modern period, as some people unreflectively assume (cf. all the groups that call themselves Christian: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, Methodists, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, and so on!). The diversity of Christianity is already evident in the earliest writings that have survived from the Christians of antiquity, most of which are preserved within the canon of the New Testament.

In this book, we will approach the writings of the New Testament from this historical perspective, looking at each author's work individually, rather than allowing the shape of the later Christian canon to determine the meaning of all its constituent parts.



THE NEW TESTAMENT: ONE OTHER SET OF PROBLEMS

We have seen that the New Testament did not emerge as a single collection of twenty-seven books immediately, but that different groups of early Christians had different collections of sacred books. In some ways, however, the problem of the New Testament canon is even more complicated than that. For not only did different Christian communities have different books—they had different versions of the *same* books.

They had different versions because of the way books were transmitted in an age before Internet access, desktop publishing, word processors, photocopiers, and printing presses. Books in the ancient world could not be mass produced. They were copied by hand, one page, one sentence, one word, one letter at a time. There was no other way to do it. Because books were copied by hand, there was always the possibility that **scribes** would make mistakes and intentional changes in a book—any and every time it was copied. Moreover, when a

new copy was itself copied, the mistakes and changes that the earlier scribe (copyist) made would have been reproduced, and the new scribe would introduce some mistakes and changes of his own. When that copy was then copied, more changes would be introduced. And so it went.

Unfortunately, we do not have the originals of any of the books of the New Testament, or the first copies, or the copies of the first copies. What we have are copies made much later—in most cases hundreds of years later.

Many thousands of these later copies of the New Testament survive today: by last count (as of 2015), we have some 5,700 copies in the original Greek language of the New Testament. This number includes not only complete copies of all the books of the New Testament, but also fragmentary copies with just a few verses on them (see fig. 1.2). Some of these smaller fragments are no larger than a credit card. Among all the surviving copies, very few were produced in the second and third centuries: our earliest is a scrap containing portions of verses from the Gospel of John, just 30–40 years after the book's original composition. We begin to get more numerous copies of the New Testament in the fourth and later centuries. By far the vast majority of our copies come from the ninth century and later.

This means that even though we have lots of copies of the New Testament—more copies than for any other book from antiquity—we do not have very many *early* copies. That is a problem because there are so many differences among the copies that we do have. These differences show convincingly that scribes occasionally changed the words they were copying. Some scribes changed them rarely, others far more frequently. How often were the words of the New Testament changed? The reality is that no one knows: no one has yet been able to count all the differences among our manuscripts. What is striking is that of the 5,700 or so Greek copies of the New Testament that we have, no two of them are exactly alike in all their details. Some scholars have estimated that among these copies there are some 200,000 differences—most of them minor, but some of them quite significant. Other scholars suggest that there are 300,000 differences, or 400,000, or more. But possibly it is



Figure 1.2 This is an image of several pages of P⁴⁵, the earliest surviving (although fragmentary) copy of the Gospel of Luke, from the early third century.

easiest to put the matter in comparative terms: there are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

It should be of some comfort to learn, however, that the vast majority of the differences in our manuscripts are insignificant, immaterial, and do not matter for anything. A large number of them simply show that scribes in antiquity could spell no better than most people can today (every change in spelling of a word counts as a difference). Scribes sometimes not only misspelled words, they also accidentally left out words, or lines, or entire pages; other times they copied the same words or lines twice. At other times they changed the text not by accident but because they wanted to do so, adding a verse or even an entire story that they thought would “improve” the text or taking away a verse or removing a passage that they thought was difficult to understand. In some instances, these were important passages.

Our Gospel of Mark today, for example, ends with twelve verses in which Jesus appears to his disciples after he was raised from the dead (without these verses, the disciples would never come to believe in the resurrection in Mark’s Gospel). Those verses are missing from some of our earliest and most important manuscripts, however. Scholars today almost universally think that a later scribe

added the entire passage (see box 5.6). Or as another example: one of the most familiar stories of the Gospels is from the Gospel of John, the story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery, where Jesus says his famous words: “Let the one without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her.” But this story is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts of the Gospel. Here again, scholars are thoroughly unified in thinking that one or more scribes added the story to the Gospel (see box 8.5). So, too, with the one passage of the New Testament that explicitly states the doctrine of the Trinity (that there are three beings who are God, but the three are one) is undoubtedly a later addition to the text (1 John 5:7–8; see box 1.5). This is also the case in the one passage where Jesus, before being arrested, is said to have been “sweating blood” (Luke 22:43–44; see box 7.5). A good many more significant changes could be mentioned. What is somewhat more daunting is the fact that in a number of instances, we simply do not *know* what the original text said because the evidence can be interpreted in various ways.

The problem scholars have, then, is this: because we do not have any of the earliest copies of the New Testament (NT) books (say, copies of copies of the originals—let alone the originals