

An Introduction
to the New Testament
and the Origins of
Christianity

Delbert Burkett
Louisiana State University



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Delbert Burkett 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Adobe Garamond 11/14 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Burkett, Delbert Royce.

An introduction to the New Testament and the origins of Christianity / Delbert Burkett.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 80955 X (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 00720 8 (paperback)

1. Bible. N.T. – Introductions. 2. Christianity – Origin. I. Title.

BS2330.3 .B87 2002

225.6'I – dc21 2001043103

ISBN 0 521 80955 X hardback

ISBN 0 521 00720 8 paperback

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
PART I HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND	
1 Introduction	3
2 Jews among Greeks and Romans	15
3 Religion of Second-Temple Judaism	32
4 Varieties of Second-Temple Judaism	45
5 Jewish hopes for the future	60
6 Hellenistic religion, philosophy, and world-view	72
7 An overview of early Christian history	90
8 The making of the New Testament	105
PART II JESUS AND THE GOSPELS	
9 Introduction to the Gospels	121
10 The Synoptic problem	140
11 The Gospel of Mark	155
12 The Gospel of Matthew	174
13 The Gospel of Luke	195
14 The Gospel of John	214
15 The apocryphal Jesus	236
16 The quest for the historical Jesus	243
PART III ACTS	
17 The book of Acts	263
PART IV PAULINE CHRISTIANITY	
18 Paul, his letters, and his churches	289
19 Gentiles and the Law (1): Galatians	303
20 Gentiles and the Law (2): Romans	315
21 Problems of church life: 1 Corinthians	328

22	Problems of church life: 2 Corinthians	339
23	The imminent parousia: 1 and 2 Thessalonians	345
24	Prison Epistles (1): Philippians and Philemon	353
25	Prison Epistles (2): Colossians and Ephesians	362
PART V JUDAIC CHRISTIANITY		
26	Judaic Christianity	379
27	The letter of James	389
28	The Didache	396
PART VI Gnostic Christianity		
29	Gnostic Christianity	407
30	The Gospel of Thomas	415
PART VII PROTO-ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY		
31	Proto-Orthodox Christianity	423
32	Conflict within the church (1): 1 Clement	431
33	Conflict within the church (2): the Pastoral Epistles	436
34	Conflict within the church (3): Jude and 2 Peter	446
35	Conflict within the church (4): the Johannine Epistles	453
36	Conflict within the church (5): the letters of Ignatius	463
37	Relation of Christianity to Judaism (1): Hebrews	469
38	Relation of Christianity to Judaism (2): the Epistle of Barnabas	480
39	Conflict with the Roman world (1): 1 Peter	484
40	Conflict with the Roman world (2): Revelation	497
APPENDIXES		
APPENDIX 1	Lucian on sacrifices	519
APPENDIX 2	The Essenes	520
APPENDIX 3	Jewish messianic hopes	524
APPENDIX 4	Divine men and their births	529
APPENDIX 5	Apotheoses	536
APPENDIX 6	Miracle stories in the ancient world	539
APPENDIX 7	The Infancy Gospel of Thomas	549
APPENDIX 8	The Gospel of Peter	553
APPENDIX 9	The Didache	557
APPENDIX 10	Selections from the Gospel of Thomas	564
APPENDIX 11	Selections from 1 Clement	572
APPENDIX 12	Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 1–9	576
APPENDIX 13	Selections from the Epistle of Barnabas	579
APPENDIX 14	Conflict with Rome	584
	<i>Index</i>	589

Illustrations

2.1	Bust of Alexander the Great	<i>page</i> 17
2.2	Alexander's empire at his death in 323 BCE (map)	18
2.3	The Roman Empire in the first century CE (map)	21
2.4	Marble statue of Augustus Caesar in military dress	23
2.5	Palestine in the time of Jesus (map)	24
2.6	Timeline of political events in Palestine from Alexander to Hadrian	27
3.1	The scribe Ezra reading from a scroll, probably the Torah	36
3.2	Scale model of the Temple in Jerusalem during the time of Herod the Great	38
3.3	Ground plan of Herod's Temple and courts	39
3.4	Ruins of the ancient synagogue at Capernaum, dating from the late second or early third century	42
4.1	Aerial view of the ruins at Qumran	49
4.2	Fragments of 1 Samuel from Cave 4 near Qumran	50
4.3	The Temple Scroll, a previously unknown manuscript from Qumran	51
4.4	Aerial view of Masada, a cliff-top fortress and palace built by Herod the Great	53
6.1	Bronze statue of Zeus, king of the Greek gods (fifth century BCE)	74
6.2	Statue of Isis, an Egyptian goddess whose worship spread throughout the Roman Empire	75
6.3	Roman art depicting a worshipper offering sacrifice on an altar before a statue of the god Dionysus	76
6.4	The infant Heracles, demigod son of Zeus and the mortal Alkmene, strangles snakes sent against him by Zeus' jealous wife Hera. Roman fresco, Casa dei Vetti, Pompeii	80
6.5	Roman art depicting a philosopher leaning on a walking stick	83
7.1	Scale model of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus	92
7.2	An ancient Christian mosaic gives an imaginative depiction of the apostle Paul.	97
7.3	Marble head from a colossal statue of Constantine	102
8.1	Greek Papyrus 52, oldest surviving text of the New Testament (c. 125–150 CE)	112

8.2	End of Matthew and beginning of Mark in the important fourth-century manuscript Codex Vaticanus	114
8.3	Portrait of James I of England and VI of Scotland by John De Critz	116
9.1	Christ as judge surrounded by the four living beings described in Revelation 4:6–8	125
11.1	Early Christian portrayal of the miracle story in Mark 5:24–34	159
11.2	A scene from the miracle story in Mark 4:35–41. Painting by Giorgio de Chirico, 1888–1978	165
11.3	Transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2–8). Painting by Mario Balassi, 1604–67	170
12.1	In this painting by Rembrandt (1606–69), an angel dictates the Gospel to the apostle Matthew.	175
12.2	Wise men from the East bring gifts to the infant Jesus. Painting by Vittorio Bigari, 1692–1776	186
12.3	As in Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus sits on a throne to exercise judgment.	192
13.1	Scene from the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Painting by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1618–82)	200
13.2	Early Christian engraving of the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep	205
13.3	Luke’s story of the penitent criminal crucified with Jesus (Luke 23:39–43). Painting by Titian, 1477/89–1576	211
14.1	Early Christian portrayal of Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well	225
14.2	Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. Sixteenth-century woodcut by Albrecht Dürer	228
14.3	Jesus raises Lazarus. Painting by Pasquale Ottini, 1580–1650	232
15.1	Sixth-century icon portraying Jesus, from the Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai	238
15.2	Jesus frees souls imprisoned in Hades. Painting by Duccio di Buoninsegna, c. 1260–1318	240
16.1	A fishing boat returning to Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee	245
16.2	Inscription from ancient Caesarea, headquarters of the Roman governors of Judea	249
16.3	An ancient ossuary, a container for holding the bones of a deceased person	255
17.1	A view of modern Antioch	266
17.2	The acropolis in Athens seen from the Areopagus (Mars’ Hill)	269
17.3	The ancient amphitheatre at Ephesus	272
17.4	Missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul (map)	280
17.5	Paul’s second missionary journey (map)	281
17.6	Paul’s third missionary journey and journey to Rome (map)	283
18.1	The apostle Paul by Rembrandt (1606–69)	290
18.2	Old road between Israel and Damascus	296
18.3	Street in ancient Ephesus	298
19.1	The Roman province of Galatia in Asia Minor (map)	305
20.1	Scale model of ancient Rome	316
21.1	The bema (raised platform) in the forum at Corinth	330
21.2	Early Christian depiction of the communal meal	336

22.1	A page from Papyrus 46 (about 200 CE) containing 2 Corinthians 13:5–13	341
24.1	St Paul in Prison by Rembrandt (1606–69)	354
24.2	The possible sites of Paul's imprisonment at the time he wrote Philippians and Philemon (map)	357
25.1	Greek inscription on a stone from the outer wall of Herod's Temple	372
26.1	A detail from the Arch of Titus, built to celebrate Titus' conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE	381
28.1	Early Christian depiction of baptism	397
28.2	Third-century depiction of a Christian praying	401
29.1	Manuscript covers of the Nag Hammadi Coptic Library	409
30.1	Last page of the Gospel of Thomas in the Coptic manuscript found at Nag Hammadi	416
31.1	Early Christian mosaic of a basket of bread between two fish	429
32.1	Early Christian bas-relief of the apostles Peter and Paul	433
33.1	Roman art from Pompeii depicting a young woman with writing utensils	441
34.1	A sixth or seventh-century icon portraying Peter	447
36.1	Sites on Ignatius' journey from Antioch to Rome (map)	464
36.2	The Via Egnatia near Philippi	465
36.3	A tenth-century illustration of the martyrdom of Ignatius	466
37.1	A Jewish high priest in ceremonial garb	474
39.1	The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer by Jean-Léon Gérôme	486
39.2	Provinces of Asia Minor to which 1 Peter is addressed (map)	490
39.3	Marble bust of the emperor Trajan (96–117 CE)	491
40.1	The seven churches of the Roman province of Asia to which the book of Revelation is addressed (map)	502
40.2	John and his vision of one like a son of man surrounded by seven golden lampstands. Woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (1511)	507
40.3	Medieval illustration of visions from Revelation 12–13	511
40.4	Michael the archangel thrusting down Satan in chains. Altarpiece by Guido Reni (after 1626)	514

Fig. 2.1: © The British Museum. Fig. 2.4: Vatican Museums (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 3.1: Z. Radovan, Jerusalem. Fig. 3.2: Holy Land Hotel, Jerusalem (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 3.3: W. E. Stinespring, "Temple, Jerusalem," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon, 1962), vol. IV, p. 556. Based on L.-H. Vincent and A.-M. Steve, *Jerusalem de l' Ancien Testament* (Gabalda & Cie, 1954–56). Fig. 3.4: Albatross Aerial Photography. Fig. 4.1: Albatross Aerial Photography. Fig. 4.2: courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem. Fig. 4.3: Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll* (Israel Exploration Society, 1977), vol. III, plate I, courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society. Fig. 4.4: Richard

Nowitz Photography. Fig. 6.1: National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece (Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 6.2: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples (Alinari/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 6.3: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 6.4: Casa dei Vetti, Pompeii (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 6.5: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 7.1: Holy Land Hotel, Jerusalem (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 7.2: Archbishop's Palace, Ravenna (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 7.3: Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome (Alinari/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 8.1: reproduced by courtesy of the Director and Librarian, the John Rylands University Library of Manchester. Fig. 8.2: © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. Fig. 8.3: by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London. Fig. 9.1: © Artephtot. Fig. 11.1: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 11.2: Vatican Museums (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 11.3: Church of the Concezione, Rome (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 12.1: Louvre (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 12.2: Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 12.3: Dom zu Aachen, Schatzkammer, Aachen (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 13.1: gift of the Avalon Foundation, Photograph © 2001 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Fig. 13.2: National Museum of Carthage, Carthage, Tunisia (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 13.3: Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 14.1: Hypogeum of Via Latina, Rome (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 14.2: Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Junius S. Morgan, 1919 (19.73.179). Fig. 14.3: Galleria Borghese, Rome (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 15.1: Konstantinos A. Manafis, ed. *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine* (Ekdotike Athenon, 1990), 135, reproduced courtesy of Ekdotike Athenon. Fig. 15.2: Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana, Siena (Alinari/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 16.1: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 16.2: Israel Museum, Jerusalem (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 16.3: courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority; photo by Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Fig. 17.1: photograph by G. Eric Matson, G. Eric Matson Collection, Library of Congress. By permission of the Matson Collection and the Episcopal Home. Fig. 17.2: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 17.3: F. H. C. Birch/Sonia Halliday Photographs, Weston Turville, England. Fig. 18.1: Widener Collection, photograph © 2001 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Fig. 18.2: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 18.3: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 20.1: Mostra Augustea, Rome (Alinari/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 21.1: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 21.2: André Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art* (Thames and Hudson, 1967), plate 10, p. 112. Fig. 22.1: P. Mich. Inv. 6238, p. 145, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan. Fig. 24.1: Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart. Fig. 25.1: Archaeological Museum, Istanbul (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 26.1: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 28.1: Museo Nazionale delle Terme (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 28.2:

Catacomb of the Giordani, Rome (Scala/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 29.1: Coptic Museum, Old Cairo, photo by Dr. Jean Doresse/Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA. Fig. 30.1: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA. Fig. 31.1: Church of the Multiplication, Tabgah, Israel (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 32.1: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Aquileia, Italy (Alinari/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 33.1: Museo Nazionale, Naples (Alinari/Art Resource). Fig. 34.1: Konstantinos A. Manafis, ed., *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine* (Ekdotike Athenon, 1990), p. 139, reproduced courtesy of Ekdotike Athenon. Fig. 36.2: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 36.3: Madeline Grimoldi Archives, © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. Fig. 37.1: James M. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nelson and Philips, 1902), p. 85. Fig. 39.1: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Fig. 39.3: Louvre (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY). Fig. 40.2: Albrecht Dürer, *Apocalipsis in figuris*, 1511. Fig. 40.3: Herrad of Hohenbourg, *Hortus deliciarum*, ed. Rosalie Green *et al.* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), vol. II, p. 454, reproduced courtesy of Brill Academic Publishers (plate 151). Fig. 40.4: S. Maria della Concezione, Rome (Alinari/Art Resource, NY).

I Introduction

Billions of people throughout the world today practice the religion of Christianity. It consists of three primary divisions: Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. It can be further subdivided into thousands of distinct denominations and sects, each differing to some degree in belief and practice. Though none of these Christian groups existed in the beginning of Christianity, all look back to that time as having fundamental significance for their own tradition. It is this foundational period of Christianity that we will study in this book. We will examine the history, literature, and religion of Christianity in its earliest stages.

Our study will focus on the years from about 30 to 150 of the present era, from the beginning of Christianity through the first half of the second century. Occasionally, we will take a look beyond those years. At the beginning of that period, a Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth went about Palestine preaching and attracting followers. After his crucifixion by the Roman governor, his Jewish followers continued to preach in his name, proclaiming him as the Jewish Messiah or Christ. Christianity thus emerged as a sect of Judaism in Roman Palestine. It quickly developed into various competing factions. Some of these factions remained primarily Jewish, while others opened the door to Gentiles (non-Jews). Some of these factions disappeared from history, while others survived and developed into forms of Christianity that still exist today.

In studying the origins of Christianity, we will examine numerous writings relating to the foundational period, some Christian and some non-Christian. Much of the Christian literature from this period has been preserved in various collections: the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, the New Testament Apocrypha, and the Nag Hammadi Library. Since much of our study will focus on the writings in these collections, we will begin by discussing the nature of this literature and our method of studying it.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Some of the earliest Christian writings, dating from the first and second centuries, have been preserved in a collection called the **New Testament**.

The New Testament as Christian scripture

The New Testament has special significance for the Christian religion. Like many other religions – such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam – Christianity has **scriptures**, sacred writings that members of the religion consider especially authoritative or important. The Christian scriptures have two main divisions. (1) Like Judaism, Christianity has traditionally viewed the **Hebrew Scriptures** as sacred writings. These are a collection of documents pertaining to the history and religion of ancient Israel and Judaism. Because Christianity developed out of the Jewish religion, early Christians took over the Jewish scriptures as their own. Christians generally call the Hebrew Scriptures the **Old Testament**. (2) In addition, Christian scriptures include the New Testament, a collection of twenty-seven writings pertaining to Jesus and the early Christian church. The story of how these writings came to be considered scripture is told in Chapter 8. Together the Old Testament and the New Testament make up the Christian **Bible**, a word that literally means “books.”

The New Testament as testament

The term “testament” in the title of these two collections would be translated more accurately as “covenant,” an agreement between two parties. In the Christian religion, the terms “old covenant” and “new covenant” express the idea that God entered into two covenants or agreements. According to this idea, in the old covenant he entered into an agreement with the nation of Israel: “I will be your God and you will be my people” (Leviticus 26:12). In the new covenant he entered into a similar agreement with people from all nations. According to this view, the Old Testament contains the writings that relate to the old covenant, while the New Testament contains those that relate to the new.

From the Jewish perspective, God made only one covenant, a covenant with the people of Israel. For Judaism, therefore, there is neither an “old covenant” nor a “new covenant,” but simply the covenant. There is no “Old” Testament, but simply the Hebrew Scriptures.

Contents of the New Testament

The New Testament contains the following books in the order given. Frequently the names of these books are abbreviated, as indicated.

BOOKS	ABBREVIATIONS
Gospels	
Matthew	Matt
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	
Acts of the Apostles	Acts
Letters ascribed to Paul	
Romans	Rom
1 Corinthians	1 Cor
2 Corinthians	2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Philippians	Phil
Colossians	Col
1 Thessalonians	1 Thes
2 Thessalonians	2 Thes
1 Timothy	1 Tim
2 Timothy	2 Tim
Titus	Titus
Philemon	Philem
Non-Pauline letters	
Hebrews	Heb
James	James
1 Peter	1 Pet
2 Peter	2 Pet
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Apocalypse	
Revelation	Rev

Types of literature

The New Testament contains twenty-seven different writings or “books.” Four types of literature are represented: Gospels (4), a book of Acts (1), letters (21), and an apocalypse (1).

1. The term “**Gospel**” (“good news”) refers to a type of writing that contains stories about Jesus and/or sayings that are attributed to him. Early Christians wrote many works called Gospels, but only four made their way into the New Testament. These are traditionally called the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, after their supposed authors.

2. The term “**Acts**” refers to a type of literature that relates the deeds of some particular person or group. The one book of Acts in the New Testament is called the Acts of the Apostles, a work that describes the beginning of the Christian church and its spread in the Roman world.

3. The twenty-one **letters** in the New Testament, also called epistles, were written by early Christian leaders to various churches and individuals to give instruction and exhortation. Thirteen of these letters claim to be written by one man, the apostle or missionary known as Paul.

4. An “**apocalypse**” (“revelation”) is a type of literature that claims to give secret information from God, often about the end of history. Many apocalyptic writings survive from the centuries before and after Jesus, but only one apocalypse, the book of Revelation, is included in the New Testament.

Chapters and verses

The books of the Bible are divided into chapters, and the chapters are divided into verses. When we wish to refer to a particular passage in the Bible, we give the book, the chapter, and the verse (or verses) in a conventional form. For example, Matthew (or Matt) 5:3–10 refers to the book of Matthew, the fifth chapter, verses 3 through 10 of that chapter.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

Early Christians wrote numerous works besides those that eventually became the New Testament. Before the New Testament came to be considered the only scripture, some of these other works were read in churches and esteemed just as highly as those in the New Testament. Gradually, as church leaders limited the contents of the New Testament to twenty-seven books, these other writings declined in importance. New copies were

seldom made and the old copies wore out or were destroyed. As a result, some of the works have disappeared while others are preserved in only a few copies.

In the modern period, as some of these writings were rediscovered, a new interest arose in the early literature that did not make it into the New Testament. In 1672 an editor named J. B. Cotelier assembled a collection of early Christian writings that he called “Works of the holy Fathers who flourished in apostolic times.” In 1699 the next editor renamed the collection a library of “**Apostolic Fathers**,” a title that it has borne since that time.

Most of these writings are letters from church leaders to various churches instructing them in what the author considers to be true faith and practice. The Didache is a church manual that gives directions for the rituals and organization of the church. The Shepherd of Hermas, an apocalypse, consists of a series of visions and revelations that a Christian prophet claimed to receive.

Contents of the Apostolic Fathers

Letters of Ignatius	Other letters
Ephesians	1 Clement
Magnesians	Epistle of Barnabas
Trallians	Polycarp to the Philippians
Romans	
Philadelphians	Manual of church order
Smyrnaeans	The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)
To Polycarp	
	Apocalypse
	The Shepherd of Hermas

Three other writings in this collection are later than the period we are studying and will not be considered here: 2 Clement, Martyrdom of Polycarp, and Epistle to Diognetus.

OTHER RELEVANT LITERATURE

New Testament Apocrypha

The writings of the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers do not exhaust the literary output of early Christianity. In the second century

and afterward, Christian writers turned out other letters, Gospels, Acts, and apocalypses. Some of these disappeared. We know they existed either because later writers quoted from them or because small fragments of them survived. Other works survived in more complete form. Such quotations, fragments, and more complete works have been collected and published under the heading “**New Testament Apocrypha.**” Originally the term “apocrypha” meant “hidden writings,” but it has come to refer to the writings that belong to neither the New Testament, nor the Apostolic Fathers, nor the collection of later authors known as the “Church Fathers.”

Some of these apocryphal writings develop the portrayal of Jesus found in the New Testament. For example, the Infancy Gospel of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas provide further stories about Jesus’ birth and childhood. The Gospel of Peter has an account of Jesus’ trial, death, and resurrection that differs somewhat from those in the New Testament. Other apocryphal writings preserve legends about Jesus’ earliest followers, the apostles. The Acts of John, the Acts of Paul, and the Acts of Thomas, for example, tell various stories about these apostles. Still other apocryphal writings claim to be revelations of heaven or the afterlife. In the Apocalypse of Peter, for instance, Jesus describes to the apostles the rewards and punishments of the final judgment.

The Nag Hammadi Library

Christianity in the second century came in several varieties, one of which has come to be called “Gnostic.” In 1945 an Egyptian digging in the sand at a place called Nag Hammadi discovered a large sealed jar that contained forty-five different writings in the Coptic (ancient Egyptian) language, the contents of a Gnostic Christian library. Though in their present form these texts date from the fourth century, some are translations of earlier Greek texts from the second century or at least reflect ideas that were current in the second century. These texts have now been translated and published in English as *The Nag Hammadi Library*.

Many different types of literature are found among these texts. For instance, the Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. The Apocryphon (secret book) of John purports to be a revelation given by Jesus to John concerning the origin of the world from a Gnostic perspective. The library also includes other such revelatory discourses, sermons or treatises on religious subjects, and accounts of otherworld journeys. To examine all of this literature would require a separate book, but I have included a discussion of one such work, the Gospel of Thomas.

THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

In our study of early Christianity, some of the writings we will examine belong to the Christian Bible and are thus considered scripture by Christians. Since most Christians are accustomed to studying these writings from a religious perspective, as scripture, it is important to stress from the beginning that we will be taking a different approach.

The New Testament can be studied either confessionally (i.e. religiously, theologically, devotionally) or academically. In the confessional approach, the reader is a Christian who takes these writings as scripture, as a norm or standard for Christian belief and practice. The reader seeks guidance for life, edification, and instruction in the Christian faith. This is how most Christians read the New Testament, either in private devotion or as part of a believing community.

In an academic setting, we approach the New Testament in such a way that both Christians and interested non-Christians can participate. We seek to understand the New Testament without necessarily ascribing normative status to it. This approach is like that of a Christian student who wishes to study the scripture and religion of Islam or Hinduism. The student may want to have a description of these religions without necessarily adopting them. In an academic setting, then, we treat Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and all other religions in the same way: we seek to understand them, not necessarily to adopt or practice them.

Since the period of Christianity that we are studying belongs to the ancient past, the method that scholars use to understand it is the same as that used to understand any period of ancient history. The method used to understand the documents from that period, including the New Testament, is the same as that used to understand any other documents from the past. This method, called the historical-critical method or historical criticism, has been the primary method by which scholars have studied the New Testament academically for the last two hundred years. Today this method is employed not only in secular colleges and universities, but also in many religious institutions – seminaries, divinity schools, and schools of religion. It is a method of studying the New Testament that can be employed by Jews, Christians, and people of other or no religious persuasion. It is the primary method that will be employed in the present textbook.

Differences from the confessional approach

As the two parts of its name suggest, the historical-critical method has two aspects. First, the scholar who uses this method is concerned with history;

and second, the scholar exercises his or her critical faculties, the faculties of reason and judgment. This historical-critical method differs from the confessional approach in several ways.

1. The confessional approach transports a text out of the past into the present. The reader is concerned not so much with what it meant then but with what it means now – what guidance or encouragement it gives to the reader in the present. In contrast, the historical method transports the reader out of the present into the past. It is concerned with what the text meant then, to the person who wrote it and the people to whom it was originally written. The goal of historical study is to understand and explain the past, to find out what happened and why. This involves locating events in time and space and understanding them in the context of the culture and beliefs of that time and place. The scholar of early Christianity working with the historical method therefore seeks to understand the political, cultural, and religious climate of the lands where Christianity originated and spread: first-century Palestine and the Greco-Roman world. The scholar then uses this background knowledge to interpret particular texts from that time, to help understand the events, ideas, and customs expressed in these texts. In this approach, one seeks to understand how the New Testament came about, who wrote it, why it was written, when it was written, what historical circumstances led to its writing, what the original writers intended to say, and what literary forms they used to express themselves.

2. The confessional approach is a theological approach. That is, a person who takes it often speaks about the activities of God: what God thinks, says, does, or intends. By contrast, the historical approach is non-theological. The historian speaks only about history, and since God would be outside of history, the historian cannot speak about the activities of God. History, as historians understand it, consists of the events in the world that could be observed by anyone, whether religious or not, who stood in the right place at the right time. What historians are able to observe in history is not divine activity but human activity. For example, a person speaking from the confessional perspective might make a statement of faith about what God did: “God came to earth in the person of Jesus.” The historian, however, can only observe and state what human beings did or said: “Many early Christians claimed that God came to earth in the person of Jesus.” A historian who is also a Christian might make a statement of faith such as “God came to earth in the person of Jesus”; but if so, he or she would be speaking as a Christian, not as a historian.

3. This non-theological character of the historical method affects the way the historian deals with the New Testament. From the confessional point of view, many Christians regard the New Testament as the inspired word of God. This perspective is equivalent to making a theological statement about the activity of God: "God inspired the authors of the New Testament to write the word of God." But as we have seen, the historian cannot make statements about what God said or did, only about what human beings in history said or did. The historian therefore focuses on the human character of the documents in the New Testament, asking who wrote them, when, where, and why. The historian does not work with any theory of inspiration, since this is a theological claim, a claim of religious faith, rather than a historical claim.

4. The Christian who regards the New Testament as the inspired word of God gives it a privileged status over all other literature. Often such a person has the view that the New Testament contains no error or inconsistency and should not be questioned but simply accepted at face value. The historian, working with no theory of inspiration, but focusing on the human character of the documents, cannot operate by these theological principles. The historian does not take any text from the past at face value, but questions it and evaluates it to determine whether it is authentic, whether it is accurate and reliable, whether it has been altered from what the author originally wrote. The text is like a witness in a court of law, and historical criticism is the method by which the witness is questioned and evaluated. In this respect, the historian gives no special status to the New Testament writings, but treats them like every other document from the ancient past. The critical scholar does not come to the documents with the assumption that they are necessarily authentic, necessarily reliable, necessarily free from errors. The scholar makes judgments about these matters not beforehand, but only after investigation. Nor does the scholar assume that all the New Testament documents agree with one another. The historian is open to the possibility that different authors of the New Testament may present different perspectives.

5. Since the purpose of the confessional approach is to benefit the believer's religious life, and since it regards New Testament scripture as the primary source of such benefit, it makes the New Testament its primary focus of attention. Other early Christian literature is disregarded because it is not scripture. Since the historian, however, has a different purpose, to study history, he or she cannot focus only on the New Testament but must examine all the literature that sheds light on the history of early Christianity. Christian writings that did not become scripture may be as

valuable or more valuable for the historian than writings that did. Non-Christian writings may be equally valuable.

Christian responses to historical criticism

The critical examination of the Bible may disturb some Christian students. Such disturbance may stem from a feeling that the Bible should not be questioned, but simply believed. Frequently it stems from the belief that every writing in the Bible is inspired by God verbally (word for word) and contains no possible error. From this viewpoint, it is not acceptable to find inaccuracies, contradictions, or inconsistencies in the Bible. Those students who have doubts about examining the Bible critically should keep one thing in mind: this textbook does not intend simply to substitute one set of authorities (critical scholars) for another (parents and church leaders). Rather, in keeping with the goal of a liberal arts education, it aims to help you think for yourself. It provides you with the information you need to make an informed evaluation of one method of reading the Bible. What you appropriate or do not appropriate from it ultimately remains your own decision to make.

Other Christian students have less trouble with the historical-critical method, since they recognize the human element in the Bible. While most Christians acknowledge a human element in the writing and formation of the Bible, some acknowledge it more fully than others. From this viewpoint, the Bible was written and collected by people who had religious experiences, but who nevertheless remained limited and fallible. For these Christians, Christian faith depends not upon a perfect, error-free Bible, but only upon the validity of its central message, whatever that is understood to be. From this perspective, it is important to question and examine the Bible critically and historically: critically, since what is true should stand up to scrutiny; historically, lest ideas and practices that simply reflected a particular situation or culture be exalted to the status of eternally valid truth.

One value of a historical perspective

The problem just mentioned, that of elevating a particular historical situation to the status of eternal truth, is illustrated by the role the New Testament has played in promoting anti-Jewish sentiment. The New Testament was produced during a time of strife between the followers of Jesus and the Jewish establishment. The New Testament writings reflect that strife. They include some rather severe denunciations and criticisms of the Jewish people and religion. In times past, Christians who take the

New Testament as scripture have been influenced to adopt a similar negative attitude toward Judaism. During the Inquisition of the Middle Ages, for example, Christians persecuted Jews, forcibly converting them or expelling them from Christian countries. Less severe forms of anti-Jewish sentiment have been more frequent.

Many contemporary Christian leaders, aware of the problem, have sought ways of establishing more positive Jewish–Christian relations. Part of the solution lies in recognizing the historically limited nature of the New Testament. A historical perspective helps make us aware that the conflicts between early Christians and Judaism belong to a particular historical time and situation. They should not serve as a model for Jewish–Christian relations today.

Abbreviations for dates

In the present textbook, the abbreviation CE (“common era”) is used instead of AD (“in the year of our Lord”) to refer to dates after the birth of Jesus. The abbreviation BCE (“before the common era”) appears instead of BC (“before Christ”) to refer to dates prior to the birth of Jesus. Most scholarly writing has abandoned the abbreviations AD and BC out of deference for non-Christians, who do not consider Jesus as “Lord” or “Christ.”

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define or identify: scriptures, Hebrew Scriptures, Old Testament, Christian Bible, CE, BCE.
2. Describe the four types of literature that the New Testament contains.
3. Distinguish between the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, the New Testament Apocrypha, and the Nag Hammadi Library.
4. Explain the two aspects of historical criticism.
5. Explain how the historical-critical method differs from the confessional approach to studying the Bible.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Primary sources

Elliott, J. K., ed. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Clarendon, 1993).

One-volume collection of apocryphal writings in English translation, with brief introductions.

- Lightfoot, J. B., J. R. Harmer, and Michael W. Holmes, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers* (2nd edn.; Baker, 1989). Holmes' revision of Lightfoot's translation of the Apostolic Fathers, with introductions and bibliography.
- Robinson, James M., ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (3rd edn.; Harper & Row, 1988). Standard English translation of the writings discovered at Nag Hammadi.
- Schneemelcher, Wilhelm, ed. *New Testament Apocrypha* (rev. edn.; 2 vols.; Westminster John Knox, 1991, 1992). Substantial collection of apocryphal writings in English translation, with extended introductions.

Other suggestions

- Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday, 1997). A comprehensive introduction to the literature of the New Testament.
- Goodspeed, Edgar J. *A History of Early Christian Literature* (revised and enlarged by Robert M. Grant; University of Chicago Press, 1966). A survey of the first three centuries of Christian literature.
- Koester, Helmut. *Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edn.; 2 vols.; De Gruyter, 1995, 2000). Volume II surveys the history and literature of early Christianity.
- Krentz, Edgar. *The Historical-Critical Method* (Fortress, 1975). A brief introduction to the rise of historical criticism, its goals, techniques, presuppositions, and achievements.