

In the overcrowded field of introductory textbooks, *Inquiry into the New Testament* is a standout. Designed with the undergraduate student in mind, this engaging and pedagogically smart volume explores salient historical, literary, theological, and wider interpretive issues both within and with the New Testament. Reflecting decades of teaching and scholarship, Landry and Martens show why a critical New Testament literacy is indispensable for understanding the power the Bible exerts, for better and for worse, in contemporary culture. Few introductions readily embrace this challenge so directly, and none does so more effectively. It's a superb choice for the beginning New Testament course and one that will enrich many classrooms for years to come.

—Gary A. Phillips
Wabash College

David Landry and John Martens provide a thorough and accessible introduction to the New Testament replete with images, review and discussion questions, key terms, and bibliography. The approach is primarily historical and literary. What makes *Inquiry into the New Testament* distinctive from other introductory texts, however, is its engagement with the ongoing use of the Bible in the contemporary world, whether for good or ill. Landry and Martens address the historical and present-day significance of various parts of the New Testament, and furnish each chapter of their book with discussion questions that sometimes engage controversial issues. Various topics such as fundamentalism, politics, economics, gender, and social and environmental justice come to the fore, especially in the last chapter. The authors effectively demonstrate why the academic study of the New Testament is important, regardless of one's religious orientation. I highly recommend *Inquiry into the New Testament* for undergraduate courses.

—Alicia J. Batten
Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo

A useful and user-friendly text for undergraduate study of the New Testament. While clearly based on the most up-to-date scholarship, the presentation will be especially helpful for students approaching the Bible critically for the first time. The text never falls into excessive jargon; the style is clear, with complex issues neatly developed.

Landry's first few chapters on the background to the New Testament texts are comprehensive yet compact. Discussions of such issues as document dating, canonical development, comparison of canonical and noncanonical gospels, and the task of critical inquiry are all helpful.

Time and again, I found this text fit well with my own presentation of the material and the range of students I encounter in my classroom. It has the real feel of classroom experience. I can see myself using this textbook very successfully, and I think other teachers of the Bible would find it similarly useful.

—Mark Matson
Milligan College

I cannot recommend this textbook highly enough. David Landry has composed an ideal introduction for students who will encounter the New Testament in a single semester as part of a general education curriculum. Students will be equipped with all the necessary technical, historical, scholarly, and theological resources to read the New Testament critically. Most impressive and useful in the way it marries methodology with specific text, this volume allows students to gain an in-depth understanding of each biblical book and to develop the critical skills to read the New Testament on their own. The volume includes a range of carefully considered digressions on relevant topics, helping students think through issues and recognize the New Testament as a book rooted in the past but speaking to the present. Students will be well positioned to read and think about the New Testament, to enter upper-division seminars, and to reflect on how these early Christian texts remain important for their lives and for the world around them.

—Shawn Kelley
Daemon University

David Landry's *Inquiry into the New Testament* has everything desired in a textbook: crystal-clear explanations, beautiful page layout with gorgeous pictures, key terms and discussion questions at the end of every chapter, fascinating sidebars, and above all a keen sensitivity to the literary and historical contexts of the New Testament, as well as its contemporary significance. With its finger right on the pulse of current New Testament scholarship and well-designed for the academic setting, this textbook will benefit both student and teacher. Highly recommended!

—Stephen C. Carlson
Australian Catholic University

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INQUIRY *into the*
NEW TESTAMENT

*Ancient Context to
Contemporary Significance*



DAVID T. LANDRY *with* JOHN W. MARTENS


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INTRODUCTION

At one point, the working title of this book was *Academic Introduction to the New Testament*. Although the title did not survive, the concept did. What is an “academic” introduction to the New Testament? How is this book different from the numerous other books that are available to students and teachers of the New Testament?

To answer these questions, we must first make a distinction between the venues in which the Bible is studied. People read and discuss or think about the meaning of the Bible most commonly during church services, in church-sponsored Bible study groups, in religious education classes, on retreats, as part of individual quests for guidance and spiritual development, and in college classrooms. Usually there are no classes on the Bible in public school classrooms prior to the college level. Courses on the Bible are offered in both religiously-affiliated and secular schools, although the orientation of these classes might be somewhat different. This book is designed for academic use in the college or university classroom.

One of the things that is characteristic of the academic study of the Bible at the college level is that the teacher and the teaching materials usually strive to be neutral and objective in their approach, rather than favoring the interpretation of a particular religious tradition. Or, if neutrality and objectivity are abandoned, the teacher and the materials will at least be open and intentional when they are engaged in reading the Bible from a particular ideological perspective or social location. The academic study of the Bible seeks to avoid bias (or at least hidden or unstated bias), and to prevent presuppositions from determining the outcome of an inquiry with regard to, for example, whether a given historical event referenced in the Bible actually occurred, what the

theological significance of this event was, or what a particular biblical author intended to communicate to his readers in a controversial passage. The effort to avoid bias is especially important and especially difficult when it comes to the Bible.

I often begin my undergraduate course introducing the New Testament by saying that the Bible is the most misread and most misunderstood book of all time. This is an opinion, of course, but one that I try to back up with evidence, namely with historical examples of blatant misreadings of the Bible. There is, for example, the theory espoused by the “Christian Identity” organization and other neo-fascist groups that Jesus was a Nazi. Most students immediately (and rightly) recognize this as a terrible misreading of the text. The only way that one could conclude that Jesus was an authoritarian and a white supremacist who hated Jews and racial minorities is by taking a small subset of Jesus’ teachings wildly out of context, twisting the meaning of his words almost beyond recognition, and ignoring a massive body of evidence that contradicts the central claim. What these neo-fascists are doing, I explain, is what biblical scholars call *eisegesis*. This refers to “reading into” a text what one wants to see there. Its opposite is *exegesis*, which means getting out of a text that which it actually says. Now it is obvious to most students that the “Jesus-as-Nazi” theory is a particularly egregious example of *eisegesis*. But my point to them is that this happens *all the time*. It is not often quite so blatant, but people read into the Bible what they want to see there with amazing frequency. It is because of this that people with diametrically opposed viewpoints can nonetheless sincerely claim that the Bible agrees with them and disagrees with their opponents. Both feminists and

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men's rights activists argue strenuously that the Bible is on their side. Both capitalists and communists claim the Bible as an ally.

Why does this happen so often with respect to the Bible? Perhaps because many readers ascribe tremendous importance to the Bible *prior to their ever reading it*. Now it is certainly true that many people misrepresent what the Bible says because they never read it at all; they simply assume that they know what it says.¹ But the problem of eisegesis is not illustrated by these people, but rather by those who do read the Bible—with laser focus on proving that the Bible agrees with all of their preconceived notions. What is at work in their thought process, almost certainly unconsciously, is a syllogism something like this:

P¹ The Bible contains the truth.

P² What I believe is the truth.

∴ The Bible contains what I believe.

The first premise would be accepted by the overwhelming majority of those who were raised Christian, even (and perhaps especially) by those with little or no direct knowledge of the Bible's contents. The second premise is difficult to deny. People might be more or less certain that their beliefs are true, but they do not believe things that they know to be false. Each of these premises seems innocuous on its own, but when one combines them the result is rather dangerous: "The Bible contains what I believe." This suggests that people will tend to interpret the Bible in such a way as to confirm and verify everything they have always been taught. One can easily see how this thought process works in the "Jesus-as-Nazi" example. A modern neo-Nazi is convinced, for whatever reasons, that Aryans are the master race and that Jews and other racial groups

are inferior and suitable only for enslavement or extermination. They are very certain that this is true. But they have also been raised to believe that the Bible contains the truth, and that Jesus preached the truth. Hence, they reason, Jesus *must have* been an advocate of white supremacy and vicious anti-Semitism. Jesus was all-knowing, so goes their logic, so there is simply no way that he would not have known the "truth" about the races. Therefore, whatever interpretive moves one needs to make in order to force Jesus into the mold of Nazi orthodoxy are justified. Taking quotes out of context, twisting the meaning of words, ignoring countervailing evidence or treating it as a later corruption of Jesus' actual teaching—all of these practices come to seem legitimate because they are deployed in the pursuit of a "higher truth" they believe they already know.

The Critical Interpretation of the Bible

The interpretive moves just mentioned are all part of what biblical scholars would call the "uncritical" use of scripture. Some principles of the critical use of the Bible, then, can be deduced by deriving their opposites. Hence, the critical study of the Bible includes (at least) the ideas that one should interpret passages in context, base one's conclusions on evidence, and avoid "special rules" for interpreting the Bible.

Context Is Crucial

Critical interpretations of the Bible will take into account both the literary and historical context of the verse, passage, and book under examination. *Literary context* refers to a consideration of both

1. An example of this I often cite is the result of a poll showing that a large majority of Americans believe that the saying "The Lord helps those that help themselves" comes from the Bible. It does not. The aphorism is attributed to Benjamin Franklin.

the genre of the text in question and of a verse or passage's place in the larger work of which it is a part. Bible verses and passages should not be taken out of context. To say that I claim in the pages above that "Jesus was a Nazi" would be an example of taking a quote badly out of context. Those four words did appear in a sentence, but in no sense did I indicate that I support this view; in fact, I made it very clear that I think the "Jesus-as-Nazi" theory has no merit whatsoever.

An example of taking something out of *historical context* might be claiming that Jesus was a Democrat (or a Republican). There were no Democrats or Republicans at the time of Jesus, and even the idea of a political spectrum running from liberal to conservative has little applicability in the time of Jesus. Jesus did express some views

that have political implications, but to understand his political stance one would need to consider the political groups and ideologies *that were available at the time and place* of Jesus' ministry.

Evidence-Based Conclusions

Critical interpretations of the Bible base their conclusions on the weight of evidence, rather than on personal preference, conformity with tradition, or the guidance of religious authorities. In deciding a question such as Jesus' stance on homosexuality, for example, it should not matter whether the reader personally supports acceptance of homosexuality or opposes it, nor whether the interpreter's church leaders have voiced opposition or support for the LGBTQ

Proof texting

Resolving not to take biblical verses and passages out of context would cause a large amount of contemporary biblical interpretation to disappear. When one reads popular books on the Bible or collections of sermons from famous preachers, so often it appears to be the case that a supposed expert on the Bible will take a pre-determined idea or conclusion, and then go looking for a biblical passage that will "prove" that the Bible supports it. The search for a verse or text that proves the author's point is supported by, or derived from, scripture gives this practice its name: proof texting. Within critical biblical studies, proof texting has a bad name, because (1) it often takes the quotes it uses out of context and hence distorts their meaning, and (2) it does not consider the *entirety* of what a particular biblical book says on a topic, or what the Bible as a whole has to say. If I wanted to argue that the Bible supports binge drinking, I might cite the fact that Jesus changes somewhere in the neighborhood of

150 gallons of water into wine at the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12). That is a great deal of wine, and one could imagine its consumption leading to a festival of drunkenness. But in truth this fact means little unless one assumes that this large quantity of alcohol will be consumed by a small number of people over a short period of time. This is almost certainly not a safe assumption with respect to first-century Jewish wedding feasts, which were large affairs that often lasted several days. Moreover, one would need to balance whatever conclusion one might draw about Jesus' position on alcohol consumption from this one passage in the Gospel of John with any other statements Jesus might have made about drunkenness elsewhere in John and in other books of the New Testament (for example Luke 12:45 and 21:34). This example illustrates the problem with proof texting: the Bible can be made to say virtually anything if one is willing to take its words and statements out of context.

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community. The only thing that matters is identifying those passages from the Gospels that are relevant to the topic, interpreting those passages in context, reading them as fairly and accurately as possible, and then weighing the evidence on each side. Interpreters are then free, of course, to disagree with this teaching of the Bible, or of one of its authors, but at least this will be an honest disagreement rather than a manufactured consensus.

No “Special Rules” for Interpreting the Bible

Critical interpretations of the Bible use the exact same methods to determine the meaning of biblical texts that would be used to determine the meaning of any other work of literature. Critical interpretations draw historical conclusions about events referenced in the Bible by using the exact same methods one would apply in evaluating any other account of a historical event.

Uncritical biblical interpretation frequently insists that “special rules” must be used when it comes to the Bible, that its authors must be accorded special deference and authority, or that words and phrases that would almost certainly mean one thing in any other context mean something else when they are found in the Bible. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:5, Paul mentions that the other apostles frequently bring their wives along with them when they travel. The Catholic Church, however, has often maintained that the apostles were unmarried and celibate, and that their celibacy is part of the reason that ordained priests should not be married. Many Catholic authorities have insisted that the Greek word *gynaika* that Paul uses here for the apostles’ companions, a word that usually refers to “wives,” in this context refers instead to “female servants.”

Non-Catholic biblical scholars, as well as Catholics who engage in critical biblical scholarship, would regard this as an example of special pleading. The word *gynaika* almost certainly refers to wives when Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 9:5. From the standpoint of critical biblical scholarship, the fact that this creates a bit of a problem for the Catholic policy on priestly celibacy is entirely beside the point.²

The rigorous use of the various critical methods of biblical interpretation is one way to limit the tendency to see in the Bible what we want to see there, rather than what the text actually says. However, it must be acknowledged that, since the advent of postmodernism, there has been a growing skepticism about whether anyone’s interpretation of the Bible or any other text can be truly objective, neutral, or unbiased. Many would argue that bias is inevitable, and that people will invariably be influenced either consciously or unconsciously by their presuppositions. Rather than claiming an objectivity that is based on a lie, would it not be better, they argue, to acknowledge one’s biases and admit that the interpretations of any individual are controlled by gender, class, sexual orientation, race, and other factors? All interpretations are relative to the perspective of the reader, and hence no single interpretation is any better than another.

This debate is similar to the dispute that has arisen in recent years involving television news. When Fox News Channel was created, its basic claim was that the other news outlets, although claiming to offer objective, fact-based journalism, were in fact all guilty of liberal bias. Fox, by contrast, would offer news and analysis that was genuinely “fair and balanced.” It would include the conservative point of view rather than marginalizing or excluding it. Fox’s critics from the beginning argued that instead of being fair and

2. Of course, the value of a celibate priesthood does not stand or fall with the interpretation of this one verse. Many Catholic theologians have made a strong case for priestly celibacy while acknowledging that Jesus’ apostles were probably married.

balanced, the network was offering an explicitly right-wing perspective on the news and utilizing more bias than any of the so-called “liberal” news organizations it claimed to be counterbalancing. To combat the boost given to conservatives by Fox News, a number of unabashedly liberal news outlets emerged, both online and over the air.

One of the results of the intense polarization of the news business in the Fox News era is that we seem at times to be living in a “post-truth” society. Once it was commonly thought that both sides on any particular issue would have to agree on the facts, given their objective character, and they would disagree only about the interpretation of the facts. Now the facts themselves are in dispute. Whether the climate is changing, whether vaccines prevent or cause childhood illness, whether tax cuts produce surges in economic growth, whether the earth is round or flat, whether twenty children were shot and killed at Sandy Hook elementary school in 2012, are items about which there would once have been a wide consensus, because they are all questions of fact, not of opinion. Now it seems as if there are no subjects on which there are an agreed-upon set of facts.

This state of affairs is both lamentable and unnecessary. The truth is that facts are as stubborn as they have always been, despite the delusions of partisans and conspiracy-theorists on both sides. It is true that there is no such thing as a purely objective, unbiased interpretation of scripture, but that does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid, or that no interpretation is any better than another. There might not be a single, correct interpretation of a controversial biblical text, but it does not follow from this that there are no objective standards by which one might evaluate the relative merit of divergent interpretations. The great Hebrew Bible scholar Jon Levinson was once asked about the inevitability of biased interpretation and the corresponding need to admit that objective reading

was a fiction. Levinson responded with an analogy: one might not be able to achieve perfect antisepsis (a germ-free environment) in the operating room, but that did not mean that he would advocate performing surgery in a sewer. His point was that all interpretations are biased, but some are more biased than others. One might not be able to avoid the presence of all germs in the operating room, but it is both possible and preferable to have as few as possible. The chaos of a “post-truth” society is not the inevitable outcome of the acknowledgement of the biased character of all interpretation. It is worth the effort to distinguish between those interpretations that are supported by more evidence and those that lack such backing. Reasonable application of the critical method should help us make this distinction.

A Nod to Predecessors

I began this introduction by reflecting on the question of how this book is different from other introductions to the New Testament, and in answering it I placed heavy emphasis on the word “academic” and distinguished between the study of the Bible in a university setting as opposed to a non-academic setting. Of course, this is hardly the first book written to accompany the study of the New Testament in an academic context.

I have used several very good introductions to the New Testament in my three decades as a teacher. I started with Norman Perrin’s classic *The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History* (1974), a project that was taken over very capably by Dennis Duling after Perrin’s death in 1976 and revised into several new editions. I also briefly used Stephen Harris’s fine textbook, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction*. But since its first appearance in 2003, I have used Bart Ehrman’s immensely popular *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. Now in

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its sixth edition, this textbook has dominated the market in recent years.

This book resembles Ehrman's in several ways. In two instances—when introducing the formation of the New Testament canon and the characteristics of pagan religions—I use an organizational schema drawn from Ehrman. Other similarities between my work and Ehrman's are coincidental. For example, Ehrman's work is admirably free of sectarian or denominational bias, and I strive for this as well. Also, from my first years of teaching the New Testament, I was a proponent of introducing the various methods of biblical criticism inductively. So was Ehrman, which is one of the reasons I chose his textbook for my class; it fit very well with what I was already doing. Ehrman does not teach the methods of biblical criticism in the abstract but introduces them in connection to their practical application. He introduces each method in connection with a single New Testament text: literary criticism with Mark, redaction criticism with Matthew, etc. I follow the same strategy in this book.

Although there are many similarities, there are differences as well. Ehrman's book is quite long. It is too long—or so it seemed to me—to work very well in a one-semester introduction to the New Testament. Ehrman also spends a fair amount of time interpreting second- and third-century Christian literature and showing how the trajectory of New Testament texts continued into the post-apostolic period of early Christianity. This is interesting and valuable information, but I found that I never had the time to include it in my sections of Introduction to the New Testament. I do see the value in going past the New Testament era to examine noncanonical

gospels, but I confine that examination to a single chapter and otherwise stick almost exclusively to the Christian literature produced in the first century CE.

Lastly, my own teaching is characterized by frequent digressions from the strictly historical examination of the meaning of the New Testament into what I call the “so what?” question. Perhaps this is because I teach exclusively at the undergraduate level and my students are taking the course to fulfill a general requirement—in other words, they are there because they *have to* be there, not always because they *want to* be there—but I feel compelled to explain how and why the debates over the meaning of various biblical texts is relevant to modern people. Very often this relevance is confined to people of faith, and thus questions of theology are among the most frequently addressed in these digressions. But I am also at pains to point out that even people with no particular faith commitment can profit from the study of the New Testament and that there are times when such people will be affected by the outcomes of debates over the meaning of the New Testament whether they like it or not. Hence I have sprinkled every chapter with sidebars, many of which address the “so what?” question, and I have also dedicated an entire final chapter to exploring the role of the New Testament in the modern world. These kinds of discussions are almost invariably more controversial than conversations that restrict themselves to the meaning and role of the New Testament in the distant past. But people who wish to avoid controversy are well-advised not to talk about the Bible. Passionate disagreement comes with the territory.

The Formation of the New Testament

Neither the New Testament nor early Christianity dropped from the sky fully formed. Scholars who seek to understand early Christianity in an academic context look at its history and literature as a *process* rather than as a *product*. They also examine the variety of expressions of early Christianity rather than imagining early Christianity as a single, monolithic entity. Christianity eventually developed in such a way that certain views became unacceptable and the religion generally united under a single set of beliefs. But this was not always the case.

Early Christianity was a highly diverse phenomenon. There were a large number of groups calling themselves Christian that had some radically different views on issues that were far from trivial, such as the number of gods that existed and the humanity and divinity of Christ. Many modern Christians might be more comfortable if the truths of early Christianity were immediately and manifestly obvious to all the faithful, such that there were no significant disagreements among them that might raise later doubts about the facts of the matter. However, that which is comforting is not always that which is true.

Evidence of the diversity of early Christianity can be found within the New Testament itself. Leaders of a particular branch of the

early Christian church—the **proto-orthodox**¹ branch—chose the books of the New Testament at least in part because they reflected the distinctive views of that group and refuted the views of their Christian rivals, but even these texts exhibit a range of opinion. The Gospel of Mark, for example, presents a very human Jesus, while the Gospel of John places much more emphasis on his divinity. Although the books of the New Testament reflect a broad consensus and came to represent the views of a single group, the authors of the books of the New Testament do not always agree with each other. Indeed, scholarly study of the New Testament involves identifying the points of agreement and disagreement, seeing how Christianity turned one way and then another, what different possibilities were explored, which options were embraced or rejected, and how things could have turned out quite differently.

Scholars know even more about the diversity of early Christianity from the books that did not make it into the New Testament. Numerous ancient gospels were written besides the four found in the New Testament. Many early histories in addition to the New Testament's Acts of the Apostles purport to recount the deeds and teachings of Jesus' disciples. Far more letters were

1. The terminology as well as the classification scheme for the major groups of early Christianity are taken from chapter 1 of Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

The Books of the New Testament

The books of the New Testament fall into four categories:

1. Gospels, which are quasi-biographical accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus
2. Acts, comprising stories about the words and deeds of a special class of Jesus' followers, namely the apostles who spread the message of Christ after his death
3. Letters (or "epistles"), which purport to be the direct communications of Jesus' apostles to churches or particular groups of Christians
4. Apocalypses, books written by seers or visionaries to whom the secrets about the end of the world have been revealed

supposedly written by apostles than those found in the New Testament. Moreover, the book of Revelation is one of a number of apocalypses written by early Christians.

Why do Christians know the Gospel of Matthew and Gospel of Luke but not the *Gospel of Peter* and *Gospel of Thomas*? The short answer is that Matthew and Luke are included in the Bible, while *Peter* and *Thomas* are not. But this begs the question: How did it come to be that some books were included in the New Testament while others were not? The answer to this deeper question lies in the history of the formation of the canon.

A **canon** is a collection of books regarded as authoritative by a given religious community. Usually these books are regarded as inspired by the gods or revealed from above. In some way they are thought to have some kind of divine origin that guarantees their reliability. Most religions practiced by literate people have a set of sacred texts that are authoritative to various

degrees. Hindus venerate the books of the Vedas, Buddhists have their sutras, and Muslims revere the Qur'an. The Christian canon is known simply as the Bible (or the Holy Bible). It consists of two major divisions: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word **testament** (Latin, *testamentum*) comes from the Latin translation of the Bible, where it means "covenant"; it reflects the Christian view that God originally made a covenant with the Jewish people that entailed practicing circumcision and following the Law of Moses, and that God made a new covenant with those who believe in Jesus Christ.

The existence of the Old Testament, then, reflects the fact that Christianity has a mother religion. Christianity emerged from ancient Judaism, first as a sect of the older religion and then as a distinct religion separate from its progenitor. Ancient Judaism already had a canon, a collection of sacred texts, now commonly known as the Hebrew Bible. While the makeup of that canon was still in flux at the time of Jesus, certain books—such as the five books of the **Torah** (Hebrew, "Law") or **Pentateuch** (Greek, "five scrolls")—were canonical for all Jews. One of the decisions, then, that early Christian leaders faced was whether to keep or discard the Jewish scriptures when forming their own canon. Many advocated dispensing with these books, believing that the new religion represented a basic rupture from the old. The proto-orthodox Christians, however, who emerged as the dominant group, advocated retaining the Jewish scriptures. In their estimation, the Jewish scriptures included not just the Torah but also the **Nevi'im** ("Prophets," including such historical books as Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and books by or about ancient Israelite prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah) and the **Ketuvim** ("Writings," including such books of wisdom as the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes). With the triumph of proto-orthodox Christians over their rivals, this decision was cemented in place for all modern forms of Christianity. Every

Biblical Inspiration

Believers and nonbelievers take different approaches to any text for which inspired status is claimed. Such claims are, by their very nature, impossible to prove.

Even among believers, however, “**inspiration**” can be taken to mean different things. Some claim that the very words of a sacred text are inspired by God. This is known as “verbal inspiration,” and it is characteristic of most (but not all) evangelical denominations of Christianity, especially those that embrace the “fundamentalist” label. This view holds that while human authors played a role, the real author of the Bible is God. As a result, they maintain that the Bible is inerrant, containing no mistakes whatsoever, and generally argue that the Bible should be interpreted literally.

The Southern Baptist Convention is an example of a denomination that is not reluctant to state its belief in biblical inerrancy: “The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy.”²

Many people find it difficult to hold such a view because of the many seeming contradictions within and between the books of the Bible, apparent mistakes by biblical writers on matters of fact, and the difficulty of reconciling the findings of modern science with a literal reading of some parts of scripture. In view of these difficulties, more moderate and progressive Christian denominations have developed a more nuanced notion of inspiration. The Catholic Church and the mainline Protestant denominations do not insist that every



Public domain

Caravaggio’s “Inspiration of Saint Matthew” (1602) illustrates the concept of verbal inspiration; Saint Matthew, writing his Gospel, takes dictation from an angel.

statement in the Bible is literally true, nor do they maintain that God directly authored the texts. Instead, they assert that God inspired the biblical authors in a more general way, such that there is a divine assurance that the Bible as a whole includes those truths essential for human salvation. They also believe the human authors of the Bible were given the freedom to express these truths in genres as

continued

2. “Basic Beliefs,” Southern Baptist Convention, www.sbc.net/aboutus/basicbeliefs.asp.

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Biblical Inspiration *continued*

they saw fit (including myth as well as history), and in ways that were appropriate for their time and culture.³ These denominations allow for the possibility of errors, but deny that the scriptures as a whole could ever lead a person

astray on essential matters of salvation. They also insist that scripture must be interpreted according to its genre and historical context, and that not every biblical statement represents a timeless and literal truth.

denomination of Christianity today has a canon that includes the Old Testament.

When it came to the formation of the New Testament, early Christians engaged in a sometimes-bitter debate over which books were reliable and trustworthy. Indeed, the canon of the New Testament formed as a result of a competition among rival early Christian groups.⁴ Each group sought to maximize its influence and garner the largest number of supporters. One way to argue that a group's beliefs and practices were superior to those of its rivals was to assert that the sacred texts of that group were older, better, and more reliable.

Early Christian Groups and Their Sacred Texts

Christianity began as a small religious movement founded by an itinerant preacher known as Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in the beginning of the first century CE. Jesus left no writings, but his followers eventually began writing down sayings and stories by and about Jesus that had circulated orally for decades. The problem with these

written records—the canonical and noncanonical gospels—is that, taken together, they provide an incomplete, confusing, and wildly contradictory account of the life and teachings of Jesus. The earliest surviving gospel—the canonical Gospel of Mark—was written some forty years after the death of Jesus. Moreover, Christians continued to write gospels for centuries thereafter. Each of these gospels implicitly claims to contain the truth about Jesus Christ, and carries the corresponding but unstated claim that any gospel speaking to the contrary about Jesus is perpetrating falsehood. Given the amount of contradiction, there is no chance all these accounts can be 100 percent accurate. Some are almost certainly the inventions of later generations of Christians who developed their own views about Jesus and then created stories that justified and confirmed those views. For example, as the rivalry between Christianity and Judaism became more bitter, some Christian groups came to believe that Jesus was completely opposed to Judaism, and wrote gospels⁵ in which the Jewish authorities' hatred of Jesus and responsibility for his death were seriously exaggerated, and in which Jesus' criticisms of Judaism are especially pointed and damning.

3. Catholics can consult official church documents such as the papal encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* (1943), the Vatican II document *Dei verbum* (1965), and the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1994) for further information. The Protestant world is too diverse to enable a listing of various mainline denominations' statements on biblical inspiration, but curious students can usually find such statements on each denomination's web site.

4. This is not to say that if early Christianity had been a completely unified phenomenon, a canon would not have emerged. However, the reality was that several rival groups claimed to be the true inheritors of the tradition of Jesus and used a variety of sacred books to buttress their claims. This fact created a certain urgency and forced groups to define themselves, at least in part, in comparison to their opponents.

5. An example of such a gospel, discussed in chapter 2, is the noncanonical *Gospel of Peter*.

Year Markings

At the time of Jesus, there was no widespread system for determining what year it was. In the absence of such a system, authors used well-known events or figures to establish a relative time frame. Roman writers often used the identity of the consuls of Rome or the regnal year of an emperor to establish the timing of an event.

To apply an absolute number to a given year, one needs a starting point. The idea of dating events using the birth of Jesus as the linchpin was conceived by a Christian monk named Dionysius Exiguus in the sixth century and became popular in Christian Europe within a few centuries. The supposed date of the birth of Jesus was assigned the designation of AD 1 (Latin, *anno Domini*, “year of the Lord”), while the previous year became known as 1 BC (based on the English phrase “before Christ”).

This system is widely used in the Christian West but is not universal. Jews have a

dating system that starts with the supposed year of creation, and by their reckoning most of the year AD 2000 was the year AM 5761 (Latin, *anno mundi*, “year of the world”). The Muslim calendar begins with the *hijra* (“flight”) of Muhammad and his followers to escape persecution in Mecca and the establishment of the first Muslim community in Medina, which made AD 2000 the year 1421 AH (Latin, *anno hegirae*).

Most biblical scholars continue to use the Christian practice of dating events from the birth of Christ, although the designations of AD and BC have been largely replaced by **CE** (the Common Era) and **BCE** (before the Common Era). Some see this as a nod to political correctness, but for most it is an easy enough adjustment to make to avoid giving the impression that the whole world revolves around Christianity.

It is impossible to establish the “truth” of these matters to everyone’s satisfaction. This does not mean, however, that it is impossible to adjudicate any of the competing claims about Jesus. Was he really anti-Jewish, or was he a Jewish reformer? Was he a human prophet or an all-powerful divine visitor? Arguments could be mounted to assert that some accounts are more probable than others, and it is precisely this claim that each of the rival groups of Christianity made for their sacred texts vis-à-vis those of their competitors.

Marcionite Christians

The first real canon was apparently created by a prominent Christian leader of the mid-second century, **Marcion** of Synope.⁶ Marcion believed

that the apostle Paul was the one true follower of Christ, the one who correctly and accurately transmitted the teachings and significance of Jesus. In particular, Marcion attached tremendous importance to Paul’s letters, and argued that Christianity needed to change course and return to Paul’s vision. Paul, at least as Marcion interpreted him, taught that salvation cannot be found in the observance of the Law of Moses and is granted only to those who have faith in Christ. Marcion appears to have taken this as a blanket condemnation of the Old Testament; he came to believe that the God he saw represented there—demanding, vengeful, impossibly strict—was irreconcilable with the merciful, compassionate, forgiving God spoken of by Paul. Marcion concluded that there were two different Gods,

6. Three of the most prominent New Testament scholars of the canon—Metzger, Grant, and Ehrman—all grant Marcion the honor of having been first.

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and that the God of Christianity was infinitely preferable to the creator-god of the Old Testament (whom he called the “Demiurge”). Marcion began to preach that Christians should utterly reject Judaism, its scriptures, and all of its ways.⁷

In effect, Marcion rested his claims on a canon of scripture. His canon consisted of ten letters of Paul, which he grouped under the heading “Apostle,” and one (unattributed) written account of the life and teachings of Jesus, which he termed “Gospel.” While Marcion enjoyed a brief popularity, his movement was eventually consigned to the dustbin of history. During his lifetime he was declared a heretic by the proto-orthodox group to which he had once belonged (as a bishop, no less), and his writings were suppressed.

While there are no extant copies of Marcion’s writings or of his version of the gospel and epistles he held sacred, scholars do know something of their contents from books written by his opponents. Marcion’s gospel, for example, reflected his view that Jesus was not really human but was strictly a divine spirit. The idea that Jesus merely “appeared” to be human is known as **Docetism** (from the Greek word *dokeō*, “to appear”). This gospel contained, then, no account of the birth of Jesus—birth to a human mother apparently being impossible for a being who is fully divine. In addition, Marcion’s version of Paul’s letters emphasized the strict discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity.

The gospel used by Marcion is essentially the one that would eventually be known as the Gospel of Luke, although the canonical version of this gospel clearly differs in some important respects from Marcion’s gospel. Which version is

the more authentic? Did Marcion take the Gospel of Luke and edit out parts he did not like (such as the virgin birth)? This is what his leading orthodox opponent, the late-second-century bishop Tertullian, claimed. Or did proto-orthodox Christians take Marcion’s gospel, add some non-Marcionite elements, and then rechristen it as the Gospel of Luke? The original of the gospel (known as the **autograph**) or a very early copy could decide this question, but no such manuscripts survive, which leaves this as something of a “he said–she said” issue. The same debate rages over the letters of Paul in Marcion’s canon. All ten of these letters are also in the proto-orthodox canon, but the canonical versions are not nearly as anti-Jewish as the Marcionite versions.⁸

What these discrepancies tell us is that rival groups not only selected different sacred texts to justify their beliefs but also that when two groups chose the same book, it was not uncommon for one or both groups to edit the book to better reflect their views. Attempting to determine the original version of these books is the aim of much scholarly work (see especially chapter 7).

Jewish-Christian Adoptionists

At the other end of the spectrum from the anti-Jewish and docetic Marcionites was a pro-Jewish group of Christians who saw Jesus as just a man—a great man, to be sure, but still a man and not a god. These **Jewish-Christian adoptionists** looked to Peter and James, “the brother of the Lord,” rather than Paul as their apostolic ancestors. Apparently the strictness of the monotheism they inherited from Judaism led them to deny the divinity of Christ. If there

7. This summary of Marcion’s thought is based mostly on Tertullian’s five-volume *Adversus Marcionem* (“Against Marcion”). Given that Tertullian hated everything about Marcionite Christianity, scholars have had to sift through his report of Marcionite beliefs for signs that Tertullian exaggerated or caricatured them. See Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 104–9, for a fuller account of Marcionite Christianity and its sacred texts.

8. See Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 2.643–46, for examples of “pro-Jewish” passages allegedly purged by Marcion.



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The Gospels declare that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and a heavenly voice declared him to be God's "Son." Adoptionist Christians sometimes cited this event as the point at which God adopted Jesus.

is only one God—all-powerful, eternal, and indivisible—then it would not make sense to say that Jesus was a god. In their view, if there is God the father (Yahweh) and God the son (Jesus), then there would be two gods. They did not see any way around this dilemma, other than to say that Jesus was not God but was a creature, that is, a being created by God.

In what sense, then, could this group be termed *Christian*? Like other groups of Christians, they claimed salvation was found in Jesus.

Jesus may have been a creature, but he was the best and most perfect of God's creatures. His righteousness, in their view, led God to choose him above all other creatures to be the Messiah. When God elected Jesus as the Messiah, he adopted Jesus as his son. This was a ceremonial rather than literal description, but it had power nonetheless. Because Jesus had been chosen, he was endowed with special powers (like the ability to perform miracles) and his life and death took on a special significance. Because he was God's adopted son, Jesus' death on the cross was not like an ordinary human death but functioned as a sacrifice that brought about the forgiveness of sin.⁹

Jewish-Christian adoptionists thought the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross meant there was no longer any need to perform animal sacrifices like those Jews had performed for centuries at the Temple in Jerusalem. But the other requirements of Judaism remained: subjecting males to circumcision, observing the commandments found in the Law of Moses, and observing ritual purity (including "keeping kosher," the Jewish system of dietary restrictions).

Unlike the Marcionites, who rejected the Old Testament and revered Paul as the one true apostle, Jewish-Christian adoptionists continued to think of the Jewish scriptures as their own and had no regard for the letters of Paul, whom they regarded as a traitor to Judaism. They kept the Law, Prophets, and Writings and simply supplemented them with some gospels that reflected their distinctive point of view. Their eventual designation as heretics led to the suppression of their sacred texts, and so there are no surviving copies of their gospels. Descriptions¹⁰ of them written by their opponents, however, reveal that adoptionists used at least three gospels: the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, the *Gospel of the Nazareans*,

9. This summary of Jewish-Christian adoptionist thought is based in part on Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 99–103.

10. References to the Jewish-Christian gospels are found in the writings of Clement, Origen, Jerome, and Cyril of Alexandria.

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and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. One of these (*Nazareans*) is thought to have been very similar to the canonical Gospel of Matthew, but without Matthew's infancy narrative. These gospels did not include the story of Jesus' birth to a virgin named Mary, because Jewish-Christians believed Jesus had two human parents. Adoptionists also saw Jesus' baptism as the moment at which God chose Jesus and "begat" him as his son. The wording of the Gospel of Mark with respect to Jesus' baptism seems to have resonated with Jewish-Christian adoptionists: "You are my son, my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; author's translation). Their view would have been that God was not acknowledging a preexisting situation, but that God was *making* Jesus his son at that very moment. He was also explaining why he had chosen Jesus for the role: because he was "well pleased" with him.

Gnostic Christians

The sacred texts of the Marcionites and the Jewish-Christians are lost to us, but history has been kinder to another group that was eventually condemned as heretical and eclipsed by proto-orthodox Christianity: the **Gnostics**. Some copies of Gnostic gospels were known to scholars prior to the twentieth century, but the study of Gnostic Christianity received a huge boost with an incredible archeological find in 1945. Two brothers were supposedly digging for fertilizer—others say they were grave robbing—outside of a town named Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt when they found an earthenware vessel containing thirteen ancient books written on papyrus. They brought the codex-form¹¹

manuscripts home and began to sell them individually to antiquities dealers in Cairo, although their mother is alleged to have burned some of the priceless artifacts as well. The texts turned out to be a trove of Gnostic Christian literature written in the third and fourth centuries and buried shortly thereafter, probably for safekeeping during a persecution. Included were the only complete copy of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the only partial copy of the *Gospel of Philip*, among other treasures. Eventually, the significance of the find was recognized, and it became known as the **Nag Hammadi library**.¹²

While the library and other evidence uncovered about Gnosticism before and after 1945 reveals this was the most internally diverse group of ancient Christians, there are some common elements to Gnostic Christianity. One of the Nag Hammadi texts, the *Apocryphon* (Greek, "secret book") of *John*, contains a reasonably clear statement of the foundational myth of Gnosticism.

According to this version of the Gnostic myth, in the beginning there was only one being: a purely spiritual, all-powerful, perfect, and eternal god known as the **Monad**. The Monad eventually spawned a second generation of divine beings called the **Aeons**, and one of the Aeons in turn produced the first of a third generation of beings—the **Archons**. This third generation is an inferior class of demonic beings and comes to operate independently of the higher gods. Their leader, an arrogant god called Yaltabaoth (or Ialdabaoth) fashions a world for them to inhabit, a world "below" the heavenly realm occupied by the Monad and the Aeons. This is the physical world as we know it, an evil world created by a malevolent being out of inferior materials,

11. A codex has a form like that of today's books, with pages or leaves bound on one side so that pages can be flipped or turned. This form supplanted the older kind of manuscript, the scroll, which had no binding and needed to be turned in order to advance or go back.

12. The story of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices is recounted in James M. Robinson's "The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices," *Biblical Archaeologist* 42, no. 4, "The Nag Hammadi Library and Its Archeological Context" (Autumn 1979): 206–24. Some elements of this story have since been disputed.

physical elements that by their nature are corruptible and not eternal.

Yaltabaoth is also responsible for the creation of human beings, but these creatures are unique because they contain a “spark” of light or spirit that was captured by the Archons. This causes the Archons to become jealous of humans, and they seek to keep them trapped below and to prevent them from ascending to the heavenly world of spirit from which their “sparks” originated. Their method for doing so includes keeping humans ignorant of their true nature and luring them into sins of the flesh that prevent them from awakening to their spiritual nature. Foremost among the sins of the flesh is sex.

As a result, following their creation, human beings become mired in the world of the flesh, a world of sin, evil, and suffering. This is caused by their ignorance of their true (divine) nature and potential. The solution to this is for the Monad to send someone from the heavenly realm, a **revealer**, who can provide ignorant humans with the knowledge (Greek, *gnōsis*) they need to escape the shackles of earthly misery and realize their divine potential. According to Gnostic Christians, Jesus is this revealer.

Jesus’ heavenly origin meant that, for Gnostics just as much as for Marcionites, Jesus was strictly divine and not at all human. Some Gnostics embraced the previously mentioned notion of Docetism, whereby Jesus merely pretended to be human. According to this theory, despite Jesus’ fleshly appearance, he was purely spirit. And because he did not have a human body, he could not suffer or die. Other Gnostics embraced an alternate theory in which there was a human being named Jesus of Nazareth whose body was temporarily occupied (or “possessed”) by a divine being called the Logos. The Logos then used Jesus as a human mouthpiece to communicate

the wisdom and knowledge essential for salvation. This divine being is thought to have entered Jesus’ body at the time of his baptism and to have departed it just prior to his death on the cross. A Gnostic version of Jesus’ famous cry on the cross reads, “My power, my power! Why have you abandoned me?” (*Gospel of Peter* 5.19).¹³

Regardless of which explanation was embraced, it is clear Gnostics did not believe Jesus saved humanity by suffering and dying on the cross. His salvific activity consisted of providing knowledge, and so in Gnostic gospels the emphasis is not on Jesus as miracle worker or martyr, but Jesus as teacher.

The denial of Jesus’ humanity and of his sacrificial death, combined with the unabashed polytheism of Gnostics, led to their being condemned as heretics by the proto-orthodox Christians. Their works were suppressed just as were those of Marcion and the Jewish-Christian adoptionists, but their popularity and longevity—along with some good fortune—meant their books have not completely disappeared. In fact, most of the non-canonical gospels that survive are Gnostic gospels, and they provide the best illustration of just how different the Christian canon would have been if some other group had won the battle for dominance in early Christianity.

Proto-Orthodox Christians

The competition between rival groups of early Christians was won by a group that would eventually be known as the “holy catholic and apostolic church.” However, it was not known as such in its earliest days, and the titles that it gave itself (such as *catholic*, which means “universal,” and *apostolic*, which implies that this is the only version of Christianity that can properly trace its ancestry back to Jesus’ apostles) were

13. As quoted in Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 172.

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The Lefke Gate, shown here, was part of the ancient city wall of Nicaea, cite of the church council in 325. The Nicene Creed, which resulted from this council, would become the standard of faith for most Christians.

either not yet true or a matter of considerable dispute. Hence scholars refer to the members of this group as “proto-orthodox” Christians. This term indicates this was the version of Christianity that eventually achieved dominance over all other forms, a dominance reflected in the fact that it was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century. The term *orthodoxy* literally means “true (or straight) opinion/belief,” and its opposite is *heresy*, which means “opinion, system of thought” and came to be synonymous with “false teaching.” Members of rival Christian churches would not have ceded the title “orthodox” to this group, nor would those rival groups have accepted the pejorative “heretic” for themselves. History is written by the winners, as the cliché goes, which is why the proto-orthodox group was able to claim the “orthodox” label for themselves and to brand their opponents as “heretics.”

The beliefs of the dominant group are well-known to members of Christian denominations today, because most modern forms of Christianity derive from the “orthodox” Christianity that was summed up in the Nicene

Creed of 325 CE (revised and expanded at Constantinople in 381 CE), a creed still recited in many Christian churches. The polytheism of Gnosticism and the bitheism (belief in two gods) of Marcion are rejected in the creed’s opening statement, “We believe in one God.” The creed further rejects the Gnostic and Marcionite belief that the physical world is an evil place created by an evil god, while heaven is a good place inhabited by a good god (or gods). This is evident in the second half of the creed’s first line: “We believe in one God . . . maker of heaven and earth.”

The section on Jesus shows that the proto-orthodox did not share the Jewish-Christian adoptionists’ denial of Christ’s divinity: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.” However, neither did they accept the Gnostic and Marcionite view that Jesus was strictly divine and did not share our human nature. Against the docetic view of Gnostics and Marcionites, that Jesus was a pure spirit who had merely pretended to be human and who could not suffer or die, the creed states that Jesus “became man,” “suffered,” and “died.”

The proto-orthodox group also rejected the extreme anti-Jewishness of Marcion and the corresponding dismissal of the Old Testament. This is clear from the statement that Jesus rose again “in accordance with the scriptures” and the reference to the Holy Spirit as having “spoken through the prophets.”

The proto-orthodox canon included the Old Testament and the collection of Christian writings now known as the New Testament. The

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under
Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again

in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of
the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the
living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,
the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and
the Son.¹⁴
With the Father and the Son he is
worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and
apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the
forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.¹⁵

books chosen for the New Testament reflect the views of the proto-orthodox group. Nonetheless, the views found in each canonical text do not all agree perfectly with those of fourth-century orthodoxy. Part of the reason for this is that the beliefs found in the fourth-century Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed represent the mature and considered views of proto-orthodox Christianity, whereas the first-century Gospels

and letters represent the earliest, most primitive attempts to articulate that faith. For example, orthodox theologians eventually formed the idea of the Trinity to explain how there could be one God in three persons. Yet the New Testament does not use the word *trinity* and contains only one or two passages in which one can detect even a hint of the concept (see Matt. 28:18–19 and 2 Cor. 13:13).¹⁶

14. The phrase “and the Son” is historically controversial, as it was not originally part of the creed, but was added to the form of the creed used in Western churches in the eleventh century.

15. The preceding is the 1975 English translation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed produced by the ICET (International Consultation on English Texts), published in a booklet entitled *Prayers We Have in Common*, and adopted for use in the Catholic and Episcopal Churches for several decades thereafter.

16. This list does not include 1 John 5:7–8, because the Trinitarian version of these verses—which reads, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one” (KJV)—was not originally part of the text of 1 John, but was a later addition. Note that the NRSV translation of these verses—“There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree”—does not have the same Trinitarian overtones.

The Development of the Proto-Orthodox Canon

When the leaders of the proto-orthodox church identified texts to be included in the canon of the New Testament, they did not do so thinking that each and every book reflected and agreed with the final views of proto-orthodox doctrine, but rather that the books *taken as a whole* did so. For example, the definitive, orthodox position on the humanity and divinity of Christ was that Jesus is fully divine and fully human, like us in all things except for sin. No book in the New Testament exactly articulates this view, and some books emphasize Jesus' humanity (like Mark, and sometimes Luke and Acts) while others emphasize Jesus' divinity (like John and Paul). Taken together, however, these books emphasize both humanity and divinity, just as the proto-orthodox group believed.

Eventually, the rivals were vanquished and the proto-orthodox Christians prevailed. Nonetheless, the canon of the New Testament developed only gradually, and not without controversy.

Canon Lists

Some early proto-orthodox leaders listed books they regarded as canonical. In the case of other leaders, who did not make such lists, it is possible to infer which books they considered authoritative by reading their works and noting which books they quoted as scripture.

Several patterns are apparent in comparing these lists. First, from at least the late second century, there was consensus about many of the books that would eventually make it into the New Testament, including all of the most important works. Each canon list contains four and only four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Acts of the Apostles also appears on every list, as well as thirteen letters of Paul

and the first letter of John. Precisely when this consensus emerged will never be known, as there is little evidence from the late first to mid-second centuries, but once agreement formed it was solid. Nineteen books are included in every proto-orthodox canon that survives.

Some books made it into the canon only with difficulty. The two letters of Peter, the letters of James and Jude, and 2 and 3 John were regarded with some suspicion but ultimately accepted. The book that had the most difficulty making it into the New Testament was clearly the book of Revelation (also known as the Apocalypse of John). As late as the middle of the fourth century, prominent Christian leaders such as Eusebius and Cyril of Jerusalem were publishing canon lists that did not even mention Revelation.

Other books were considered for inclusion but ultimately rejected. Foremost among these are the *Shepherd* of Hermas, the *Acts of Paul (and Thecla)*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, *1 Clement*, and the *Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)*.

The canon that became the New Testament has twenty-seven books: four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one letters or "epistles" (*epistolē* is the Greek word for "letter"), and one apocalypse (the book of Revelation). The first known publication of the proposed canon dates to 367 CE, when Bishop Athanasius issued a festal letter containing the list. In the 390s, Jerome used Athanasius's list in his production of the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible. The Vulgate became the definitive edition of the Bible in Western Christianity for the next thousand years (even longer in the Catholic Church), effectively ending all debate over the canon.

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

The appearance or nonappearance of certain books on these lists provides important hints about

| Development of the Proto-Orthodox Canon | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|---|---|
| Muratorian Canon (late 2nd century) | Tertullian (early 3rd cent) | Origen (middle 3rd cent) | Eusebius (early 4th century) | Athanasius (367 CE) | Jerome (390 CE) |
| Matthew Mark Luke John Acts 13 letters of Paul Jude 1 & 2 John Wis. Solomon Revelation <i>Apocalypse of Peter</i> | Matthew Mark Luke John Acts 13 letters of Paul Jude 1 John Revelation 1 Peter | "Uncontested" Matthew Mark Luke John Acts 14 letters of Paul 1 John Revelation 1 Peter "Doubtful" or "Disputed" 2 & 3 John 2 Peter James Jude "False" <i>Gos. Egyptians</i> <i>Gos. Thomas</i> <i>Gos. Matthias</i> <i>Gos. Basilides</i> | "Accepted" Matthew Mark Luke John Acts 14 letters of Paul 1 John 1 Peter "Disputed" 2 & 3 John 2 Peter James Jude | Matthew Mark Luke John Acts 14 letters of Paul 3 letters of John 2 letters of Peter James Jude Revelation | Matthew Mark Luke John Acts 14 letters of Paul 3 letters of John 2 letters of Peter James Jude Revelation |
| 24 books total, including 2 that were later excluded, and excluding 5 that were later included | 22 books total, excluding 5 that were later included | 22 books are accepted; 5 books are disputed | 21 books are accepted; 5 books are disputed; 1 book that would ultimately be included (Revelation) is not even mentioned | 27 books total | 27 books total |

the criteria used to select books for the proto-orthodox canon, criteria that were also explicitly identified and debated by prominent leaders and

theologians. Foremost among these criteria were authorship, antiquity (the age of the text), and conformity with proto-orthodox doctrine.



The thirty-ninth festal letter of Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, written in 367, included the first canon list to contain all the New Testament books now accepted as canonical and no others.

Authorship

The letter to the Hebrews provides an interesting example of the first of these criteria. The letter is not included in the earliest proto-orthodox canons, but is eventually accepted. The debate shows the reason for its early exclusion was entirely related to the question of authorship, not to the contents of the book. Unlike the thirteen letters of Paul that are included on every list, the letter to the Hebrews does not explicitly claim to have been written by Paul. Paul's name is attached to the first line of all of the other letters, but Hebrews is anonymous. Some believed Paul was its author, while others claimed its contents and style are dissimilar to the other Pauline letters and therefore he could not have written it. Eventually the proto-orthodox would agree that the letter was written by Paul and

it was therefore included. Questions about authorship also dogged books such as 1 and 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, and Revelation, which explains why these books were sometimes excluded or identified as “disputed.”

Why was the question of authorship a vital criterion? As already noted, wildly contradictory things were being said about Jesus. To whom could one look for the authentic teachings of the master, and for accurate and reliable information about his life? One would assume that those who were closest to Jesus, and who had been specifically chosen and trained for the task of carrying on his ministry, would be the best sources. It was understood in virtually all varieties of early Christianity that Jesus had many followers, for whom the broad term *disciple* was used (Greek, *mathētēs*, “learner,” or “disciple”). Of these, only a few had been hand-selected for the task of missionary work and commissioned as Jesus’ official representatives after his death. These select few are known as *apostles* from the Greek *apostellō*, which means “to send out.”

Many gospels speak of Jesus having an inner circle of disciples known as “**the Twelve**,” who were also commissioned as apostles. Included on this list were Peter, James, John, Andrew, Thomas, Matthew (or Levi), and Philip, to whom many canonical and non-canonical books are attributed. It was generally acknowledged among all groups of early Christians that the Twelve were apostles, and that a book actually written by one of them should be included in the canon. However, these men were not the only apostles. One Gospel mentions a larger group of seventy (some manuscripts have seventy-two), who were apostles sent out by Jesus as missionaries (Luke 10:1–20). Four men known as Jesus’ brothers, including James and Jude, were also usually acknowledged as apostles. In addition, many others were sometimes regarded as apostles in the early church, itinerant preachers who claimed to have been

called by Christ. The foremost of such apostles is Paul. Paul never knew Jesus, and because of this some denied him the status of apostle. But Paul argued that Jesus had appeared to him in a post-resurrection revelation (or a series of revelations), naming him the apostle to the Gentiles and instructing him in the gospel. Paul clearly had some difficulty gaining acceptance as an apostle during his lifetime, and he was often compared negatively to the apostles in Jerusalem who had been personal associates of Jesus. But he was vigorous and persistent in his claim to apostleship, and most Christian groups eventually accepted that designation. In his letters, Paul also refers to many other colleagues as apostles.

The debate among proto-orthodox shapers of the canon¹⁷ reveals that they came to believe that for a book to be included in the canon, it must have been written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle (an “apostolic man”).¹⁸ It was believed that some of Jesus’ apostles were illiterate, therefore it was acceptable if one of their followers wrote down the stories and traditions that had come from the apostle, even if that follower had not personally been acquainted with Jesus or otherwise qualified as an apostle. For example, the Gospel of Mark is alleged to have been written by an associate of Peter, who came to know the apostle in Rome and wrote down Peter’s preaching.¹⁹ In this view, the real source of the Gospel is Peter and not Mark, so the Gospel was regarded as apostolic. Similarly, the Gospel of Luke (and its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles) is said to have been written by an associate and colleague of Paul.

In this way all twenty-seven books of the New Testament were thought to have been written by apostles or associates of apostles. The Gospel of Matthew, the two letters of Peter, and the Johannine literature (the Gospel of John, the three letters of John, and the book of Revelation) were written by apostles who were among the Twelve. The fourteen letters of Paul were written by an apostle commissioned in a post-resurrection revelation. The letters of James and Jude were written by brothers of Jesus, and the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles were written by associates of apostles. There are, however, several kinds of problems associated with proto-orthodox claims for the apostolic origin of these documents.

1. *Anonymity*. Some books were **anonymous**, originally written with no name attached to them. The Letter to the Hebrews was one such: the letter was eventually attributed to Paul, but this was basically a guess made decades or even centuries after it was written. Most modern scholars believe the attribution to Paul is mistaken because the writing style and theology of Hebrews is thoroughly un-Pauline.

The same problem of anonymity applies to all four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. All of these books originally circulated anonymously; none of the earliest quotations of these books name the authors. The earliest source claiming to identify the authors of some of the Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and John) is Papias (around 125–140 CE). However, the relevant section of Papias’s work survives only as a quotation in Eusebius (around 324 CE), raising questions about the reliability of this tradition. The first

17. The use of this criterion is attested as early as the writings of Papias (ca. 140 CE) and Irenaeus (ca. 180 CE). See below for the problems associated with this evidence.

18. Justin Martyr writes, “For in the memoirs which I say were drawn up by His apostles *and those who followed them*” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 103). Tertullian states, “The evangelical Testament has apostles for its authors, to whom was assigned by the Lord Himself this office of publishing the gospel. . . . Therefore, John and Matthew first instil faith into us; while of apostolic men, Luke and Mark renew it afterwards” (*Against Marcion* 4.2.2; 4.5.3).

19. Papias, Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria all assert Mark’s association with Peter.

28 Inquiry into the New Testament

undisputed reference to the identity of the four evangelists is found in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* (around 180 CE). Most modern scholars do not believe any of the four Gospels were actually written by the authors to whom they are traditionally attributed.²⁰

2. *Pseudonymity*. While some books were written with no name attached, others had a false name—a **pseudonym**—appended to them. It was common in ancient religious literature for an author to attach the name of a famous predecessor to a book. Jewish literature, for instance, contains abundant examples of books attributed to Adam, Enoch, Abraham, and Moses that were written centuries or even millennia after the death of their purported authors. The fact that many proto-orthodox leaders and theologians expressed reservations about the authorship of 1 and 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, and Jude shows they were aware of the phenomenon of pseudonymity.²¹ All of these books were eventually judged authentic and included in the canon, but modern scholars believe early suspicions about authorship were well founded. In fact, modern biblical scholarship suggests far more books are likely to be pseudonymous than ancient Christians suspected. Of the thirteen letters of Paul, only seven are universally thought to have been written by Paul.²² The other six are usually designated as “deutero-Pauline” (*deutero* meaning “secondary”), having been written by Paul's followers in his name after his death. The same judgment has been rendered with respect to 1 John.

3. *Mistaken Identity*. The book of Revelation identifies its author as “John” of Patmos. There is no reason to doubt this is the real name of the author. But was this the same John as the apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, or another person who shared this common name? Ancient scholars were divided on this question, the skeptics pointing out that the theology of the book of Revelation and that of the Gospel of John and letters of John are incompatible, and the writing less polished.²³ The final verdict was that John the apostle and John of Patmos were the same person, but modern scholars think this highly unlikely.

In sum, probably only seven of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were actually written by an apostle, or by the person to whom the book was traditionally attributed. While this seems like a low percentage, it is helpful to keep in mind two facts. First, no other group of early Christians could make a legitimate claim to have even one book that was written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle. All of their books bearing the names of apostles are pseudonymous. Second, because a book was not actually written by an apostle does not mean it cannot be “apostolic” in a more fundamental sense. The Gospel of Mark, for example, was written by an anonymous second-generation Christian in 70 CE, but this author was relying on oral traditions that were far older, many of which undoubtedly originated with Jesus' apostles.

20. The most vigorous defense has been mounted for the authorship of the Fourth Gospel by the apostle John. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), claims as many as three or four of the Gospels were written by those to whom they are traditionally attributed, but Bauckham's work has been heavily criticized.

21. Origen, for example, says about 2 and 3 John that “not all say that these are genuine,” and about the apostle Peter, that he left “one acknowledged epistle; and possibly also a second, but this is disputed” (quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.8–10).

22. This issue will be explored in greater detail—with arguments for and against the claim that these six books are pseudonymous—in chapter 18.

23. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25. Eusebius is summarizing the arguments of Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (mid-third century).

Antiquity

A second criterion for inclusion in the proto-orthodox canon is **antiquity**. To be included, a book needed to be judged “ancient,” which meant it must have been written during the apostolic age and not later. The “apostolic age” refers to the time when the apostles might still have been alive. This criterion seems to reflect a view that as long as there were still apostles alive, they would have acted as a check on the development of legends about Jesus and embellishments of his words or deeds. Given that Jesus died around the

year thirty CE, the longest an apostle could possibly have lived would have been another seventy years or so; thus a rough estimate for the close of the apostolic age would be the end of the first century CE. A book that was clearly written after this point would not have a credible claim to be “apostolic” in origin. It was on this basis that some early Christian leaders excluded the *Shepherd* of Hermas from the canon, a book with an otherwise strong case.²⁴ Some of the other books possibly excluded on this basis include *1 Clement* and the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch.

Estimated Dates of Composition for the Books of the New Testament

The challenges of dating the composition of ancient texts will be discussed later (see chapter 6), but the following list represents the main contenders for canonical status in early Christianity, according to scholars.

| | |
|--|------------|
| Genuine letters of Paul (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) | 50–60 CE |
| Deutero-Pauline Letters (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians) | 60–80 CE |
| Gospel of Mark | 70 CE |
| Gospel of Matthew | 80–90 CE |
| Gospel of Luke | 80–135 CE |
| Acts of the Apostles | 80–125 CE |
| Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus), James, and Hebrews | 80–100 CE |
| Gospel of John, Letter of Jude | 90–100 CE |
| Johannine Epistles (1, 2, 3 John) | 95–105 CE |
| Revelation | 95–100 CE |
| 2 Peter | 110–115 CE |

24. The author of the Muratorian Fragment, for example, speaks highly of the *Shepherd* of Hermas, but cannot admit it to the canon because it was not written in the apostolic age. “But Hermas wrote the *Shepherd quite lately in our time*,” he says, so it “ought indeed to be read, but it cannot be read publicly in the Church to the other people either among the prophets, whose number is settled, or among the apostles to the end of time.”

Broad Conformity with Proto-Orthodox Doctrine

The third and final criterion²⁵ for admission to the New Testament canon involved whether the book was generally accepted throughout the proto-orthodox world, which meant the book broadly conformed with proto-orthodox doctrine (or at least did not clearly contradict it). It is true some positions were deemed heretical because they were too extreme. Any book claiming that Jesus was strictly divine but did not share our human nature, or claiming that Jesus merely pretended to be human but was in fact only a divine spirit, would have been excluded on this basis. A popular gospel such as the *Infancy Gospel*

of *Thomas* (see below) would have been deemed unacceptable because it portrayed the boy Jesus as disobedient and reckless in the use of his power.

The final result of the application of these criteria was the inclusion of twenty-seven books in the canon of the New Testament. While the issue of the contents of the canon was hotly disputed within and between rival groups of early Christians, that controversy ended with the emergence of a single, dominant strain of orthodoxy from which virtually all modern denominations of Christianity derive. Every Christian New Testament published today includes the same books: the four Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Paul, the catholic epistles, and the book of Revelation.

Key Terms

| | | |
|-------------|-------------------------------|------------|
| canon | Docetism | revealer |
| testament | autograph | orthodoxy |
| inspiration | Jewish-Christian adoptionists | heresy |
| Torah | Gnostics | disciple |
| Pentateuch | Nag Hammadi library | apostle |
| Nevi'im | Monad | the Twelve |
| Ketuvim | Aeons | anonymous |
| BCE and CE | Yaltabaoth | pseudonym |
| Marcion | Archons | antiquity |

Review Questions

1. What is the difference between the fundamentalist/evangelical understanding of biblical inspiration and that of the Catholic Church and the mainline Protestant churches?
2. How did the various early Christian communities differ with regard to the number and nature of god(s), the status and significance of Jesus, and the orientation of Christianity toward Judaism? How did the stance of each group affect that group's acceptance of certain books as canonical?
3. What criteria were used by proto-orthodox Christians for inclusion in their canon? What problems are associated with their claims? How did the process of forming the proto-orthodox canon unfold?

25. These criteria were never officially promulgated, nor is it the case that no other criteria were ever utilized by the proto-orthodox leaders who compiled canon lists. Another factor that figured prominently in the thinking of some of these leaders is whether the books were generally accepted—and thus being used liturgically—in the proto-orthodox churches, or whether they may have been popular only in a few areas.

Discussion Questions

1. Is the use of CE and BCE in place of AD and BC a pointless exercise in political correctness or an easy and appropriate adjustment in a diverse, pluralistic world?
2. Might knowledge of the formation of the canon have an effect upon the way Christians view the New Testament? Does such knowledge undermine Christian confidence in the reliability of these texts?
3. To the degree that most Christians know about the multiple varieties of early Christianity, they tend to assume that the “right” version emerged as the dominant one, and that the others were properly rejected. Some scholars have questioned this, and have argued that there is truth and beauty in some of the lost versions of Christianity, and perhaps some flaws in what became orthodox Christianity. Do you agree or disagree with this view?
4. In choosing books for a canon, Christian leaders tended to assert that their beliefs had been shaped by the books they knew were reliable, rather than admitting that they chose books based on their preexisting beliefs. Does this make a difference? Do you tend to believe this claim or are you skeptical of it?

Bibliography and Suggestions for Further Study

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