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READING *the*
NEW TESTAMENT
as CHRISTIAN
SCRIPTURE

A LITERARY, CANONICAL, AND
THEOLOGICAL SURVEY

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Abbreviations xi

1. The New Testament as Christian Scripture 1
2. The New Testament as a Book 12
3. The World around the New Testament 22
4. Jesus's Life and Teaching 52
5. The Fourfold Gospel Book 70
6. The Gospel according to Matthew 89
7. The Gospel according to Mark 105
8. The Gospel according to Luke 120
9. The Gospel according to John 138
10. The Acts of the Apostles 156
11. The Apostle Paul's Life and Teaching 178
12. The Letter to the Romans 191
13. The First Letter to the Corinthians 210
14. The Second Letter to the Corinthians 229
15. The Letter to the Galatians 241
16. The Letter to the Ephesians 253
17. The Letter to the Philippians 262
18. The Letter to the Colossians 269
19. The First Letter to the Thessalonians 277

20. The Second Letter to the Thessalonians	284
21. The Pastoral Letters: 1–2 Timothy and Titus	290
22. The Letter to Philemon	305
23. The Letter to the Hebrews	311
24. The Letter of James	323
25. The First Letter of Peter	331
26. The Second Letter of Peter	341
27. The Letters of John: 1–3 John	347
28. The Letter of Jude	360
29. The Book of Revelation	366
30. Reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture in the Twenty-First Century	381
Glossary	387
Notes	407
Index	411



The New Testament as Christian Scripture

What's in a Title?

Titles matter because the title of a book gives a frame of reference, creates expectations, and sets the tone for readers' experience. Indeed, many things have already happened in your mind (and body) between when you first started reading the title of this book and the sentence that is ending right now. Our title, *Reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Survey*, has already animated various notions and set your expectations in a way that is mostly subconscious.

We hope that these are positive expectations, but we are aware that they may not be! Our chosen title may or may not register much reaction at all and may even cause some confusion. We have carefully chosen this title to stimulate questions and guide your encounter with our book and, more importantly, with the **New Testament** itself. In this opening chapter we will unpack the title to discuss the frame, goal, and vision for this book.

Why Emphasize Reading Today?

“Nothing easy is worthwhile, and nothing worthwhile is easy.” “You can rake all day long and get only leaves. But if you take the time to dig, you may find gold.” These proverbial statements are pithy and memorable but, more importantly, wise and true. Every generation and culture have

obstacles to thoughtful living, but it seems that our culture today has the potential and technology to be more distracted than any other. Screens, notifications, and connection to a global wealth of information in our pockets provide us with dopamine-inspired quick bursts of pleasure that leave us hungering for another fix while dissipating our mental and emotional energy.

This makes reading hard. This makes reading old, foreign, religious documents especially hard. Maybe you don't want to read this book and are being forced to for a grade. We understand. But we want to invite you into the profound pleasure that comes from learning to be attentive and present to yourself and others through reading. Imagine how wonderful it is when you have the opportunity to sit with an engaging and wise friend at a coffee shop discussing the complexities of life and deep thoughts about the soul and relationships. Remember what it's like to be so absorbed that you are undistracted, wholly present to the reality and importance of the discussion.

The beauty and power of books is that they enable us to enter into such life-changing conversations with a world of people that we would never have the opportunity to meet in person. This includes the Bible,

wherein we can sit with God himself, learning and reflecting. But this does require some work: the commitment to read and to read thoughtfully. This book will guide you through a reading of the New Testament texts. When we begin a new section with a heading like this—■ READ MARK 1:16–2:12 ■—we are inviting you to pause and devote your energy to listening to these ancient texts. You can browse social media all day and get some leaves, but if you dig into **Scripture** you will find gold.

Why Call This a “Christian” Reading?

What is the significance of adding the descriptor “Christian”? Why are we being invited to read the New Testament as *Christian* Scripture?

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1962.



Figure 1.1.1. *Saint Francis Reading* by Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich

In the first instance, this means that we embrace the biblical **canon** as twofold, Old and New Testaments together. As we will discuss below, both parts of the Christian canon mutually inform each other. At the same time, the New Testament claims to provide the ultimate revelation of God himself in **Christ**. This *Logos*, the Son, who is ever with the Father and has been incarnated at a time in history in Jesus, together with the indwelling Spirit, witnesses to the mystery of the **Trinity**. This is no small matter. This means that because of the fullness of revelation now given in the new **covenant**, *all* of the Bible should be read with the knowledge of the Triune God at hand, even though the **Hebrew Scriptures** do not explicitly speak in this way. This reading backward of the whole Bible is an important element in what it means to read Christianly. One does not *have* to read the Bible in this way, but one must do so in order to read it as *Christian Scripture*.

There is also another vital facet of reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture: reading it as a **disciple**. To read the New Testament (and the whole Bible) as Christian Scripture is to read it “with the grain,” in line with its clear intention, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The foreignness of the Bible to modern readers inclines us to think that we need to make a pilgrimage into the world of the Bible and then take its meaning back out and transform it into something relatable to us today. Rather, as one biblical scholar observes, “‘Pilgrimage’ is more appropriately a description of the character of our lives in this world, with our status as strangers in the world attributable to our making our home in the world of Scripture. In this hermeneutical scenario, it is not the message of the Bible that requires transformation; it is we who require transformation.”¹ That is, we are not taking a pilgrimage into the Bible and back; the Bible is transforming the journey of our lives.

The ideal reader of the New Testament, then, is one who is reading in order to be formed according to God’s vision for humanity. Our goal in reading is not merely to garner *information* but also to experience *transformation*: not to be smarter people but to become a different kind of people. The reason for listening to the teaching of Jesus and of the **apostles** is to come to trust in Jesus as the revelation of God and, from this, to entrust



Figure 1.2. *The Supper at Emmaus* by Velázquez

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913.

our lives to his ways. The New Testament has a radical and beautiful goal of deconstructing our values and re-forming them in line with God’s nature and coming kingdom. Therefore, to read the New Testament as Christian Scripture is to read it so as to become conformed to the image of Christ himself, imitating the apostles, who themselves were imitating/following Jesus (John 13:12–15; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Pet. 2:21). Anything less than this transformative pilgrimage is less than a *Christian* reading of the New Testament. ⓘ

What’s New about the New Testament?

We encounter the word “new” most frequently today through the world of advertising. Whether it is the new iPhone, a new plan from politicians, or a new dishwashing detergent, we are trained to spot and covet the “new and improved.” This is not necessarily bad, of course, as “new” can and does often mean an improvement. Rarely do people want the “old and inferior,” unless it signals some retro technology or sports a throwback look. Even then, the old is desirable because there is some perceived greater value or quality, not simply because it is old.

But what does the “new” in New Testament communicate? Why did early Christians describe the writings of the apostles as a “new testament”? First, we must understand that this word “testament” comes to us through Latin and basically means the same thing as “covenant.” In fact, the title for the New Testament in Greek is *Hē Kainē Diathēkē*, which translates as “the new covenant,” wording that comes from Jeremiah 31:31; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 8:8; and elsewhere. What is a covenant? A covenant is a relationship between two parties (like a marriage or a mortgage) that has spelled-out expectations. So when we call a piece of writing a covenant or testimony, we are referring to the instructions and explanations that relate to a specific relationship. In this case, for both the **Old Testament** and the New Testament, we are learning about the relationship of God with humanity.

This collection of writings titled “New Covenant/Testament” implies that there was something before, an “Old Covenant/Testament.” The earliest



INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

The Ideal Disciple Reader

Different books anticipate different kinds of readers. Some books require certain skills, knowledge, and perspectives for the writing to be fully understood. So too with the New Testament, which expects and anticipates a certain kind of ideal reader. This reader is a disciple whose life is marked by a number of traits. The ideal reader (1) has a personal stake in the truthfulness of the Bible’s assertions, seeking to understand through **faith**; (2) has undergone a religious, moral, and intellectual conversion, resulting in a renewed view of the world, a transformed set of commitments, and an attitude of devotion; (3) has the Holy Spirit residing within, enabling understanding; and (4) has an active engagement in the life of the church/God’s people, reading the texts in a community and tradition with orthodox teachers.² Anyone can read the New Testament, but this kind of reader will understand it most clearly.

Christians did not use this phrase explicitly, but they understood Jesus as the Promised One, who ushered in the era of a new covenant. By the early third century of the Christian era this “Old/New Testament” description comes into usage, and it continues to this day.

However, this language of “new” does not necessarily mean that the preceding was bad or is now completely irrelevant, as would be the case with a consumer product today (who wants an iPhone 3 anymore?). Rather, “renewed and completed” might be a better sense of how the New Testament is linked to what came before it.

Matthew 5:17–20 is one of the most important biblical passages for understanding the relationship of the two parts of the Christian Bible, even if its exact meaning is still being debated two thousand years later. In his first teaching in the First Gospel Jesus addresses the issue head-on: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17 AT). Jesus is not dismissing or disregarding God’s earlier revelation. He is not deeming the past as irrelevant. The New Testament does not *abolish* the Old Testament but rather *fulfills* it. In the Bible “fulfill” primarily focuses not on prediction or replacement but on renewal, consummation, and fullness. This means that when we think about the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament, there is both continuity and discontinuity, a shared foundation with positive change toward its goal.

Thus we can recognize some real sense in which the new (Jesus) covenant *is* superior to the old (Mosaic) covenant. The apostle Paul and the author of Hebrews particularly make this clear: the old covenant was not able to give life in the same way (Rom. 8:2–4), or provide a perfect, conscience-cleansing *sacrifice* (Heb. 8:6–13), or be fully internalized and transformative from the inside (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26; Heb. 10:16). To be a Christian means to believe precisely in this distinction, that Jesus has come and brought a new covenant in his blood (Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20), bringing us to a mountain greater than Sinai, to Zion (Heb. 12:18–24).

However, this fulfillment should not be misunderstood as a negating or dismissing of the Hebrew Scriptures. The story of Israel is not old news, or “inferior” like an early, buggy version of hardware or software. The same Paul who speaks boldly about the transforming shift from the Mosaic covenant to the **law of Christ** (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2) also emphasizes that God still cares for the Jewish people, that they have some understanding of God that the world does not naturally have, and that **gentiles** should not think of themselves as somehow superior (Rom. 3:1–2; 9:1–11:36).

To think about this relationship, we need a metaphor other than that of mere superiority. From a Christian perspective, “fulfillment” is the best way

to frame the matter. God’s good plans for humanity come to their completion and consummation in Jesus. This means that going back to the Mosaic covenant would be foolish and even deadly because of what it is unable to do for humanity—provide true and lasting life. However, it does not mean that the **Jewish Scriptures** themselves are flawed or irrelevant to the Christian life. At the end of Luke’s Gospel, in the story he tells about Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Luke highlights this same fact, that Jesus is understood properly by going back and rereading the whole Old Testament in light of what Jesus has now said and done (Luke 24:13–49). ⁱ

What Does the New Testament Have to Do with the Old Testament?

Following directly from this idea of the New Testament’s fulfillment of the Old Testament, we then can ask more specifically: What does the New Testament have to do with the Old Testament? We have already noted that we must not think of the Old in a flat-footed way of being replaced with the relevant and instructive New.

Nor should we think of the relationship of the Old Testament and the New Testament as unidirectional only. There is a very old and venerable Christian tradition of reading the Old Testament in light of the New. We might describe this as a front-wheel-drive arrangement. The New Testament drives the whole Bible and pulls the Old Testament along where it is going. Some have suggested instead a rear-wheel-drive understanding, where a plain-sense reading of the Old Testament pushes along and we understand the New Testament in light of what the Old Testament is already doing.³

In contrast to either a front-wheel-drive-only or rear-wheel-drive-only analogy, we propose a four-wheel-drive model where both the Old Testament and the New Testament alternate in taking the lead. We should think of the Testaments as two parts in a *two-testament Christian canon*. Together the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the writings of the apostles (New Testament) form something new and



INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

The Titles of Our Bibles

Because our Christian Bibles consist of writings considered sacred by two major religions (Judaism and Christianity) in two major languages (Hebrew and Greek), the Bible has been described in a variety of ways:

The Scriptures—Used by Jewish people in both pre-Christian times and during early Christianity to describe the Jewish sacred writings, before the New Testament was finalized.

The Jewish/Hebrew Scriptures—Used today by Jewish people and many scholars to describe sacred writings written in Hebrew.

The Old Testament—Used by Christians starting in the early third century to refer to the sacred Jewish writings in comparison with the writings of the apostles.

The New Testament—Used by Christians starting in the early third century, coming from the promise of a new covenant that Christians understand to be fulfilled in Jesus.

authoritative (see below on “canon”). By being read together (and, very early on, being physically bound together), the two parts of the Christian Bible inform each other in a bidirectional way. The Old Testament sets the foundation, reveals God’s character and actions in the world, and points toward the restoration of humanity under his good reign. The New Testament completes this story, enabling a more thorough and particularly trinitarian and Christ-centered rereading of the whole Bible. You can read the Old Testament without the New Testament and understand a lot about God, though to be part of the people of God now requires embracing the **Messiah** he has finally sent. You can read the New Testament without the Old Testament, but it will be a thin and decontextualized reading of the whole story.



Figure 1.3. Design for a cupola with Old and New Testament figures by Pietro de Angelis

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1960.

Why Is the New Testament Called “Scripture”?

So far, we have explored the newness of the New Testament and how to think about the relationship of the Old to the New. We may now ask, What is the significance of calling the Old and New Testaments “Scripture”? After all, we are focusing on documents written between two thousand and three thousand years ago by people in cultures very different from our own. Are these documents really relevant today for individuals and for society?

Even if understood as a collection of merely human documents, the Bible still has abiding antiquarian and historical interest. But the perspective operative in this book, in line with the ancient Jewish and Christian conviction, is that the Bible is not only a record of religious understanding but is also more: *it is Holy Scripture*. This means that in addition to providing human wisdom and lessons from human history, the Old Testament and the New Testament are witnesses to God’s self-disclosure, a *revelation*

of who God is—his character, his name, his identity, his actions, his ways. To understand the Bible as Scripture, then, is to approach it with a posture of humility, teachability, and submission, not because the Bible itself is magical or glows in the dark, but because it faithfully does what no other speech or writing in the world does fully: it reveals the Triune God of the universe. It is the revelation of God himself in verbal form. And this calls for a response. Erich Auerbach writes, “The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. . . . The Scripture stories . . . seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.”⁴

This is why we refer to the Bible as a “canon,” meaning that the books that make up the Bible together are separate and distinct and worthy of heeding closely. The books of the Bible have a unique authority because they are part of the canon, or rule. There is plenty of wisdom and truth all throughout the world, but to identify some writings as canonical is to set them apart, to recognize and honor their authoritative contribution. So to read the New Testament as Scripture is to recognize its revelatory nature.

We may also think of the Bible as “Scripture” in another way, as providing the “script” for our lives. Not only does Scripture show us truth and falsehood, but also it guides how we are to live in the world. This sense of “script(ure)” is analogous to that of a play. The script guides the direction of the story, but a good actor will always make the performance his or her own. Performing is more than reading lines on a script with monotone obedience; it is understanding and being present to the voice and power of the script, interpreting and emphasizing with wholehearted presence, and even ad-libbing and expanding as the need arises. Of course, this analogy breaks down eventually, but the point is that to read the New Testament as Scripture is to be in a lively and humble dialogue with the voice of the text, seeking to understand and live according to its direction as we encounter obstacles, tensions, and other people.

What Can You Expect from This Book?

This leads us to the final question for this opening chapter: What can you expect from this book? This is a textbook, and, more specifically, it can be classified in the genre of a New Testament survey or introduction. This kind of book developed relatively late in the reading of the Bible, only a couple of hundred years ago, as a product of modern scholarship. Various New Testament surveys or introductions emphasize different aspects, depending on the interests and perspectives of various writers. Our

introduction to the New Testament is no exception, reflecting a particular vision. We hope that our readers will discover some modes and means of reading the New Testament that have largely been lost in the modern era and therefore are not found in other New Testament surveys. These include reading the New Testament texts in dialogue with each other, with the Old Testament, with other interpreters throughout history, and with Christian creeds and theological statements.

Our conviction is that direct engagement with the biblical texts themselves is more important than anything we can say about them. As a result, the major goal of this New Testament survey is to offer a guide for students to thoughtfully read the texts of Scripture themselves, with

helps supplied by those who are a bit further along on the journey. These helps include the use of **bold** type to indicate that a term appears in the glossary at the end of the book. Don't forget to look there when you have a question! Each chapter also ends with some study questions to help you reflect and deepen your understanding. As we trek through each book, we encourage you to read the biblical texts before you read our interpretive guide.

In addition to this main interpretive guide, each chapter contains a series of sidebars organized into five different categories: Historical Matters, Literary Notes, Theological Issues, Canonical Connections, and Reception History. This unique approach comes from the conviction that the kinds of questions we ask of texts determine the kinds of answers we get from them. If we ask historical questions, we get historical answers; theological questions yield theological answers; moral and practical questions produce moral and practical answers; and so on. (The introductory chapters also include some general sidebars that contain information that helps prepare us to read the text well.) Icons corresponding to the various types of sidebars are placed within the main text to prompt readers to pause and read the relevant sidebar(s).



Figure 1.4. *Reading the Scriptures* by Thomas Waterman Wood

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1966.

Scripture is not afraid of questions; we believe that these five query categories are valuable for a truly Christian reading of the whole Bible.



HISTORICAL MATTERS

Historical Matters boxes provide information about issues going on behind the text of Scripture. This includes information about authorship, date, and historical setting of the biblical books. This also includes cultural information that sheds light on certain customs and practices mentioned in the biblical texts.



LITERARY NOTES

Literary Notes boxes focus on the structure and form of the scriptural writings. What are the ways the New Testament author has structured the argument or story, and what can we learn from this? For example, recognizing that Matthew has collected Jesus's teachings into five major blocks helps us to interpret them as collections and to note their particular literary structure.



THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Theological Issues boxes build bridges between Scripture and categories of systematic and constructive theology. While the Bible and theology can and do overlap, they often use different categories and language to describe the truth. Theological Issues boxes help to make connections between particular biblical texts and the categories that are used to organize the biblical witness into theological categories.



CANONICAL CONNECTIONS

Canonical Connections boxes show some of the myriad ways in which the whole Bible can be read as one story. The canon is beautifully diverse, but as a canon it also has a unity and singularity of voice in witnessing to the Triune God. Canonical Connections boxes highlight how a particular biblical text can be read in fruitful dialogue with other passages in the Old Testament and the New Testament.



RECEPTION HISTORY

Reception History boxes give examples of ways in which a portion of the Scriptures has been received and applied throughout the history of the church. This reception may be in the form of visual art, music, or application to particular social situations. Reception History boxes can help us to see the biblical texts with fresh eyes.

Christian Reading Questions

1. What makes a *Christian* reading of Scripture different from another way of reading the Bible?
2. What traits mark the life of the ideal disciple reader?
3. How does the New Testament relate to the Old Testament? How is this understanding different from or similar to the way you thought about the two Testaments before reading this chapter?
4. Why is it important that we call the Old Testament and the New Testament “Scripture”? How does this influence the way we read them?

The New Testament as a Book

At the heart of both Judaism and Christianity is the belief that God’s truth is found in a book—sacred writings that are honored, studied, and obeyed (or not) and that outlast every generation of their believers. “All humanity is grass. . . . The grass withers, . . . but the word of our God remains forever” (Isa. 40:6–8). In the previous chapter we discussed what it means to call the New Testament “Scripture.” In this chapter we will address key issues concerning the New Testament as a book: the reliability of the ancient **manuscripts**, differences among translations and editions, and the impact of binding together the apostles’ writings into one volume.

From Speaking to Manuscripts to a Book

As with the Old Testament, the New Testament did not begin as writing. Both Testaments began with historical events, memories about these events, and then people discussing the meaning and interpretation of these events. Some of these memories and oral interpretations came from authoritative leaders, inspired by God through the Holy Spirit to record in writing what happened and how to understand the significance. These writings included both generic and detailed accounts of historical events as well as poems, songs, prophecies, sermons, letters, and proverbs. Sometimes these were written down by an authoritative **prophet**, king, priest, or apostle, and sometimes by their disciples.

For the New Testament, this progression from oral traditions to written records materialized very quickly—within twenty to seventy-five years and within the lifetime of the first generation of people who experienced Jesus. In the case of the Gospels particularly, influential disciples gathered the memories and traditions about what Jesus said and did, and they produced theological interpretations of these in the form of four biographies (see chap. 5). One of these disciples, Luke, also wrote a companion volume, the book of Acts, that explains the birth of the church and the events of its first decades (see chap. 10). Several of the leading, authoritative disciples (called apostles) traveled widely, preaching the **gospel** and establishing Christian churches. As they did so, they often wrote letters explaining theological ideas, exhorting people to godliness and faithfulness, and addressing moral and doctrinal problems that arose. Some of these letters (“epistles”) are very personal (e.g., Galatians, Philemon), while others are more generalized and were intended for circulation among a larger number of people and churches (e.g., James, Revelation). ①

The New Testament’s Table of Contents

Each document in the New Testament started as an individual text, but eventually they were collected into what became a standard grouping and ordering. The New Testament consists of twenty-seven different documents, organized not chronologically but according to **genre** and author. There is also an intentional pattern: four biographies about Jesus followed by the continuing story in Acts, followed by Paul’s nine letters to seven different churches, Paul’s four letters to individuals, the Letter to the Hebrews, seven general letters, and the book of Revelation, which is addressed to seven churches.

The four Gospels—The largest section of the New Testament contains four overlapping stories that describe Jesus’s life and teaching. The authors traditionally are understood to be two of Jesus’s original disciples (Matthew and John) and two students of the apostles Peter (Mark) and Paul (Luke).

The book of Acts—Also written by the Gospel author Luke, this book continues the story of some of Jesus’s disciples after his **resurrection**, recounting how the church grew and spread throughout the Roman world, with particular emphasis on Peter and then Paul.

The apostle Paul’s letters to churches—The early Christian missionary Paul started churches all over the Roman world. He subsequently wrote letters to these people to encourage and teach them. We have nine of these letters, each bearing the name of the city or area of the church’s location, organized by length from lon-

gest to shortest: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, and 2 Thessalonians.

The apostle Paul’s letters to individuals—Paul also wrote letters to individual disciples, offering instructions and encouragement. We have four of these personal letters, again organized according to length: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.

The Letter to the Hebrews—Some people link this letter to Paul, but we don’t know for certain who wrote it. This highly structured piece gives a Greek and Christian reinterpretation of key aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures, hence its name.

The General or Catholic Letters—This group consists of seven letters that are named according to their authors. They are no less important than the letters written by Paul, but they are called “general” or “catholic” (meaning “universal”) because they seem to be intended for a wider readership and application. These letters are James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

The book of Revelation—The New Testament collection ends with a very different kind of document, one that combines the letter form with another type of ancient writing, the **apocalypse**. An apocalypse uses poetic and **allegorical** images to describe the world from a heavenly perspective, revealing to God’s faithful people what is happening now and in the future under God’s control.

In every case the written form of these biographies, teachings, and letters was recorded as a manuscript—that is, a handwritten document on some type of paper (**papyrus**) or, a more expensive option, a kind of leather (**velum**). These manuscripts were then courier-borne to other places, where they were copied by hand so that they could be preserved and read aloud in the churches. As a result, these texts that eventually became the New Testament spread like wildfire as Christians traveled throughout the Greco-Roman Empire, calling people to believe in the risen Christ.

As Christianity continued to grow, and as the apostles' generation began to die (often as **martyrs**), the need arose to preserve and clarify which manuscripts were really from apostles—meaning that they were authoritative and worthy of maintaining in the church. Several false teachers and errors had arisen in the church (Matt. 7:15; Rom. 16:17–18; Gal. 1:7–8), and these people and their disciples wrote letters and treatises as well. Therefore, an

authoritative list of which documents were trustworthy and beneficial was needed. This kind of list is called a canon. ⓘ

Texts were canonized not just through putting their titles on a list but also through binding and publishing an authorized group of documents together. By putting several texts together with the stamp of approval from recognized authorities, the collection verified these documents as official and authoritative. A canon book gave people a reliable, authoritative collection of texts to study.

The physical mechanics of creating such a clearly demarcated collection, however, proved very difficult with **scrolls**. Rolled pieces of parchment (scrolls) can easily get separated from one another, and one can lose track of which texts were supposed to be included, not to mention the hassle of trying to find a section to read by unrolling a long document. In the first couple of centuries AD, however, a newer technology was on the rise: the technique of slicing manuscripts into pieces and then sewing or gluing them together in a stack. This produced something called a **codex**, and it is the earliest form of what today we would call a book. (If you look closely at the binding on a modern book, you will see that the technique is still very much the same.)



INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

Canon Lists

A “canon list” is a list of books that an author or a council has determined are authoritative because they make up what should be in the Bible. For the Christian Bible (both Old and New Testaments together), many canon lists were made throughout the first several centuries of the church. This included lists by Greek authors such as Melito of Sardis, Eusebius, and Athanasius, and Latin leaders including Hilary, Jerome, Augustine, and Pope Innocent I.

These lists are not always identical, but they do show a growing consensus about which books were regarded as biblical. The canonical books were not the only books that were read by Christians, however. Other works, such as *Wisdom of Solomon* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, were still seen as beneficial and worth reading, even if they were not always considered part of the canon.

Even though the canon lists became more standard in the Middle Ages, distinct branches of the church (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) had some differences. With the Reformation in the sixteenth century, canon lists became a hot issue again, with Protestants often arguing for the exclusion of some books that the Roman Catholic tradition included in its canon.¹

Christians were some of the earliest adopters of this new binding and publishing technique, and the significance was great. Selected manuscripts could be collected, organized, titled, and distributed in one piece. This happened with the Gospels, which soon began circulating as the Fourfold Gospel Book (see chap. 5). This happened with the letters by Paul, which were collected—maybe by Paul himself—and given various titles and an order. The other parts of the New Testament canon took shape as well, as we can see in some early and large whole-Bible codices. Very significantly, the codex enabled Christians to bind together not only the authoritative New Testament books themselves but also the New Testament canon with the Jewish Scriptures (later called the Old Testament). This created a two-fold canon that honored the Old Testament as authoritative, while also setting the New Testament documents on the same level of authority and inspiration. ⓘ



The Whole-Bible Codices

While we have many individual manuscripts of the New Testament writings from the first few centuries AD, some of the most important witnesses we have to the New Testament come from the large whole-Bible codices (bound books) from the third and fourth centuries. These are called **majuscules**, because they are written entirely in capital Greek letters with no spaces between the words. They were written on vellum by professional scribes. These include:

- Codex Vaticanus**—ca. AD 325; oldest of the majuscules; preserved in the Vatican Library
- Codex Sinaiticus**—ca. AD 350; discovered at St. Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
- Codex Alexandrinus**—ca. AD 425; named for its earlier location in Alexandria, Egypt
- Codex Ephraemi**—ca. AD 450; so named because it was discovered on manuscripts under the writings of the theologian Ephrem of Syria

These beautiful, expensive, handcrafted books show how Christians thought about their Holy Scriptures—the Old Testament and New Testament together, preserved with great care.

The recent digitization project on Codex Sinaiticus has produced high-quality interactive images of this important book (<http://www.codexsinaiticus.org>).



Figure 2.1. Codex Sinaiticus (AD 350)

The British Library | Add MS 43725; f.244v.

Are These Old Texts Reliable? The Art and Science of Textual Criticism

Before the printing press was invented in the fifteenth century, all textual reproductions were created by hand, one copy at a time. Even with modern printing technologies it is easy for errors and derivations from the original to creep in. The same thing was true in the ancient world with the hand copying of manuscripts. The process of canonization highlights which books, letters, and biographies are authoritative and worthy of preservation and study. The study of **textual criticism** seeks to establish the most reliable version of the content and wording of each of these books. “Criticism” here does not mean a posture of judgment or an assumption of inaccuracy, but instead the scholarly practices and techniques used to make reasonable decisions about the accuracy of the manuscripts.

Are the Greek texts that we now call the New Testament accurate compared to what was originally written and distributed? In short, the answer is a confident yes. This can be argued for several reasons. First, Christianity, rooted in Jewish heritage, shares with Judaism the religious and cultural values to preserve sacred texts and to care very much about the particular wording. As this was true for the Jews, so it was naturally true from the beginning for Christianity.

Second, Christianity spread rapidly and deeply throughout the ancient world, resulting in multiple copies of the New Testament texts being made and distributed, thus providing us with many manuscripts to compare and evaluate. The long-term impact of Christianity on the Mediterranean basin and throughout Europe meant that the lengthy time between Jesus and the printing press was filled with thousands of people and institutions that dedicated themselves to the preservation and accurate reproduction of the biblical texts.

Third, stemming from the second point, at the sheer material level the fact is that we have many and varied manuscript witnesses to the ancient New Testament texts. This mass of manuscripts (numbering nearly six thousand and dating back to the second century AD) consists of papyri, majuscules, **minuscules**, **lectionaries**, and translations into other languages, including Latin, Coptic, and Syriac. Beyond this, the extant writings of the church’s prominent theologians and preachers of the first centuries (often called the **church fathers**) constantly quote the biblical texts, giving us another point of comparison to what the original documents likely said.

Fourth, based on this large body of manuscript witnesses, scholars have developed sophisticated procedures by which they are classified and compared and their relationships to one another analyzed. This work has been

done since ancient times and by a wide variety of scholars all over the world, resulting in many **critical editions** of the Greek New Testament that provide reconstructed Greek texts that are recognized as reliable. ⓘ

The fact that we have so many different manuscripts means that every page of our modern critical editions of the Greek New Testament has a wide variety of alternative readings (variants). It has been estimated that about 12 percent of all the words of the New Testament have some alternative reading. This may sound surprising, and some scholars have used this statistic in a misleading way. But the reality is that there are so many variants precisely because we have such a wealth of manuscripts; this is a positive effect, not a negative one. More importantly, only about 1.5 percent of the New Testament could be classified as having significant variants, meaning that some thought is required to determine which is the best reading. The vast majority of variants are obvious and insignificant differences such as misspellings, alternate spellings, or the accidental repeating of a word or line—all common errors that occur in manuscript reproduction. Only about one out of every one thousand words in the New Testament provides substantial difficulties to determine which wording is original, and very few of these have any significant effect on the

Types of Ancient Manuscripts

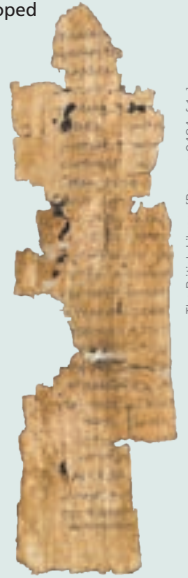
Many different types of manuscripts developed before the age of the printing press:

Papyri—Manuscripts written on an early form of paper (papyrus) made from a reed plant. Some of the earliest portions of the New Testament are on papyrus, some as early as the second century AD.

Majuscules—Manuscripts written in a style of all capital letters. These date especially from the fourth to eighth century.

Minuscules—Manuscripts, usually on parchment, written in a small cursive style of Greek letters. We have thousands of minuscules, most dating from the eleventh to thirteenth century.

Lectionaries—Books of biblical readings to be used in worship services. These were written in many different styles and languages, and most date from the eleventh to thirteenth century.



The British Library [Papyrus 2484, f.1v].

Figure 2.2. Papyrus with parts of John 16 (third century)

A critical edition of the Greek New Testament is a reconstructed text that scholars put together based on these ancient manuscripts, providing a text that a committee has decided is most likely original. Critical editions also include examples of variants, wording that is different in some manuscripts but that has been decided to be not original. These editions frequently include notes that indicate how confident the scholars are on different variants and their reasoning for the decisions they have made in creating their text.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Mary and Michael Jaharis Gift, and Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2007.

Figure 2.3. Jaharis Byzantine Lectionary (ca. 1100)

meaning. Such difficult variants usually consist of complications in determining which of similar words like “your” and “our” was original. Of the difficult variants, not one affects any major Christian doctrine or understanding. Thus, we can have more than reasonable confidence in the faithfulness of our critical editions. ⓘ

Of course, as with any field of study, there are deeper levels of nuance and complexity than this overview can provide. The scholarly discipline of textual criticism and related fields is always undergoing revisions and improvements, even today. More manuscripts are regularly discovered and cataloged, and scholars debate fine details of different approaches. All of this is good and inspires confidence in the reliability of our New Testament texts.



INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

A Typical Manuscript Transmission Difficulty

In 1 John 1:4 we have a variant that is representative of the text-critical decisions that are made in the production of critical editions. Most editions understand the original Greek to read: “And we write these things to you in order that our joy might be full.” This reading is supported by the highest quality and earliest manuscripts. However, a lot of manuscripts present the text differently: “And we write these things to you in order that your joy might be full.” Which is right: “our joy” or “your joy”?

Text-critical scholars reason through this question in this way: On the grounds of looking at the best manuscripts, “our joy” is more likely, even though many later manuscripts do have “your joy.” Other considerations also suggest that “our joy” is more likely original: (1) “your joy” is what one expects more naturally, so it is far more likely that over time scribes would accidentally or intentionally move from “our” to “your,” not the other way around; (2) John 16:24 speaks of “your joy,” and this has likely influenced readers to assume that this is what 1 John says as well.


Thus, while the “our joy” versus “your joy” is a textual variant that is not perfectly clear, it is easy to make reasonable arguments for the superiority of the one reading over the other. Moreover, this example is typical of how variants have no significant theological effect on our understanding of the New Testament’s message. Finally, we may note that the process of wrestling with the best variant reading is a communal one, open to a wide range of scholars and their readers. This increases our confidence in the reliability of our critical Greek New Testaments.

The Myriad of Translations and Editions of the New Testament

We have mentioned already that because of the rapid and geographically expansive spread of Christianity, combined with Christianity’s valuing of sacred writings, very quickly there appeared many manuscript copies of the New Testament writings. Some New Testament writers even give directions for their letters to be copied and sent on to other cities to spread the message and teachings (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). This meant that the New Testament writings were soon translated into other languages as part of the church’s missionary efforts. This follows the model of Judaism in the **Second Temple period** (see chap. 3), which also made translations of the Hebrew Scriptures (into Aramaic, Greek, etc.) so that believers could read them in their native tongues. (This is very different from Islam, which does not allow the Qur’an to be officially translated into any other language.)

This copying and translation of the two-part Christian Scriptures has continued mostly unabated throughout the centuries. Today the entire

New Testament has been translated into over 1,500 languages, and portions of the Bible into another thousand-plus languages. Large organizations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators are dedicated to the difficult and demanding work of translating the Bible into every one of the approximately 7,100 living languages. The English language is particularly rich in Bible translations (estimated at around 900 versions since Tyndale’s first English translation in 1526), each with its own goals, philosophy of translation, and pros and cons.

Starting in the ancient world, copies of New Testament texts began to contain little headings that describe the contents of each section of the text, such as “Jesus Stills the Storm” right before the text of Mark 4:35–41. These types of headings or titles are found in almost every version of the New Testament today, guiding readers in identifying and interpreting each section. By the Middle Ages, manuscripts also began to demarcate larger sections within New Testament books, and when Bibles were first printed in mass, a system of chapter and verse notation became increasingly standardized. Today, every New Testament book can be referenced by a name and numbering system that may seem odd at first, but this standard format makes it easy for everyone to locate specific sayings within the texts and to discuss them. Each New Testament book is divided into chapters, and then each chapter into verses. Thus we can say, “Matthew 5:48,” meaning the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verse 48. 

There are many versions of the Bible and the New Testament that serve different purposes. There are diglot versions that provide two languages that can be compared. There are study Bibles, which provide the biblical text along with notes written by scholars (usually from a certain theological perspective) to guide readers in their interpretation. Red-letter editions of the New Testament, in which Jesus’s words are printed red to make them stand out from the black print, first appeared in 1899. Children’s Bibles range from

INTRODUCTORY MATTERS




“Minority Report” New Testament Versions

Although almost all printed New Testaments today follow a traditional ordering of the books, use standardized chapter and verse divisions, and provide descriptive titles for separate sections of the stories or letters, there are some versions that seek to offer an alternative and fresh approach to guide readers.

Some publishers have produced “manuscript Bibles” that remove all chapter and verse notations and instead present the New Testament texts in a singular flow. This makes the stories and letters look and feel more like a modern book. In recent years some have also attempted to rearrange the books of the New Testament (and the whole Bible) according to a structure other than the traditional canonical form, often based on the perceived chronological order of the writings.

Because the standard chapter and verse divisions are sometimes misleading and distracting, the “manuscript Bibles” can provide a fresh and more engaging experience of reading, though they are not practical for referencing. The attempts at reordering the New Testament books can likewise provide an interesting and fresh reading experience, especially for those who are long accustomed to the New Testament.

While there are some helpful aspects to these minority-report editions of the New Testament, readers (and publishers) shouldn’t begin to see these editions as superior to the traditional canonical forms. There are good reasons that the New Testament canon has been ordered and read the way it has, and alternative orderings of the books are no less an interpretation than the traditional approach.

easier-to-read translations of the whole Bible to retellings of select stories, complete with illustrations. 

The New Testament as a Library

This chapter is titled “The New Testament as a Book” because this is how readers experience these New Testament writings collected from eight or nine different authors: they are gathered together into one volume. This “book,” however, is not like most books we see. The New Testament is more like a little library dedicated to one topic, with appropriate and helpful diversity within it. It’s somewhat like a music library within a university, with a diversity of volumes collected around a field of study. This New Testament library includes different genres of literature: biographies, stories, wisdom teachings, letters designed to correct and train, personal correspondence, and fantastical visions to inspire hope.

Yet there is unity in this New Testament library. This unity within diversity can be seen historically, literarily, and theologically. Historically, the New Testament documents come from a short period of time, sharing the culture and geography of Hellenistic Judaism in the first-century Greco-Roman world. Literarily, the New Testament texts share the common Greek language of the day (with some authors obviously more skilled and educated than others) and use conventional genres and styles. Theologically, the New Testament library is intensely focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ, shaped and shepherded by the apostles’ teachings.

To change the image: the New Testament is like a choir singing in many parts, interlacing harmony, rhythm, and melody—but singing together as one, directed by one conductor, God himself. These complementary images of the New Testament as a unified choir and a topical library are important to remember as we step, as readers, into the world of the New Testament.



INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

The Greek Language of the New Testament

Various forms of the Greek language have existed for thousands of years due to the great influence of Greek culture spanning from the ancient world to today. By the time of Jesus, a common (Greek, *koinē*) form of Greek was spoken throughout the whole Mediterranean world and into the Middle East because it allowed governance and trade to occur throughout the Roman Empire. **Koine Greek** is a simplified hybrid of several dialects of Greek.

The New Testament is written in this form of Greek, with variations based on the educational level and background of the individual New Testament authors. New Testament Greek also shows heavy influence of the Greek version of the Old Testament (the **Septuagint**) in terms of style and vocabulary.

Christianity’s production of its sacred writings in common Greek rather than the Hebrew of the Old Testament enabled it to spread rapidly throughout the ancient world among gentiles, not just Jews, and to transform the variety of cultures it encountered.

Christian Reading Questions

1. Consider the earliest period of the church, when memories and oral interpretations preceded many of the New Testament writings. How do you think that life as a Christian then differed from a current Christian life?
2. Discuss the diverse genres of writing in the New Testament. Why do you think this diversity adds value to the New Testament?
3. How has textual criticism increased our confidence in the accuracy of the New Testament that we read today?
4. What translation and type of Bible do you read from? What are some of its advantages and disadvantages?