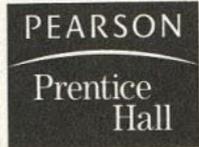


A VOYAGE THROUGH THE NEW TESTAMENT

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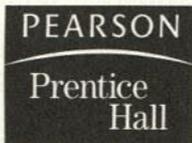
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INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

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

Divisions of the New Testament
The Question of Canon

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 Some are drawn to the New Testament as a historical document that provides a window into the sociopolitical world of the ancient Middle East.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

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

Perhaps we can use the analogy of travel to a distant location, like India or China, to make our point. Using modern means of transportation, you can get to India without too much trouble. If you are visiting some of its major cities, you may encounter many things that look and sound familiar to you. You may even find a number of people who speak English and dress in clothing similar to yours. But can you say that you know India? Not at all! To really know India, you need to live there awhile. You need to learn about its history and religious and cultural practices. You need to understand the worldviews of various groups within Indian culture and how they relate to each other. You also need to know the languages its people speak.

So it is with the New Testament. We can read the text without much knowledge of how it was composed, and we might think we understand it. However, it is quite possible that we are seeing only a reflection of our own religious and cultural worldviews. To really understand the New Testament, we need to study the historical, religious, cultural, and literary contexts out of which it came and within which we interpret it today. That is what we will be trying to do with this introduction to the New Testament. In addition, we will explore today's new literary theories to see how they help us unlock deep and rich interpretations of the New Testament for contemporary readers. Likewise, liberationist and feminist interpretations, as well as various cultural readings of scripture, can reveal truths about the biblical text that people of earlier generations might never have considered.

We begin our study of the New Testament by describing the "big picture." What is contained in the New Testament? How were these books composed? How were they collected into this larger document we call the New Testament? What kind of authority does the New Testament have for Christians? Before tackling these questions, however, we have to establish the context for our investigation. The New Testament belongs to a larger unit of Christian scriptures known as the Bible. Thus, our first step will be to briefly describe the nature of the Bible so that we can situate the New Testament within that larger document.

THE BIBLE, THE SCRIPTURES OF CHRISTIANITY

The title of a book often can be helpful in determining its contents or at least in raising our curiosity about what we will find between its covers. The Greek term *ta biblia*, from which the English word **Bible** is derived, means "the books." Thus, the literature that Christians call the Bible is actually a collection of books. Composed over the course of more than one thousand years, some of these books were written a very long time ago and some relatively recently—the latest ones being almost two thousand years old now. Some are rather long, while others are very short. One is only a single page in English translation! Some books contain legends and stories about important historical figures in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Others consist of prayers and sayings about how to live a good life. Still others provide laws and prescriptions about how to honor and worship God. In sum, the Bible is a very compact library of a wide variety of literature. *anthology* *genres*

The first thing a new reader of the Bible will notice is that it is divided into two parts. Traditionally, these two major units of the Bible have been called the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word **testament** means "covenant" or "agreement." You've probably heard the phrase "last will and testament," referring both to the legal agreement that a person makes to ensure that his property is properly disposed of after death and to the parting words of the deceased. However, when used in a religious sense, as in the Bible, the term *testament* refers to God's covenant relationship with humanity. Thus, to describe the second part of the Bible as the New Testament is to suggest that it proclaims the new covenant established in Jesus the Christ.

However, this terminology poses a problem because some people might be tempted to think that the books identified as the Old Testament proclaim an old

covenant, basically one that is no longer valid or effective. In fact, such a view would be entirely wrongheaded for at least two reasons. First, these books include the sacred scriptures of Judaism, which proclaim a living and enduring covenant between God and God's chosen people, the Jews. Second, although individual Christian churches might interpret these books differently, the books of the Old Testament enjoy the same status and authority within the Bible as do the New Testament books.

What, then, shall we call these two parts of the Bible? Some have suggested that the Bible be called Christian Scriptures. If we accept this term for the Bible, then the books we have traditionally called the New Testament could be identified as the Christian Testament, and the books that Christians call the Old Testament could be named the Hebrew Scriptures. This solution resolves the difficulties that arise by labeling the covenant of Judaism "old." However, the term *Hebrew Scriptures* misrepresents this collection of books because not all of these books were written in Hebrew and they do not exactly correspond with the scriptures of Judaism.

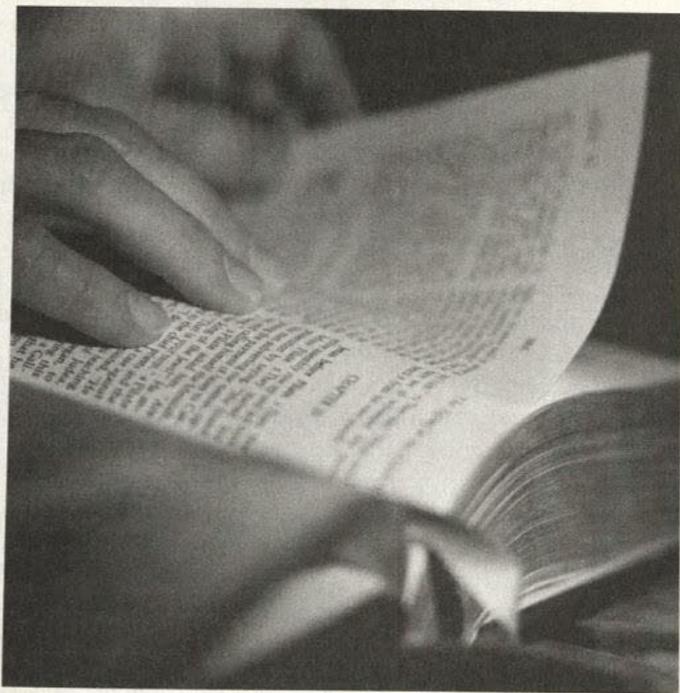
Although other potential solutions have run into similar difficulties, the motive for seeking alternative descriptions of the Old and New Testaments is a positive one: respect for Judaism as the elder brother or sister of Christianity. This textbook will use the "*Old Testament*" and "*New Testament*," because these terms have a history within Christianity and because we do not, as yet, have a more satisfactory solution. However, we need to recognize that these are explicitly Christian designations, which reflect Christianity's theological interpretation of the document. Christians do understand Jesus Christ to be the embodiment of a new covenant with God and the New Testament to be the proclamation of that covenant. At the same time, the use of these terms is not intended to deny the unique and privileged status of God's covenant with Israel, manifested as it is in Judaism today.

Christian teaching dictates that both testaments be regarded equally as the sacred word of God. Although different Christian traditions might interpret these two testaments differently, one is not more important or of higher status than the other. Christianity has its origins in Judaism. Its central figure, Jesus of Nazareth, was a Jew. So were the early Jesus followers. Christianity's earliest and most important prayers have their roots in Jewish worship, and its values of justice and charity have ties to Jewish religious practice. Simply stated, Christianity owes its origins and much of its identity to its elder sibling, Judaism.

We now survey these two parts of the Bible.

DIVISIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The books of the Old Testament are not arranged chronologically but are grouped (more or less) according to types of literature. Judaism calls its scriptures, which are roughly equivalent to the Christian Old Testament, the **TaNaK**. The name is an acronym based on the scriptures' three parts: Law (the Hebrew word is *Torah*), Prophets (the Hebrew word is *Nevi'im*), and Writings (the Hebrew word is *Ketuvim*). If you look at the table of contents of an English translation of the TaNaK, you will see that the books are arranged in order according to these three categories.



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

Already by the third century B.C.E., Jews were reading their scriptures in a Greek translation that came to be known as the **Septuagint**, often represented by LXX, the Roman numeral 70. The name is derived from a legend recorded in the second-century B.C.E. document, called the *Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates*, in which the Egyptian king Philadelphus (285-246 B.C.E.) requested a Greek translation of the Law (Torah) for his library at Alexandria. In response, the Jerusalem high priest Eleazar sent 72 Jewish elders (six from each of the twelve tribes) to complete the job to the satisfaction of all involved. Later, the Septuagint came to include Greek translations of the prophets and writings, as well as the books of Torah. It also contained a selection of books and parts of books, which Protestant traditions call the **Apocrypha** (Greek, meaning "hidden" or "concealed") and that the Roman Catholic Church and some Eastern Christian churches call **Deuterocanonical** books (meaning "second canon," i.e., literature that was given biblical status at a second or later stage of development). The Septuagint is arranged in order according to the following four categories:

- Pentateuch (Greek, meaning "five roll;" the first five books of the Bible)
- Historical books
- Prophets
- Wisdom books

CALENDAR DESIGNATIONS

As you probably know, people of different cultures in today's world use different ways of marking time. The Chinese calendar, for example, is a lunar calendar (based on the phases of the moon) of twelve months in a year, named after the Chinese signs of the zodiac. Five cycles of twelve years complete a unit in the calendar. According to one legend, the twelve years of the cycle got their names when Buddha invited all of the animals of the earth to say goodbye to him as he was about to leave the earth. Only twelve came, and he honored them by naming the years after them, each in the order of their arrival: the rat, the ox, the tiger, the rabbit, the dragon, the snake, the horse, the sheep, the monkey, the rooster, the dog, and the boar. The Jewish calendar is a modified version of a lunar calendar, but with a standard length to each month and the periodic inclusion of additional months to bring the lunar calendar back into conformity with the solar calendar. The Chinese calendar dates back more than 4,600 years, while the Jewish calendar year is nearing the year 5770.

Of course, the most familiar calendar for people of Western cultures is the Christian calendar, also called the Gregorian calendar. Based on the sixth-century Julian calendar, which was constructed around what they thought, at the time, was the year of the birth of Jesus, the Gregorian calendar uses the designations B.C., meaning "Before Christ," and A.D., meaning "anno Domini" or "Year of the Lord." However, you will notice that biblical scholars tend to use C.E., meaning "Common Era", instead of the more familiar A.D., and B.C.E., meaning "Before the Common Era," instead of the more familiar B.C. The Common Era refers to the shared history of Judaism and Christianity. Biblical scholars are not using a different calendar than the one to which you are accustomed. They simply describe it differently in an effort to respect Judaism's relationship to Christianity and its place in history.

If you have a study Bible (a Bible with study aids), you will likely find a listing of the books that belong in each of these categories in its introductory sections.

DIVISIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Like the Old Testament, the books of the New Testament are grouped according to types of literature and are not arranged chronologically. The New Testament is usually divided into four sections: gospels, Acts of the Apostles, letters, and Revelation. Let us look more carefully at the content of each of these sections.

1. **Gospels.** These are the books that tell the story of the life of Jesus. Our English term **gospel** comes from the Anglo-Saxon *god-spell*, which means "good tidings." The Greek word for gospel, *euangelion*, means "good message" (of Jesus Christ). Thus, the term itself suggests that these gospels should not be treated as objective

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

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

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

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

35-64
3CE

At first glance, Acts of the Apostles looks like a relatively uncomplicated history (as modern people understand history) or an eyewitness documentary of the early church. However, a closer examination reveals that something quite different is going on in this book. For example, the reader will notice that the author of Acts is being very selective in his telling of the story because he focuses on only two principal characters, namely, Peter and Paul. Moreover, although Acts appears to give us a good deal of information about Paul's missionary activity, the historical details are not always consistent with what Paul tells us in own letters, raising additional questions about the historicity of Acts of the Apostles. However, these are not significant problems because, as we shall see, Acts of the Apostles was not intended to be a documentary account of the early years of Christianity. Rather, it gives us a religious interpretation of or theological perspective on the events associated with the beginnings of Christianity.

3. **Letters.** After the gospels and Acts of the Apostles, the New Testament contains twenty-one letters (also called **epistles**). Seven are undisputedly **Pauline**: the Letter to the Romans, the two Letters to the Corinthians, the Letters to the Philippians and the Galatians, the First Letter to the Thessalonians, and the Letter to Philemon. They are called Pauline because New Testament scholars are convinced that they were written by Paul himself. Another three letters attributed to Paul are called **Deutero-Pauline** letters, meaning that they probably were written not by Paul himself but by one of his disciples. These are the Letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians and the Second Letter to the Thessalonians. Three others—the two Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus—are known as the **pastoral** letters because they are addressed to pastors of churches. Although they bear Paul's name, they appear to be much later compositions, written after his death.

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

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

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

THE QUESTION OF CANON

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

The term **canon** means “rule” or “standard,” like a measuring stick. It was first used in early Christian literature to refer to the “rule of faith,” that is, the norm or measure of religious truth in the Christian tradition. The first Christian canons were **creeds**, that is, statements of belief. However, today the word *canon* is most often used to describe the collection of authoritative writings of a particular religious group. For example, the canon for Islam includes the Koran, while the canon for Judaism is the TaNaK, roughly what we call the Old Testament; the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish oral law attributed to Jewish teachers dating from 50 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.; and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, which are commentaries on the Mishnah. To say that the Bible, including the New Testament, is the canon of Christianity is to declare that Christianity’s self-understanding is somehow dependent on it. It also means that the Bible carries a level of authority that directs the Christian community’s way of being in the world. But how did Christians get the canon they have?

A THEORY ABOUT THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON When we consider the development of the New Testament, we need to remember that the first Christians—before they were even called Christian—had no distinctively Christian scriptures. Instead, because the first Christians were Jews and people who were interested in Judaism, they were studying and praying over the Jewish scriptures in order to make sense of their experience of Jesus and this new Jesus movement. For Paul, the apostles of Jesus, and their immediate circle of believers, “scriptures” meant Jewish scriptures. Gradually, as Christians began to put together their own distinctive scriptures, they did so not all at once but in stages.

First Stage. The earliest Jesus followers shared stories about Jesus—what he did to care for people, who he taught, how he came to be crucified, and how they knew he was raised from the dead—and they reminisced about his teachings. What they knew about Jesus lived on in the memories of his disciples and the apostles and was passed on by word of mouth, perhaps for thirty years or more. However, we might imagine that they eventually began to write down collections of Jesus sayings that were used in teaching new members about Jesus, hymns and creeds (short statements of belief), and even some individual stories about Jesus.

Second Stage. Many Christians are surprised to discover that the first collections of Christian texts did not include the gospels. Rather, they probably consisted of some of the letters of Paul. In the Second Letter of Peter (c. 100–125 C.E.), the author says

So also our beloved brother wrote you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. (2 Pet. 3:16)

Although the Greek word that is translated here as *scriptures* can simply mean “writings,” many biblical scholars take this verse as our earliest clue that Christians were beginning to collect Christian literature in order to create their own canon. It is

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

Third Stage. Eventually, the early Jesus traditions were organized into written gospels (stories about the life of Jesus or collections of his teachings). There were many so-called gospels in the early years of the church. From writers like Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215 C.E.), Origen (185–254 C.E.), and Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315–403 C.E.), we know of the Gospel to the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of the Ebionites, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Thomas, but only four obtained the status of sacred scripture: the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Our earliest evidence for this canonization process comes from Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century C.E. In his comments on how Eucharist was celebrated in the early Christian churches, Justin mentions that either the “memoirs of the apostles” or the writings of the prophets were being read at liturgy (*First Apology* 67). The phrase “memoirs of the apostles” most likely refers to the gospels, and Justin appears to be giving them the same status as the books of the prophets, which were already part of the Jewish scriptures.

A few decades later, Irenaeus (c. 180 C.E.) was the first early Christian writer to single out as authoritative the four gospels that would later become part of the New Testament (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8). He also provides evidence that, already in the late second century C.E., people were beginning to distinguish between orthodox and heretical gospels. For example, he dismisses the Gospel of Truth because it “agrees in nothing with the gospels of the apostles” (*Against Heresies* 3.11.9) and he condemns the Gospel of Judas as a “fictitious history” (*Against Heresies* 1.31.1).

Fourth Stage. Paradoxically, Marcion (c. 140 C.E.), a Christian preacher in Rome, was responsible for the first canon of the New Testament. Failing to appreciate the richness and complexity of the scriptures that the earliest Christians had inherited from their Jewish brothers and sisters, he created a very restrictive canon of Christian scriptures that excluded all of the Old Testament scriptures. Apparently, he viewed the Old Testament as filled with internal contradictions that could not be resolved. Likewise, he could not reconcile the Old Testament’s portrayal of God as a violent and vengeful God with the New Testament’s portrayal of God as the God of goodness. He understood Jesus Christ to be the son of the God of goodness and not the messiah of the Jewish God of justice. As a consequence, he also rejected much of Christian literature that had Jewish overtones, accepting only the edited gospel of Luke and ten of the letters attributed to Paul as his canon.

Marcion’s teaching quickly prompted a hearing before other clergy in Rome that resulted in his condemnation in 144 C.E. Soon afterward, other church leaders began to form their own canons or lists of approved books. The most famous of these was the Muratorian canon, an official list of books probably developed in Rome in the latter part of the second century C.E. It included the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen letters attributed to Paul (excluding Hebrews), Jude, 1 John, 2 John, the Wisdom of Solomon (today included in the Old Testament apocrypha or deuterocanonical books), Revelation, and the Apocalypse of Peter (today included among New Testament apocrypha). Other lists or partial lists can

be found in the writings of Origen (c. 185–254 C.E.) Tertullian (c. 155–230 C.E.), and Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–340 C.E.).

Although these early canons sometimes vary a great deal, you will notice that they consistently include the four gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and Paul's letters. Athanasius, in his Festal Letter of 367 C.E., was the first to name the current twenty-seven books of the New Testament as canonical. Thus, the canon of the New Testament as we know it today may have been in flux until the middle of the fourth century. Even so, it was not until the Council of Trent in 1546 that the Catholic Church made an official statement concerning the canon of the Bible, listing—as a response to the Protestant reformers—the books that it considered to be sacred and canonical.

Most religions go through a similar process in the formation of canon, though they may not actually use the term *canon* to describe their authoritative literature. Judaism's formation of the Hebrew canon is a good example. The oldest Jewish canon probably consisted of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, which are also called the Pentateuch. These books took their final form and were considered authoritative within Judaism not earlier than the end of the sixth century B.C.E. and not later than the fourth century B.C.E. Most Jews at the time of Jesus appear to have accepted a second canon called the Prophets, which may be almost as old as that of the Torah. It included the historical books (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets. It was of somewhat lesser authority than the Torah, however—what Christians might call a “canon within a canon.” In the gospels, we will see several references to “the Law” or “the Law and the Prophets,” the latter referring to the Jewish canon of the first century C.E.

However, the Jewish scriptures, as they are known today, also include a collection of books called Writings. Even though many of these books, like the Psalms, had already been in existence for a long time, the Writings apparently were not accepted into the Jewish canon until after the destruction of Jerusalem (70 C.E.). In other words, the Jewish canon was in a state of flux for approximately five hundred years before it reached its final form and was still in flux during the time of Jesus. In the end, Jews did not all agree on the content of their canon, so Samaritans, for example, have a different canon from other Jews. We should not be surprised to learn that the canon of the New Testament also evolved over a long period of time, since the processes of canon formation were likely quite similar for both testaments.

FACTORS THAT AFFECTED THE DEVELOPMENT OF CANON How did Christians ultimately decide which religious writings would be included in the New Testament and which ones would not? When we look back on historical evidence of the process of canon formation, we can see a few factors at work. In some cases, we might call these factors criteria because they resulted in the acceptance of some religious writings as authoritative for communities of faith and the rejection of others. However, we should note that early Christian communities did not start out with a set of guidelines for selecting New Testament books. In retrospect, we can identify priorities that seemed to govern the process and, as a result, think the process was fairly straightforward; in reality, the process was probably quite messy.

Factors that affected the development of the New Testament canon:

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

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

Sometimes it appears that this criterion was used in reverse fashion. For example, some early church historians and theologians questioned whether the Letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation ought to be included in the Christian canon because they could not verify that Paul and John, the son of Zebedee, were their respective authors. However, apostolic origin was probably not their primary concern. Instead, it may have been that how and where the books were used made them suspect. Today we understand the notion of apostolic origin in the broadest sense, meaning that the book has some connection to the traditions associated with a particular apostle or with the period of the apostles in general.

The second criterion, theological correctness, suggests that some religious documents were not included in the Christian canon because they were judged to contain statements that were not consistent with the "rule of faith," that is, the creeds and the teachings that support them. Teachings that are consistent with the "rule of faith" are called **orthodox**, while those that deviate from it are called **heretical**. Of course, we can safely say that people did not set out to be heretics. Instead, it is far more likely that they were wrestling with a particular theological problem or trying to emphasize an aspect of a difficult teaching and they simply were not able to recognize the negative implications of the alternative they put forward. Unfortunately, these judgments about the orthodoxy of a particular writing were not clearly articulated at the time such decisions were made, so sometimes we are left to guess at the issues that pastors and teachers were struggling to resolve.

The Gospel of Peter provides a good example of the complexities of this criterion. First, we should say that we no longer possess this entire gospel. All that remains of the book today is the story of the trial, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Today's reader might be tempted to reject it because it sounds like an ancient version of our science-fiction comic books and could not possibly be historically accurate. It is a strange gospel, complete with enormous angels and a cross that talks! However, this is not the

generally speaking

reason why early Christian churches rejected it. The fourth-century historian Eusebius recounts that Bishop Serapion of Antioch (c. 190 C.E.) told Christians not to read it because some of those who held it as sacred were led into heresy (wrong teaching) by its words. As a consequence, he also challenged the apostolic origin of the Gospel of Peter. An excerpt from Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* follows:

"We brethren," says Serapion, "receive Peter and the other apostles as Christ himself. But those writings which falsely go under their name, as we are well acquainted with them, we reject, and know also, that we have not received such handed down to us. But when I came to you, I had supposed that all held to the true faith; and as I had not perused the gospel presented by them under the name of Peter, I said, 'If this be the only thing that creates difference among you, let it be read;' but now having understood, from what was said to me, that their minds were enveloped in some heresy, I will make haste to come to you again; therefore, brethren, expect me soon. But as we perceived what was the heresy of Marcianus, we plainly saw that he ignorantly contradicted himself, which things you may learn from what has been written to you. For we have borrowed this gospel from others, who have studied it, that is, from the successors of those who led the way before him, whom we call Docetae, (for most opinions have sprung from this sect.) And in this we have discovered many things, superadded to the sound faith of our Savior; some also, attached that are foreign to it, and which we have also subjoined for your sake." Thus far of the works of Serapion. (*Ecclesiastical History*, VI 12.3-6)

The wrong teaching to which Serapion referred is called **docetism**, a tendency among some early Christians to consider the suffering and death of Jesus as "mere seeming." One can imagine them characterizing Jesus in this way to emphasize his superior heroism, but others saw this as a refusal to acknowledge the humanity of Christ. Thus, the decision to exclude the Gospel of Peter from the canon of the New Testament appears to have been a judgment of orthodoxy or right doctrine.

Likewise, the Gospel of Thomas, although apparently popular within some Christian circles in the mid-second century C.E., probably did not achieve canonical status because of questions of orthodoxy. The Gospel of Thomas is very difficult to understand unless you know something about Gnosticism (see Chapter 11). This gospel does not contain many of the details we typically associate with gospels. For example, it has no miracle stories and no story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather, it consists of 114 sayings (i.e., short teachings that sound like proverbs) attributed to the "living Jesus," many of which are also found in the canonical gospels (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). It describes the true disciples of Jesus as "enlightened ones" who seek to rid themselves of the things of the world in order to become "single ones," that is, pure spirits. They apparently thought of the physical world as evil; they recognized that they came from the divine realm and wanted to return there as quickly as possible.

Even with limited exposure to the Gnostic worldview, you are probably thinking, "But I thought Christians believed that God created the world as good?" You are right! This is just one of the theological problems raised by the Gospel of Thomas. But is this the only reason why early Christians rejected this gospel? We don't know for certain. Early church writers who comment on this gospel say that, because certain heretical groups read it, Christians of the true faith should avoid it. You can imagine them saying, "If those guys are reading that gospel, there must be something wrong with it!"

Our reflections on the Gospel of Thomas and Eusebius's quotation of Serapion's assessment of the Gospel of Peter suggest yet another factor that contributed to the formation of the New Testament canon, namely, the authority of church leaders to determine what was appropriate reading for their Christian communities. As pastors and overseers, they were responsible for the well-being of their churches. The pastoral letters of the New Testament (1–2 Timothy and Titus) make it clear that a chief obligation of the pastor is to restrain false teaching. Therefore, Eusebius's account of Serapion making judgment on the Gospel of Peter was probably not exceptional.

A fourth factor, closely related to the third, is widespread appropriation by the churches. By this, we mean that either the majority of Christian churches in several geographic locations or the most important churches with the greatest amount of influence saw these books as valuable for the development of the faith, preserved them, and passed them on. Thus, Christian literature like the Testament of Mary, which was popular only in Syria, did not become part of the canon of the New Testament, in part because it was not widely known. In some cases, churches like those of Greece and Turkey (then called Asia Minor) collected sacred documents and distributed them to other churches. Paul's letters are a good example. Almost right away, it appears, people started to collect his letters and pass them on to other churches. If those earliest church communities had not chosen to share Paul's writings, they might not have been available to us today.

These four factors appear to have been the most important for canon formation. However, other factors may have affected this process and simply may not have left enough evidence for historians to recognize their significance. For example, some early Christian literature that might otherwise have been included in the canon of the New Testament simply disappeared for reasons that are unknown to us. Today we have only brief quotations from them or commentary on them in other early Christian writings, making us aware that documents like the Gospel to the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Ebionites existed, but we do not know their content or why they were not included in the New Testament canon. But for those writings that were included in the New Testament, we can safely conclude that early Christian communities and their leaders judged them to be more or less universally accepted as authoritative for guiding faith and useful for inspiring and building up communities of believers.

KEY TERMS

Bible	Synoptic	Canon
Testament	Pauline	Creed
TaNaK	Deutero-Pauline	Orthodoxy/orthodox
Septuagint	Pastoral	Heresy/heretical
Apocrypha	Catholic	Docetism
Deuterocanonical	Apostolic	
Gospel	Apocalyptic	