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THE NEW TESTAMENT

A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings

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What Is the New Testament? The Early Christians and Their Literature

CHAPTER 1

What to Expect

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

We will start by considering a basic feature of early Christianity that will recur time and again throughout our study: its remarkable diversity. Rather than being *one* thing, early Christianity was lots of different things, so much so that some scholars prefer to speak about "early Christianities" rather than "early Christianity." As we will see, it was in the context of early Christian struggles to determine the "right" beliefs and practices that one group of Christians decided which books should be included among the Scriptures. Somewhat surprisingly, the final decisions did not come in just a few years or decades; they took more than three hundred years.

Christianity in the modern world is a richly diverse phenomenon. Ask any Pentecostal preacher who has attended a Roman Catholic mass, or Greek Orthodox monk who has happened upon a Baptist tent revival, or Episcopalian nun who has visited a Jehovah's Witness prayer meeting. There is, to be sure, common ground among many Christian groups, but when you compare the beliefs and practices of an Appalachian snake handler with those of a New England Presbyterian, you may be more struck by the differences than the similarities.

Is this kind of rich diversity a modern development? Many people appear to think so. For them, Christianity was originally a solid unity, but with the passing of time (especially since the Protestant Reformation) this unity became fractured and fragmented. Historians, however, recognize that in some ways Christian differences today pale in comparison with those that existed among believers in the distant past. If we turn the clock back 1,850 years to the middle of the second century, we find people calling themselves Christian who subscribe to beliefs that no modern eye has seen or ear heard, Christians who believe that there are 2 different gods, or 30, or 365, Christians who claim that the Old Testament is an evil book inspired by an evil deity, Christians who say that God did not create the world and has never had any involve-

ten, than in the first. This is because, quite simply, there are more documents that date to this period. Virtually the only Christian writings that can be reliably dated to the first century are found in the New Testament itself, although we know that other Christian books were produced at this time. We begin our investigation, then, by examining several examples of later forms of Christianity, before seeing how these are relevant to the study of the New Testament.

Jewish-Christian Adoptionists

Consider first the form of religion embraced by a group of second-century Jewish Christians known to be living in Palestine, east of the Jordan River. These believers maintained that Jesus was a remarkable man, more righteous in the Jewish Law than any other, a man chosen by God to be his son. Jesus, in fact, was "adopted" at his baptism; when he emerged from the waters of the Jordan, he saw the heavens open up and the Spirit of God descend upon him as a dove, while a voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my son, today I have begotten you."

According to these Christians, Jesus was empowered by God's Spirit to do remarkable miracles and to teach the truth of God. Then, at the end of his life, he fulfilled his divine commission by dying as a willing sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world, a sacrifice that put an end to all sacrifices. Afterward God raised him from the dead. Jesus then ascended into heaven, where he presently reigns.

There may seem to be little that is remarkable about these beliefs—until, that is, one probes a bit further into the details. For even though Jesus was chosen by God, according to these Christians, he was not himself divine. He was a righteous man but nothing more than a man. In their view, Jesus was not born of a virgin, he did not exist prior to his birth, and he was not God. He was adopted by God to be his son, the savior of the world. Hence the name bestowed upon this group by others: they were "adoptionists." For them, to call Jesus God was a blasphemous lie. For if Jesus were God, and his Father were also God, there would be two Gods. But the Jewish Scriptures emphatically state otherwise: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4).

According to these Christians, this one God chose Israel and gave it his Law (in the Jewish Scriptures). Furthermore, Jesus taught that his followers must continue to obey the entire Law (except the law that required animal sacrifice—for them, Jesus himself was the perfect sacrifice) in all its details—and not just the Ten Commandments! Those who were not born Jews must first become Jews in order to follow Jesus. For men, this meant being circumcised; for men and women, it meant observing the Sabbath and keeping kosher food laws.

On what grounds did these Christians advance this understanding of the faith? They had a sacred book written in Hebrew which they claimed contained the teachings of Jesus himself, a book that was similar to what we today know as the Gospel of Matthew (without the first two chapters). What about the other books of the New Testament, the other Gospels and Acts, the epistles, and Revelation? Odd as it might seem, these Jewish Christians had never heard of some of these books, and rejected others of them outright. In particular, they considered Paul, one of the most prominent authors of our New Testament, to be an arch-heretic rather than an apostle. Since, in their opinion, Paul blasphemously taught that Christ brought an end to the Jewish Law, his writings were to be rejected as heretical. In short, these second-century Christians did not have our New Testament canon (see box 1.1).

Marcionite Christians

The Jewish-Christian adoptionists were by no means unique in not having our New Testament. Consider another Christian group, this one scattered throughout much of the Mediterranean in the mid to late second century, with large numbers of congregations flourishing especially in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Their opponents called them "Marcionites" because they subscribed to the form of Christianity advanced by the second-century scholar and evangelist Marcion, who himself claimed to have uncovered the true teachings of Christianity in the writings of Paul. In sharp contrast to the Jewish Christians east of the Jordan, Marcion maintained that Paul was the true apostle, to whom Christ had especially appeared after his resurrection to impart the truth of the

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Box 1.1 The Canon of Scripture

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

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

ment with it, Christians who maintain that Jesus did not have a human body, or that he did not have a human soul, or that he was never born, or that he never died.

Of course, many people today would argue that such views could not be Christian. What is striking to the historian, however, is that people who believed these things claimed to be Christian. Moreover, these believers invariably maintained that their ideas were taught by Jesus himself. In many instances, they could appeal to written proof, for they all possessed documents allegedly penned by Jesus' own apostles.

The New Testament also contains books that were thought to have been written by Jesus' own apostles. These books, however, do not teach that there are several gods, or that the creator of the world is evil, or that Jesus did not have a real body. Are there historical grounds for thinking that the New Testament books actually *were* written by Jesus' apostles and that books supporting contrary views were forgeries? Indeed, how is it that some books claiming to be written by the apostles were included in the New Testament, but others were not? Moreover, even if the books that came to be included in the New Testament agree on certain fundamental points (for example, that there is only one God), is it possible that they disagree on others (such as who Jesus is)? That is to say, if Christians in the second century, a hundred fifty years or so after Jesus, held such a wide range of beliefs, is it possible that Christians of the first century (when the books of the New Testament were being written) did as well? Did all of the early Christians agree on the fundamental points of their religion?

These are some of the issues that we will consider as we begin to examine the earliest Christian writings. They are not, of course, the only issues. There is an extraordinarily broad range of important and intriguing questions that readers bring to the New Testament—about where it came from, who its authors were, what their messages were—and many of these will occupy us at considerable length in the pages that follow. But the issue of Christian diversity is a good place for us to begin our investigation. Not only can it provide a useful entrée into important questions about the early stages of the Christian religion, starting with the teachings of Jesus, it can also enlighten us about the nature of the New Testament itself, about how and why these various books came to be gathered together into one volume and accepted by Christians as their sacred canon of scripture (see box 1.1).

THE DIVERSITY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

As I have intimated, Christian diversity is somewhat easier to document in the second century, after the books of the New Testament were writ-

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Box 1.2 The Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament

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

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

Christians have long referred to these books as the "Old Testament," to set them apart from the books of the "New Testament" (the new set of books that reveal God's will to his people). Throughout our study, I will use the term "Old Testament" only when referring explicitly to Christian views; otherwise, I will call these books the Jewish Scriptures or Hebrew Bible.

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

The Hebrew Bible

The Torah (5 books)
- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

The Prophets (8 books)

Former Prophets
- Joshua
- Judges
- Samuel (counts as 1 book)
- Kings (counts as 1 book)

Later Prophets
- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- The Twelve (count as 1 book)
  - Hosea
  - Joel
  - Amos
  - Obadiah
  - Jonah

The Christian "Old Testament"

The Pentateuch (5 books)
- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

Historical Books (12 books)
- Joshua
- Judges
- Ruth
- 1 and 2 Samuel
- 1 and 2 Kings
- 1 and 2 Chronicles
- Ezra
- Nehemiah
- Esther

Poetry and Wisdom Books (5 books)
- Job
- Psalms
- Proverbs
- Ecclesiastes
- Song of Solomon

Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

The Writings (11 books)
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ruth
Song of Solomon
Ecclesiastes
Lamentations
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah (1 book)
Chronicles (1 book)

Prophetic Books (17 books)
Major Prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel

Minor Prophets
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

gospel. Paul, according to Marcion, had begun as a good Jew intent on obeying the Law to the utmost, but the revelation of Christ showed him beyond doubt that the Jewish Law played no part in the divine plan of redemption. For him, Christ himself was the only way of salvation. Marcion argued that Paul's writings effectively set the gospel of Christ over and against the Law of the Jews, and that the apostle had urged Christians to abandon the Jewish Law altogether.

For Marcion and his followers, the differences between the religion preached by Jesus (and his apostle, Paul) and that found in the Jewish Scriptures were plain to see. Whereas the Jewish God punishes those who disobey, they claimed, the God of Jesus extends mercy and forgiveness; whereas the God of the Jews says "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," the God of Jesus says to "turn the other cheek"; and whereas the Old Testament God tells the Israelites to conquer Jericho by slaughtering its entire population—men, women, and children—the God of Jesus says to love your enemies. What do these two Gods have in common? According to the Marcionites, nothing. For them, there are two separate and unrelated Gods, the God of the Jews and the God of Jesus.

Marcionite Christians maintained that Jesus did not belong to the wrathful and just God of the Jews, the God who created the world and chose Israel to be his special people. In fact, Jesus came to save people from this God. Moreover, since Jesus had no part in the Creator, he could have no real ties to the material world that the Creator-God made. Jesus therefore was not actually born and did not have a real flesh-and-blood body. How, then, did Jesus get hungry and thirsty, how did he bleed and die? According to Marcionites, it was all an appearance: Jesus only seemed to be human. As the one true God himself, come to earth to deliver people from the vengeful God of the Jews, Jesus was never born, never got hungry or thirsty or tired, never bled or died. Jesus' body was a phantasm.

The contrasts between the Jewish Christians and the Marcionites are stark. One group said that Jesus was totally human and not divine, the other said that he was totally divine and not human. One group staunchly maintained that there was only one God, the other asserted that there were in fact two. One said that the true God created the world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them the Law, the other said that the true God had never had any dealings with the world or with Israel. One group urged that believers must follow the Law, the other argued that they should reject it altogether. Both groups considered themselves to be the true Christians.

Most significantly for our purposes here, these groups did not appeal to the same authorities for their views. On the contrary, whereas the Jewish Christians rejected Paul as a heretic, the Marcionites followed him as the greatest of the apostles. Moreover, instead of adhering to a version of Matthew's Gospel, the Marcionites used a truncated version of something like our Gospel of Luke, along with ten of Paul's letters (all of those found in the New Testament, with the exceptions of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). But even these were not exactly the letters as we have them today. Marcion believed that earlier heretics had willfully modified these books by inserting positive references to the God of the Jews, his creation, and his Scriptures; accordingly, he excised these passages, giving his followers a form of the Bible strikingly different from that used by Christians today: eleven books, all of them shortened, and no Old Testament.

Gnostic Christians

The Jewish-Christian adoptionists and the Marcionites were not the only two Christian groups vying for converts in the second century. In fact, there were many other groups supporting a wide range of other beliefs on the basis of a wide range of other authorities as well. Some of the best known are the various sects of Christian Gnostics, so named because of their claim that special "gnosis" (Greek for "knowledge") is necessary for salvation.

We know that Gnostic Christians were located in major urban areas throughout much of the Mediterranean during the second and third centuries, especially in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Rome, and Gaul. Gnostics were themselves wildly diverse, with different groups believing radically different things (see Chapter 11). Some Gnostics agreed with Marcion that Jesus was totally divine and not at all human, and for much the same reason that he did: Jesus represented a different God from the one who created this world. Others, however, claimed that Jesus Christ consisted of two distinct beings, the human Jesus and the divine Christ. These Gnostics agreed with the Jewish-Christian adoptionists that Jesus was the most righteous man on earth and that something special had happened at his baptism. They did not think, however, that God adopted him to be his son; instead, they maintained that his baptism was the moment at which the divine being, the Christ, came into the man Jesus, empowering him for his healing and, especially, teaching ministry. At the end of Jesus' life, immediately before his death, the Christ then departed from him once again to return to heaven. This is why Jesus cried out in such anguish on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you left me behind?" (cf. Mark 15:34).

Who, though, was this divine Christ? For many Gnostics, he was one of the deities that made up the divine realm. Unlike the Jewish Christians who maintained that there was only one God or the Marcionites who claimed that there were two, Gnostics accepted the existence of many. In some of the Gnostic systems that we know about there were 30 different gods, in others as many as 365. Moreover, for all of these systems, the true God was not the God of the Old Testament. Unlike Marcion, however, Gnostics did not believe that the Old Testament God was simply vengeful and righteous, a God who had high standards (the Law) and little patience with those who did not meet them. For many of them, the creator God of the Old Testament was inherently evil, as was this material world that he created.

Gnostics felt a sense of alienation from this world and knew that they did not belong here. They were spiritual beings from the divine realm who had become entrapped in the realm of matter by the evil God and his subordinates. Salvation meant escaping from this material world. Thus a god from the divine realm entered into the man Jesus, and left him prior to his death, so that he could impart to the imprisoned spirits the knowledge (gnosis!) that is necessary for escape.

This was secret knowledge not divulged to the masses, not even to the mass of Christians. It was meant only for the chosen, the elect, the Gnostics themselves. They did not deny that Jesus taught the crowds publicly, but they believed he reserved the secret teachings that led to salvation only for the elect who were able to act upon them. The Gnostics passed on this teaching by word of mouth and claimed that it could be discovered through a careful reading of the writings of the apostles. It lay there hidden beneath the surface. Thus, for the Gnostic, the literal meaning of these texts was not what mattered; the truth necessary for salvation could be found only in the secret meaning, a meaning exclusively available to Gnostic interpreters, those "in the know."

Since Gnostic Christians were not tied to the literal meaning of their texts, they were not as compulsive as other Christians about collecting a group of books and ascribing special authority to them (in contrast, for example, to the Marcionites). Various Gnostics nonetheless did have their own favorites. We know that many of them were especially drawn to the Gospel of John and that others cherished Gospels that most modern people have never heard of: the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Gospel of Truth*. Some of these books have only recently been discovered by archaeologists. Each of them was thought to convey the true teachings of Jesus and his apostles.

How is it that most of these books cannot be found in our own New Testament? Or for that matter, how is it that the versions of Matthew, Luke, and Paul read by Jewish-Christian adoptionists and Marcionites were not included? Why do the views of these other groups not have equal representation in the Christian Scriptures? The answer can be found by examining the story of one other group of second-century Christians.

"Proto-Orthodox" Christians

The "proto-orthodox" Christians represent the forerunners (hence the prefix "proto") of the group that became the dominant form of Christianity in later centuries. When this group later acquired more converts than any of the others (say, by the beginning of the fourth century) and stifled its opposition, it claimed that its views had always been the majority position and that its rivals were, and always had been, "heretics," who willfully "chose" (the Greek root of the word "heresy") to reject the "true belief" (the literal meaning of "orthodoxy").

We ourselves can use the term "proto-orthodox" only in retrospect, since the adherents of this position did not actually know that their views would become dominant, nor did they think of themselves as forerunners of believers to come later; like all the other groups of their day, they simply saw themselves as the true Christians. The story of their victory over their opponents is fascinating, but aspects of it are hotly debated among modern-day scholars. Some historians think that the proto-orthodox beliefs were original to Christianity, others maintain that they developed over time. Some scholars claim that the proto-orthodox had always been in the majority throughout Christendom, others think that other fotms of Christianity were predominant in many parts of the Mediterranean (e.g., Jewish Christians in parts of Palestine, Gnostics in parts of Egypt and Syria, Marcionites in Asia Minor). Fortunately, we do not need to resolve these thorny problems here.

But there are aspects of the proto-orthodox struggle for dominance that are directly germane to our study of the New Testament. To begin with, we can consider what these Christians believed in contrast to the other groups we have discussed.

Proto-orthodox Chtistians agreed with the Jewish Christians who said that Jesus was completely human, but disagreed when these people denied that he was divine. They agreed with the Marcionites who said that Jesus was completely divine, but disagreed when they denied that he was human. They agreed with the Gnostics who said that Jesus Christ taught the way of salvation, but disagteed when they said that he was two beings rather than one and when they claimed that his true teachings had been secret, accessible only to the elect few. In short, proto-orthodox Christians argued that Jesus Christ was both divine and human, that he was one being instead of two, and that he had taught his disciples the truth. They claimed that the apostles had written the teachings of Jesus down and that, when interpreted in a straightforward and literal fashion, the books that were passed on from the apostles to their followers revealed the truth necessary for salvation.

These views may sound familiar to readers who have had any involvement with Christianity—and no surprise! For the side that held these views won the debates and determined the shape of Christianity up to the present day.

The proto-orthodox position, then, attempted to counteract the claims of the groups that they opposed. In part, this meant that the proto-orthodox group had to reject some documents that claimed to be written by apostles but that advanced beliefs contrary to their own, for example, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Philip*, or the *Gospel of Thomas*, all of which appeared to support Gnostic perspectives. Some of the writings used by the opposing groups, however, were quite popular among the proto-orthodox Christians as well. For example, the Gospel of Matthew was well loved by Jewish Christians, and the Gospel of John was a favorite of many Gnostics. Indeed, by accepting and ascribing authority to both of these Gospels, the proto-orthodox believers were able to balance the "heretical" claims that could be made when only one of them was taken to be the ultimate authority.

In other words, if Jesus appears to be completely human in one Gospel and completely divine in another, by accepting both authorities as Scripture the proto-orthodox were able to claim that both perspectives were right, and that an exclusive emphasis on Jesus as only human, or purely divine, was a perversion of the truth. The development of the canon of Scripture within proto-orthodox circles is in large part an attempt to define what true Christians should believe by eliminating or compromising the views of other groups.

Because the proto-orthodox group represented the party that eventually became dominant in Christianity (by at least the fourth century), Christians of all later generations inherited their canon of Scripture, rather than the canons supported by their opponents.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON OF SCRIPTURE

The purpose of the preceding sketch was not to give a complete account of Christianity in the second century but simply to indicate how early Christianity was extremely diverse and to show how this diversity led to the collection of books into a sacred canon. The Christian Scriptures did not drop from the sky one day in July the year Jesus died. They were written by individual authors at different points of time, in different countries, to different communities, with different concerns; they were later read by an even wider range of Christians and were eventually collected together into what we now call the New Testament. Before launching into a study of these various books, we should reflect further on how and when they (and not others) came to be placed in the canon. We can begin with some preliminary observations concerning the shape of the canon as we now have it.

The New Testament: Some Basic Information

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

The first four books are "Gospels," a term that literally means "good news." The four Gospels of the New Testament proclaim the good news by telling stories about the life and death of Jesus—his birth, ministry, miracles, teaching, last days, crucifixion, and resurrection. These books are traditionally ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Proto-orthodox Christians of the second century claimed that two of these authors were disciples of Jesus: Matthew, the tax collector mentioned in the First Gospel (Matt 9:9), and John, the beloved disciple who appears in the Fourth (e.g., John 19:26). The other two were reportedly written by associates of famous apostles: Mark, the secretary of Peter, and Luke, the traveling companion of Paul. This second-century tradition does not go back to the Gospels themselves; the titles in our Bibles (e.g., "The Gospel according to Matthew") were not found in the original texts of these books. Instead, their authors chose to remain anonymous.

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Box 1.3 The Common Era and Before the Common Era

Most students will be accustomed to dating ancient events as either A.D. (which does *not* stand for "After Death," but for "anno domini," Latin for "year of our Lord") or B.C. ("Before Christ"). This terminology may make sense for Christians, for whom A.D. 1996 is indeed "the year of our Lord 1996." It makes less sense, though, for Jews, Muslims, and others for whom Jesus is not the "Lord" or the "Christ." Scholars have therefore begun to use a different set of abbreviations as more inclusive of others outside the Christian tradition. In this book I will follow the alternative designations of C.E. ("the Common Era," meaning common to people of all faiths who utilize the traditional Western calendar) and B.C.E. ("Before the Common Era"). In terms of the older abbreviations, then, C.E. corresponds to A.D. and B.C.E. to B.C.

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

The next section of the New Testament comprises twenty-one "epistles," that is, letters written by Christian leaders to various communities and individuals. Not all of these epistles are, strictly speaking, items of personal correspondence. The book of Hebrews, for example, appears to be an early Christian sermon, and the epistle of 1 John is a kind of Christian tractate. Nonetheless, all twenty-one of these books are traditionally called epistles. Thirteen of them claim to be written by the apostle Paul; in some cases, scholars have come to question this claim. In any event, most of these letters, whether by Paul or others, address theological or practical problems that have arisen in the Christian communities they address. Thus, whereas the Gospels describe the beginnings of Christianity and the book of Acts its spread, the epistles are more directly focused on Christian beliefs, practices, and ethics.

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

Other Early Christian Writings

The books I have just described were not the only writings of the early Christians, nor were they originally collected into a body of literature called the "New Testament." We know of other Christian writings that have not survived from antiquity. For example, the apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, refers to an earlier writing that he had sent them (1 Cor 5:9) and alludes to a letter that they themselves had sent him (7:1). Unfortunately, this correspondence is lost.

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Box 1.4 The Layout of the New Testament

Gospels: The Beginnings of Christianity (4 books)
- Matthew
- Mark
- Luke
- John

Acts: The Spread of Christianity (1 book)
- The Acts of the Apostles

Epistles: The Beliefs, Practices, and Ethics of Christianity (21 books)
- Pauline Epistles
  - Romans
  - 1 and 2 Corinthians
  - Galatians
  - Ephesians
  - Philippians
  - Colossians
  - 1 and 2 Thessalonians
  - 1 and 2 Timothy
  - Titus
  - Philemon
- General Epistles
  - Hebrews
  - James
  - 1 and 2 Peter
  - 1, 2, and 3 John
  - Jude

Apocalypse: The Culmination of Christianity (1 book)
- The Revelation of John

This schemaric arrangement is somewhat simplified. All of the New Testament books, for example (not just the epistles), are concerned with Christian beliefs, practices, and ethics, and Paul's epistles are in some ways more reflective of Christian beginnings than the Gospels. Nonetheless, this basic orientation to the New Testamenr writings can at least ger us starred in our understanding of the early Christian literature.

Other noncanonical writings, however, have survived. The best known of these are by authors collectively called the "Apostolic Fathers." These were Christians living in the early second century, whose writings were considered authoritative in some proto-orthodox circles, some of them on a par with the writings of the Gospels or Paul. In fact, some of our ancient manuscripts of the New Testament include writings of the Apostolic Fathers as if they belonged to the canon. Other, previously

unknown, Christian writings have been discovered only within the twentieth century. Some of these writings clearly stand at odds with those within the New Testament; some of them appear to have been used as sacred scripture by certain groups of Christians. A number of them claim to be written by apostles. The most spectacular find occurred in 1945 near the town of Nag Hammadi, Egypt, where some bedouin digging for fertilizer accidentally uncovered a jar containing thirteen fragmentary books in leather bindings. The books contain anthologies of literarure, some fifty-two treatises altogether, written in the ancient Egyptian language called Coptic. Whereas the books themselves were manufactured in the mid-fourth century C.E. (we know this because some of the bindings were strengthened with pieces of scratch paper that were dated), the treatises that they contain are much older: some of them are mentioned by name by authors living in the second century. Before this discovery, we knew that these books existed, but we didn't know what was in them.

What kind of books are they? I earlier indicated that Gnostic Christians appealed to written authorities that did not make it into the New Testament, some of them allegedly written by apostles. These are some of those books. Included in the collection are epistles, apocalypses, and collections of secret teachings. Yet more intriguing are the several Gospels that it contains, including one allegedly written by the apostle Philip and another attributed to Didymus Judas Thomas, thought by some early Christians to be Jesus' twin brother (see box 12.2).

These books were used by groups of Christian Gnostics during the struggles of the second, third, and fourth centuries, but they were rejected as heretical by proto-orthodox Christians. Why were they rejected? The question takes us back to the issues raised earlier concerning how Christians went about deciding which books to include in the New Testament and when their decisions went into effect.

The Development of the Christian Canon

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

Jesus and his followers were themselves Jews who were conversant with the ancient writings that were eventually canonized into the Hebrew Scriptures. Although most scholars now think that a hard and fast canon of Jewish Scripture did not yet exist in Jesus' own day, it appears that most Jews did subscribe to the special authority of the Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, see box 1.2). Also, many Jews accepred the authority of the Prophets as well. These writings include the books of Joshua through 2 Kings in our English Bibles, as well as the more familiar prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets. According to our earliest accounts, Jesus himself quoted from some of these books; we can assume that he accepted them as authoritative.

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

Thus by the beginning of the second century some Christians were ascribing authority to the words of Jesus and the writings of his apostles. There were nonetheless heated debates concerning which apostles were true to Jesus' own teachings (cf. Marcion and the Jewish Christians on Paul), and a number of writings that claimed to be written by apostles were thought by some Christians to be forgeries. It is interesting to reflect on how our present New Testament

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 1.5 The New Testament: One Other Set of Problems

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

This is because of the way books were transmitted in an age before Internet access, desktop publishing, word processors, photocopiers, and printing presses. Books in the ancient world could not be mass produced. They were copied by hand, one page, one sentence, one word, one letter at a time. There was no other way to do it. Since books were copied by hand, there was always the possibility that scribes would make mistakes and intentional changes in a book—any and every time it was copied. Moreover, when a new copy was itself copied, the mistakes and changes that the earlier scribe (copyist) made would have been reproduced, while the new scribe would introduce some mistakes and changes of his own. When *that* copy was then copied, more changes would be introduced. And so it went.

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

How do we know that these copies were changed in the process of reproduction? Because we can compare the thousands of copies that we now have, which range in date from the second to the sixteenth centuries, to see if and how they differ from one another. What is striking is that they differ *a lot*. In fact, among the over 5,000 Greek copies of the New Testament that we have, no two of them are exactly alike in all their details. We don't know how many differences there are among these copies because no one has been able to add them all up. But the total is in the hundreds of thousands. Possibly it is easiest to put the matter in comparative terms: there are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

Most of these differences are altogether minor and unimportant (misspelled words, changes of word order, the accidental omission of a line, etc.). But some of them are of immense importance. Were the last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel original, or were they added later (they are not found in our oldest and best copies)? Was the story of the woman taken in adultery originally part of John's Gospel (it does not start to appear regularly in copies until the Middle Ages)? Was the famous account of Jesus "sweating blood" originally found in Luke (some of our oldest and best copies omit it)?

These are difficult questions to answer. We will be dealing with some of them throughout the course of the book. But we will save a full discussion to the end, in Chapter 29, where we consider how scholars have gone about trying to establish what the authors of the New Testament originally wrote, given the circumstance that we don't have their original copies, but only copies made hundreds of years later, all of them filled with mistakes.

emerged from this conflict, for, in fact, the first person to establish a fixed canon of Scripture appears to have been none other than Marcion. Marcion's insistence that his sacred books (a form of Luke and ten truncated letters of Paul) made up the Christian Bible evidently led other Christians to affirm a larger canon, which included other Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) and other epistles (the "Pastoral" epistles—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus—and the eight general epistles) as well as the books of Acts and Revelation.

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

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

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR STUDY

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

These are among the most difficult and controversial issues that we will address in our study of the New Testament writings. In order to anticipate my approach, I might simply point out that historians who have carefully examined the New Testament have found that its authors do, in fact, embody remarkably diverse points of view. These scholars have concluded that the most fruitful way to interpret the New Testament authors is to read them individually rather than collectively. Each author should be allowed to have his own say,* and should not be too quickly reconciled with the point of view of another. For example, we should not assume that Paul would always say exactly what Matthew would, or that Matthew would agree in every particular with John, and so on.

* Throughout this book I will be using the masculine pronoun to refer to the authors of the early Christian literature, simply because I think all of them were males. For discussion of some of the relevant issues, see Chapter 24 and box 3.1.

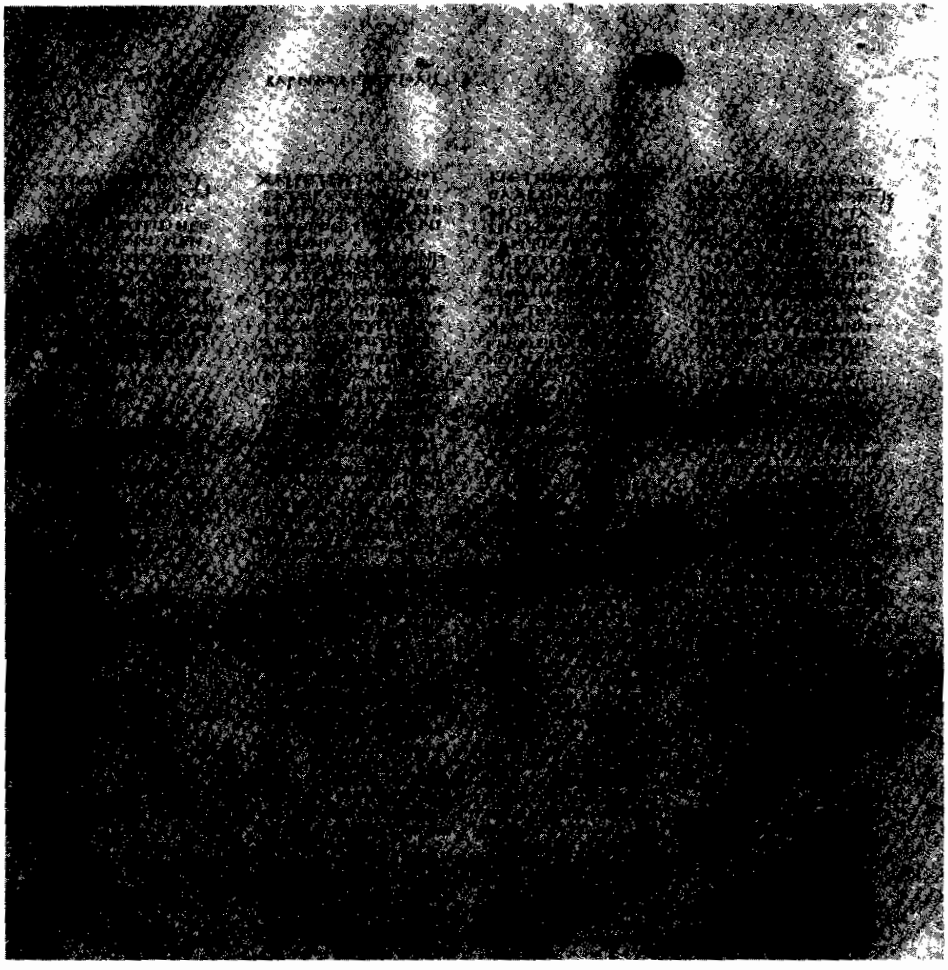

FIGURE 1.1 Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest surviving manuscript of the entire New Testament. This fourth-century manuscript includes *The Shepherd* of Hermas and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (the first page of which is pictured here), books that were considered part of the New Testament by some Christians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

Following this principle, scholars have been struck by the rich diversity represented within the pages of the New Testament. This point cannot be stressed enough. The diversity of Christianity did not begin in the modern period, as some people unreflectively assume, nor did it begin in the second century, in the fragmented forms of Christianity discussed earlier in this chapter. The diversity of Christianity is already evident in the earliest writings that have survived from the Christians of antiquity, most of which are preserved within the canon of the New Testament.

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

AT A GLANCE

Box 1.6 The New Testament Canon

1. Early Christianity was not the unified monolith that modern people sometimes assume. It was, in fact, extremely diverse.
2. This diversity was manifest in a wide range of writings, only some of which have come down to us in the New Testament.
3. The New Testament canon was formed by proto-orthodox Christians who wanted to show that their views were grounded in the writings of Jesus' own apostles.
4. Whether these writings actually represented the views of Jesus' own apostles, however, was in some instances debated for decades, even centuries.
5. A historical approach to these writings allows each book to speak for itself, without assuming they are all saying the same thing.
6. This approach will allow us to see the diversity of early Christianity more clearly, already in its earliest writings.

Excursus: Some Additional Reflections: The Historian and the Believer

Most of the people interested in the New Testament, at least in modern American culture, are Christians who have been taught that it is the inspired word of God. If you yourself belong to this camp, then you may find the historical perspective that I have mapped out in this chapter somewhat difficult to accept, in that it may seem to stand at odds with what you have been taught to believe. If so, then it is for you in particular that I want to provide these brief additional reflections.

Here is the question: how can a Christian who is committed to the Bible affirm that its authors have a wide range of perspectives, and that they sometimes disagree with one another? I can address the question by stressing that this book is a historical introduction to the early Christian writings, principally those found in the New Testament, rather than a confessional one. This is an important distinction because the New Testament has always been much more than a book for Christian believers. It is also an important cultural artifact, a collection of writings that stands at the foundation of much of our Western civilization and heritage. These books came into existence at a distant point in time and have been transmitted through the ages until today. In other words, in addition to being documents of faith, these books are rooted in history; they were written in particular historical contexts and have always been read within particular historical contexts. For this reason, they can be studied not only by believers for their theological significance but also by historians (whether or not they happen to be believers) for their historical significance.

Historians deal with past events that are matters of the public record. The public record consists of human actions and world events—things that anyone can see or experience. Historians try to reconstruct what probably happened in the past on the basis of data that can be examined and evaluated by every interested observer of every persuasion. Access to these data does

not depend on presuppositions or beliefs about God. This means that historians, as historians, have no privileged access to what happens in the supernatural realm; they have access only to what happens in this, our natural world. The historian's conclusions should, in theory, be accessible and acceptable to everyone, whether the person is a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, an atheist, a pagan, or anything else.

To illustrate the point: historians can tell you the similarities and differences between the worldviews of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you that Gandhi's belief in God was wrong or that Martin Luther King's was right. This judgment is not part of the public record and depends on theological assumptions and personal beliefs that are not shared by everyone conducting the investigation. Historians can describe to you what happened during the conflicts between Catholics and Lutherans in sixteenth-century Germany; they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you which side God was on. Likewise, historians can explain what probably happened at Jesus' crucifixion, but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you that he was crucified for the sins of the world.

Does that mean that historians cannot be believers? No, it means that if historians tell you that Martin Luther King Jr. had a better theology than Gandhi, or that God was on the side of the Protestants instead of the Catholics, or that Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world, they are telling you this not in their capacity as historians but in their capacity as believers. Believers are interested in knowing about God, about how to believe, about what to believe, about the ultimate meaning of life. The historical disciplines cannot supply them with this kind of information. Historians who work within the constraints of this discipline are limited to describing, to the best of their abilities, what probably happened in the past (as discussed further in Chapter 14).

Many such historians, including a large number of those mentioned in the bibliographies scattered throughout this book, find historical research to be completely compatible with—even crucial for—traditional theological beliefs; others find it to be incompatible. This is an issue that you yourself may want to deal with, as you grapple intelligently with how the historical approach to the New Testament affects positively, negatively, or not at all your faith commitments. I should be clear at the outset, though, that as the author of this book, I will neither tell you how to resolve this issue nor urge you to adopt any particular set of theological convictions. My approach instead will be strictly historical, trying to understand the writings of the early Christians from the standpoint of the professional historian who uses whatever evidence happens to survive in order to reconstruct what happened in the past.

That is to say, I am not going to convince you either to believe or to disbelieve the Gospel of John; I will describe how it probably came into existence and discuss what its message was. I am not going to persuade you that Jesus really was or was not the Son of God; I will try to establish what he said and did based on the historical data that are available. I am not going to discuss whether the Bible is or is not the inspired word of God; I will show how we got this collection of books and indicate what they say and reflect on how scholars have interpreted them. This kind of information may well be of some use to the reader who happens to be a believer, but it will certainly be useful to one—believer or not—who is interested in history, especially the history of early Christianity and its literature.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Bauer, Walter. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Trans. Robert Kraft et al. Ed. Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971. The classic study of the wide-ranging diversity of second- and third-century Christianity, suitable only for more advanced students.

Dunn, James D. G. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2d ed. London: SCM Press, 1990. A very informative discussion that applies Bauer's view of early Christian diversity to the New Testament itself; highly recommended for students who have already completed a course in New Testament.

Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. An examination of the early conflicts among various Christian groups (Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics, Proto-orthodox) and the various "Scriptures" they produced—including noncanonical Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses. For popular audiences.

Ehrman, Bart D. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Chapter 1, "The Text of Scripture in an Age of Dissent," explores the diversity of early Christianity on a more introductory level than Bauer.

Gamble, Harry. *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. A clearly written and informative overview of the formation of the New Testament canon.

Harnack, Adolph von. *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*. Trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma. Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1990. The classic study of the life and teachings of Marcion.

Hultgren, Arland J. *The Rise of Normative Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994. A book that disagrees with Bauer's understanding of early Christianity and argues that early Christian diversity was not as wide-ranging and pervasive as some have thought.

Metzger, Bruce M. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. The authoritative discussion of the formation of the canon, for advanced students.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1976. An enormously popular and provocative account of the views of some of the early Gnostics in relation to emerging Christian orthodoxy.

The Traditions of Jesus in Their Greco-Roman Context

CHAPTER 3

What to Expect

People who read the New Testament Gospels today generally assume that these books tell stories about Jesus simply as they happened. But is that true? None of these writers claims to be an eyewitness. And they wrote their accounts decades after the fact in a different language (Greek) from the one Jesus spoke (Aramaic).

Where did these writers get their stories? Did they simply drop out of the sky? Were they passed down by stenographers who followed Jesus and recorded everything he said and did? Did they come from notes taken by his disciples on their journeys? From somewhere else?

This chapter will argue that the Gospels ultimately go back to oral traditions—that is, stories about Jesus told by word of mouth, year after year after year, in different times and places, mainly by people who had not been there to see any of these things happen. Moreover, it will maintain that stories like this tend to change in the process of retelling over time, with some stories actually being made up.

Did this happen with the traditions about Jesus?

We have already touched on one of the ironies involved in the historical study of the New Testament. If we choose to begin our study not with the earliest New Testament author, Paul, but with the person on whom his religion is in some sense based, Jesus, then we are compelled to begin by examining books that were written after Paul. Indeed, some of these books were among the last New Testament books to be produced. To reach the beginning, we have to start near the end.

At the same time, even though the Gospels themselves were written relatively late, they preserve traditions about Jesus that existed much earlier, many of them circulating among Christians long before Paul wrote his letters. Now that we have discussed several important aspects of the Greco-Roman environment within which the Christian religion was born and grew, we can examine the traditions themselves, as embodied near the end of the first century in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and somewhat later in the Gospels ascribed to Peter and Thomas. How did these various authors acquire their traditions about Jesus?

ORAL TRADITIONS BEHIND THE GOSPELS

For the moment, we will leave aside the question of who these authors were (see "Some Additional Reflections" at the end of the chapter), except to point out that all of the New Testament Gospels are anonymous: their authors did not sign their names. Our principal concern at present involves a different issue, namely how and where these anonymous authors acquired their stories about Jesus. Here we are in the fortunate position of having some definite information, for one of these authors deals directly with this matter. Luke (we do not know his real name) begins his Gospel by mentioning earlier written accounts of Jesus' life and by indicating that both he and his predecessors acquired their information from Christians who had told stories about him (Luke 1:1–4). That is to say, these writings ultimately were based on oral traditions, stories that had circulated among Christians from the time Jesus died to the moment the Gospel writers put pen to paper. How much of an interval, exactly, was this?

No one knows for certain when Jesus died, but scholars agree that it was sometime around 30 C.E. In addition, most historians think that Mark was the first of our Gospels to be written, sometime between the mid 60s to early 70s. Matthew and Luke were probably produced some ten or fifteen years later, perhaps around 80 or 85. John was written perhaps ten years after that, in 90 or 95. These are necessarily rough estimates, but almost all scholars agree within a few years.

Perhaps the most striking thing about these dates for the historian is the long interval between Jesus' death and the earliest accounts of his life. Our first written narratives of Jesus (i.e., the Gospels) appear to date from thirty-five to sixty-five years after the fact. This may not seem like a long time, but think about it in modern terms. For the shortest interval (the gap between Jesus and Mark), this would be like having the first written record of Lyndon Johnson's presidency appear today. For the longest interval (between Jesus and John), it would be like having stories about a famous preacher from the early years of World War II show up in print for the first time this week. We should not assume that the Gospel accounts are necessarily unreliable simply because they are late, but the dates should give us pause. What was happening over these thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty years between Jesus' death and the writing of the Gospels?

Without a doubt, the most important thing that was happening for early Christianity was the spread of the religion from its inauspicious beginnings as a tiny sect of Jesus' Jewish followers in Jerusalem—the Gospels indicate that there were eleven men and several women who remained faithful to him after his crucifixion, say a total of fifteen or twenty people altogether—to its status as a world religion enthusiastically supported by Christian believers in major urban areas throughout the Roman Empire. Missionaries like Paul actively propagated the faith, converting Jews and Gentiles to faith in Christ as the Son of God, who was crucified for the sins of the world and then raised by God from the dead.

By the end of the first century, this tiny group of Jesus' disciples had so multiplied that there were believing communities in cities of Judea and Samaria and Galilee, probably in the region East of Jordan; in Syria, Cilicia, and Asia Minor; in Macedonia and Achaia (modern-day Greece); in Italy; and possibly in Spain. By this time Christian

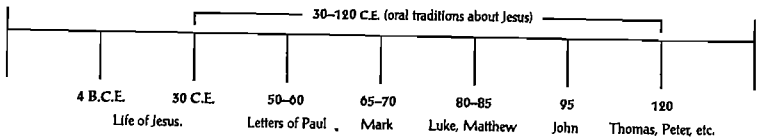

FIGURE 3.1 Time Line of the Early Christian Movement.

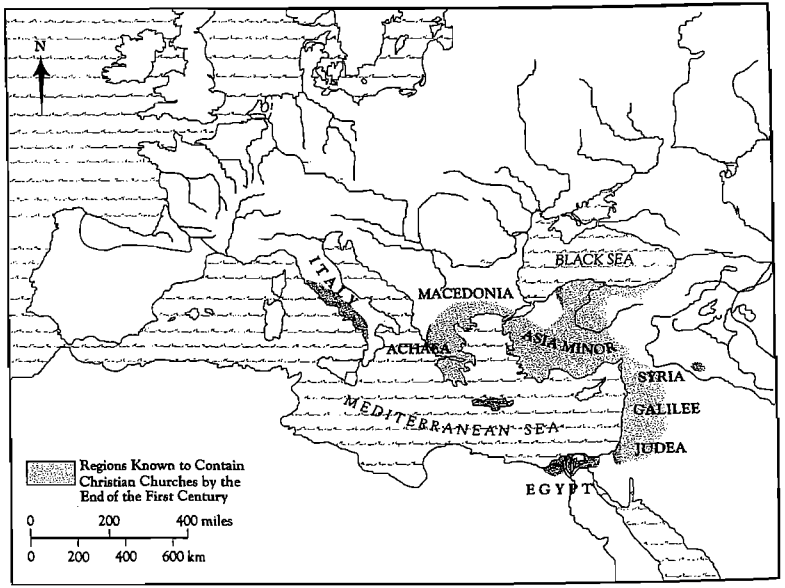

FIGURE 3.2 Christian Churches in Existence by 100 C.E.

churches may have sprung up in the Southern Mediterranean, probably in Egypt and possibly in North Africa.

To be sure, the Christians did not take the world by storm. As we will see later in Chapter 26, Roman officials in the provinces appear to have taken little notice of the Christians until the second century; strikingly, there is not a single reference to Jesus or his followers in pagan literature of any kind during the first century of the Common Era. Nonetheless, the Christian religion quietly and persistently spread, not converting millions of people, but almost certainly converting thousands, in numerous locations throughout the entire Mediterranean.

What did Christians tell people in order to convert them? Our evidence here is frustratingly sparse: examples of missionary sermons in the book of Acts and some intimations of Paul's preaching in his own letters (e.g., 1 Thess 1:9–10). We cannot tell how representative these are. Moreover, there are good reasons for thinking that most of the Christian mission was conducted not through public preaching, say on a crowded street corner, but privately, as individuals who had come to believe that Jesus was the Son of God told others about their newfound faith and tried to convince them to adopt it as well.

Since, in the Greco-Roman world, religion was a way of securing the favor of the gods, we are probably not too far afield to think that if faith in Jesus were known to produce beneficial, or even miraculous, results, then people might be persuaded to convert. If a Christian testified, for example, that praying to Jesus, or through Jesus to God, had healed her daughter, or that a believer in Jesus had cast out an evil spirit, or that the God of Jesus had miraculously provided food for a starving family, this might spark interest in her neighbor or coworker. Those with an interest in Jesus would want to learn more about him. Who was he? When did he live? What did he do? How did he die? The Christian, in turn, would be both compelled and gratified to tell stories about Jesus to anyone interested.

Such opportunities to tell stories about Jesus must have presented themselves throughout major urban areas of the Mediterranean for decades prior to the writing of the Gospels. Otherwise there is no way to account for the spread of the religion in an age that did not enjoy the benefits of telecommunication. When people had heard enough (however much that might have been), they might have decided to believe in Jesus. This would have involved, among other things, adopting aspects of Jesus' own religion, which for non-Jews meant accepting the Jewish God and abandoning their own, since Jews maintained that this One alone was the true God. Once the converts did so, they could join the Christian community by being baptized and receiving some rudimentary instruction. Presumably it was the leaders of the Christian congregation who performed the baptisms and taught the converts. These leaders would have been the earliest people to adopt the new religion in the locality or people with special gifts for leadership, possibly the more highly educated among them, who were therefore best suited to give instruction.

We do not know exactly what the leaders would have told new converts, but we can imagine that they would have imparted some of the essentials of the faith: information about the one true God, his creation, and his son Jesus.* To some extent, this would have involved telling yet other stories about who Jesus was, about how he came into the world, about what he taught, what he did, why he suffered, and how he died. Stories about Jesus were thus being told throughout the Mediterranean for decades, both to win people to faith and to edify those who had been brought in. They were told in evangelism, in instruction, and probably in services of worship. The stories would have, necessarily, been passed on by word of mouth, since, as we've seen, the Gospels had not yet been written. But who told the stories?

Unfortunately, we do not know the precise identity of those who were telling the stories about Jesus. Was every story told by one of the apostles? Impossible. The mission goes on for years and years and years all over the map. Were the stories told by other eyewitnesses? Equally impossible. They must have been told, then, for the most part, by people who had not been there to see them happen, who had heard them from other people, who also had not been there to see them happen. The stories were passed on by word of mouth from one convert to the next. They were told in different countries, in Egypt, Judea, Galilee, Syria, and Cilicia, throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, Achaia, Italy, and Spain. They were told in different contexts, for different reasons, at different times. They were told in a language other than Jesus' own (he spoke Aramaic, while most of the converts spoke Greek), often by people who were not Jews, almost always by people who were not eyewitnesses and had never met an eyewitness.

Let me illustrate the process with a hypothetical example. Suppose I am a Greek-speaking worshiper of the goddess Artemis from Ephesus. I listen to a stranger passing through town, who tells of the wonders of Jesus, of his miracles and supernatural wisdom. I become intrigued. When I hear that this wandering stranger has performed miracles in Jesus' name— my neighbor's son was ill, but two days after the stranger prayed over him, he became well—I decide to inquire further. He tells of how Jesus performed great miracles and of how, even though wrongly accused by the Romans for sedition and crucified, he was raised by God from the dead. Based on everything I've heard, I decide to forego my devotion to Artemis. I put my faith in Jesus, get baptized, and join the local community.

I take a trip for business to nearby Smyrna. While there, I tell friends about my new faith and the stories I've learned about my new Lord. Three

FIGURE 3.3 Stories of the power of the gods to heal the sick were widespread in the Greco-Roman world. Here we see a relief from the temple of the healing god Asclepius in the city of Piraeus, showing the god and his female assistant (on the right) curing a sleeping patient.

of them join me in becoming Christian. They begin to discuss these things with their neighbors and friends. Mostly they are rejected, but they acquire several converts, enough to come together once a week for worship, to discuss their faith, and to tell more stories. These new converts tell their own families the stories, converting some of them, who then take the word yet further afield.

And so it goes. As the new converts tell the stories, the religion grows, and most of the people telling the stories are not eyewitnesses. Indeed they have never laid eyes on an eyewitness or anyone else who has.

This example does not imply that if we had accounts based on eyewitnesses, they would necessarily be accurate. Even the testimonies of eyewitnesses can, and often do, conflict. But the scenario I have painted does help to explain why there are so many differences in the stories about Jesus that have survived from the early years of Christianity. These stories were circulated year after year after year, primarily by people who had believed their entire lives that the gods were sometimes present on earth, who knew of miracle workers who had appeared to benefit the human race, who had themselves heard fantastic stories about this Jewish holy man Jesus, and who were trying to convert others to their faith or to edify those who had already been converted. Furthermore, nearly all of these storytellers had no independent knowledge of what really happened. It takes little imagination to realize what happened to the stories.

You are probably familiar with the old birthday party game "telephone." A group of kids sits in a circle, the first tells a brief story to the one sitting next to her, who tells it to the next, and to the next, and so on, until it comes back full circle to the one who started it. Invariably, the story has changed so much in the process of retelling that everyone gets a good laugh. (If it didn't work this way, who would play the game?!) Imagine this same activity taking place,

not in a solitary living room with ten kids on one afternoon, but over the expanse of the Roman Empire (some 2,500 miles across), with thousands of participants—from different backgrounds, with different concerns, and in different contexts—some of whom have to translate the stories into different languages (see box 3.1).

The situation, in fact, was even more complicated than that. People in the Christian communities that sprang up around the Mediterranean, like people just about everywhere, encountered severe difficulties in living their daily lives and thus sought help and direction from on high. The traditions about Jesus were part of the bedrock of these communities; his actions were a model that Christians tried to emulate; his words were teachings they obeyed. Given this context, is it conceivable that Christians could have made up a story that proved useful in a particular situation? Creating a story is not far removed from changing one, and presumably people would have good reasons for doing both.

Christians would not have to be deceitful or malicious to invent a story about something that Jesus said or did; they would not even have to be conscious of doing so. All sorts of stories about people are made up without ill intent, and sometimes stories are told about persons that we know are not historically accurate: ask any well-known person who is widely talked about, a politician, religious leader, or university professor.

The Nature of the Gospel Traditions

It does not appear that the authors of the early Gospels were eyewitnesses to the events that they narrate. But they must have gotten their stories from somewhere. Indeed, one of them acknowledges that he has heard stories about Jesus and read earlier accounts (Luke 1:1–4). In the opinion of most New Testament scholars, it is possible that in addition to preserving genuine historical recollections about what Jesus actually said and did, these authors also narrated stories that had been modified, or even invented, in the process of retelling.

The notion that the Gospels contain at least some stories that had been changed over the years is not pure speculation; in fact, we have hard evidence of this preserved in the Gospels themselves (we will examine some of this evidence in a moment). We also have reason to think that early Christians were not particularly concerned that stories about Jesus were being changed. Odd as it may seem to us, most believers appear to have been less concerned than we are about what we would call the facts of history. Even though we as twenty-first-century persons tend to think that something cannot be true unless it happened, ancient Christians, along with a lot of other ancient people, did not think this way. For them, something could be true whether or not it happened. What mattered more than historical fact was what we might call religious or moral truth.

On one level, even modern people consider "moral truth" to be more important than historical fact. That is, they will occasionally concede that something can be true even if it didn't happen. Consider, for example, a story that every second grader in the country has heard, the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. As a young lad, George takes the axe to the tree in his father's front yard. When his father comes home and asks, "Who cut down my cherry tree?" George confesses, "I cannot tell a lie. I did it."

Historians know that this never happened. In fact, the Christian minister who propagated the story (known as "Parson Weems") later admitted to having made it up. Why then do we tell the story? For one thing, the story stresses one of the ultimate values that we claim as a country. We use the story to teach children that our country is rooted in integrity. Who was George Washington? He was the father of our nation. What kind of man was he? He was an honest man, a man of integrity! Really? How honest was he? Well, one time when he was a boy. . . . The point of the story? This country is founded on honesty. *It* cannot tell a lie. In other words, the story serves as a piece of national propaganda. I'm reasonably sure, at least, that it's not a story told to schoolchildren in Tehran.

The account of George Washington and the cherry tree is told for at least one other reason as well, relating not so much to national image as to personal ethics. We tell this story to children because we want them to know that they should

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 3.1 *Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World*

Nearly everyone we come in contact with can read and write on at least an elementary level; most can read the editorial page, for instance. Recent studies have shown, however, that things have not always been this way, that widespread literacy is a purely modern phenomenon. Preindustrial societies had neither the incentive nor the means to provide mass education in literacy for their children. They had no real incentive because the means of production didn't require that everyone read, and they couldn't afford the expense of providing the necessary training in any case. Such societies were far more dependent on the spoken word than the written.

Even ancient Greece and Rome were largely oral cultures, despite the unreflective assumption held even among some scholars that these societies, which produced so many literary classics, must have been largely literate. We now know that most people in the Greco-Roman world could not read, let alone write. Estimates of the level of literacy vary, but several important studies have concluded that in the best of times (e.g., Athens in the days of Socrates), only 10 to 15 percent of the population (the vast majority of them males) could read and write at an elementary level. Moreover, in this world even literary texts were oral phenomena: books were made to be read out loud, often in public, so that a person usually "read" a book by hearing it read by someone else.

Interestingly, even as these societies developed a dependence on texts—for example, by using written tax receipts, contracts, and wills—they did not promote literacy for the masses. Instead, those who were literate began to hire out their services to those who were not.

Until recently it has been commonly thought (again, even among scholars) that oral cultures could be counted on to preserve their traditions reliably, that people in such societies were diligent in remembering what they heard and could reproduce it accurately when asked about it. This, however, is another myth that has been exploded by recent studies of literacy. We have now come to see that people in oral cultures typically do not share the modern concern for preserving traditions intact, and do not repeat them exactly the same way every time. On the contrary, the concern for verbal accuracy has been instilled in us by the phenomenon of mass literacy itself; since anyone now can check to see if a fact has been remembered correctly (by looking it up), we have developed a sense that traditions ought to remain invariable and unchanged. In most oral societies, however, traditions are understood to be malleable; that is, they are *supposed* to be changed and made relevant to the new situations in which they are cited.

The importance of these new studies should be obvious as we begin to reflect on the fate of the traditions about Jesus as they spread by word of mouth throughout the largely illiterate Greco-Roman world.

not lie under any circumstances. Even if they've done something bad, something harmful, they should not try to deceive others about it. It is better to come clean and deal with the consequences than to distort the truth and make things worse. So we tell the story, not because it really happened, but because in some sense we think it is true.

The stories about Jesus in the early church may have been similar. To be sure, many of them are accounts of things that really did happen (part of our task will be figuring out which ones did). Others are historical reminiscences that have been changed, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, in the retelling. Others were made up by Christians, possibly well-meaning Christians, at some point prior to the writing of the Gospels. But they all are meant to convey the truth, as the storyteller saw it, about Jesus.

A Piece of Evidence

That stories about Jesus were changed (or made up) in the process or retelling is not just a wild idea dreamt up by university professors with too much time on their hands. In fact there is good evidence for it, evidence that can be found in the stories themselves as they have come down to us in the Gospels. In numerous instances different Gospels tell the same story, but the stories differ in significant ways. Sometimes these differences represent simple shifts in emphasis. At other times, however, they represent irreconcilable conflicts. What is striking is that whether the changes are reconcilable or not, they often point to an attempt by some early Christian storyteller to convey an important idea about Jesus. Here we will look at just one example; dozens could easily be cited, all of them suggesting that many early Christians were willing to change a historical fact in order to make a theological point.

The illustration I have chosen concerns a small detail with profound implications—the day and time of Jesus' death, which are described differently in the Gospels. All four Gospels of the New Testament indicate that Jesus was crucified sometime during Passover week, in Jerusalem, on orders of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. But there is a key discrepancy in the accounts. To understand it, you will need some background information.

In the days of Jesus, Passover was the most important Jewish festival. It commemorated the exodus of the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. The Hebrew Scriptures narrate the commemorative event itself (Exod 7–12). According to the ancient accounts, God raised up Moses to deliver his people and through him brought ten plagues on the land of Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to set his people free. The tenth plague was by far the worst: the death of every first-born human and animal in the land. In preparation for the onslaught, God instructed Moses to have every family of the Israelites sacrifice a lamb and spread its blood on the lintels and doorposts of their houses. In that way, when the angel of death came to bring destruction, he would see the blood on the doors of the Israelites and "pass over" them to go to the homes of the Egyptians.

The children of Israel were told to eat a quick meal in preparation for their escape. There was not time even to allow the bread to rise; they were therefore to eat it unleavened. The Israelites did as they were told; the angel of death came and went. The Pharaoh pleaded with the children of Israel to leave, they fled to the Red Sea, where they made their final escape through the parted waters.

The Israelites were instructed through Moses to commemorate this event annually. Hundreds of years later, in the days of Jesus, the Passover celebration brought large numbers of pilgrims to Jerusalem, where they would participate in sacrifices in the Temple and eat a sacred meal of symbolic foods, including a lamb, bitter herbs to recall their bitter hardship in Egypt, unleavened bread, and several cups of wine. The sequence of events was typically as follows. Lambs would be brought to the Temple, or purchased there, for sacrifice with the assistance of a priest. They would then be prepared for the Passover meal by being skinned, drained of their blood, and possibly butchered. Each person or family who brought a lamb would then take it home and prepare the meal. That evening was the Passover feast, which inaugurated the weeklong celebration called the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

As you may know, in Jewish reckoning, a new day begins when it gets dark (that is why the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday evening). So the lambs would be prepared for the Passover meal on the afternoon of the day before the meal would actually be eaten. When it got dark, the new day started, and the meal could begin.

This now takes us to the dating of Jesus' execution. The Gospel of Mark, probably our earliest account, clearly indicates when Jesus was put on trial. On the preceding day, according to Mark 14:12, the disciples ask Jesus where he would have them "prepare" the Passover. This is said to happen on the day when the priests "sacrifice the passover lamb," or the day of Preparation for the Passover (the afternoon before the Passover meal). Jesus gives them their instructions and they make the preparations. That

evening—the start of the next day for them—they celebrate the meal together (14:17–25).

At this special occasion, Jesus takes the symbolic foods of the meal and endows them with additional meaning, saying, "This is my body . . . this is my blood of the covenant" (14:22–24). Afterward, he goes with his disciples to (the Garden of) Gethsemane, where he is betrayed by Judas Iscariot and arrested (14:32, 43). He is immediately put on trial before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin (14:53). He spends the night in jail; early in the morning the Sanhedrin delivers him over to Pilate (15:1). After a short trial, Pilate condemns him to death. He is led off to be crucified, and is nailed to the cross at 9:00 a.m. (15:25). Thus, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is executed the day after the Preparation of the Passover, that is, on the morning after the Passover meal had been eaten.

Our latest canonical account of this event is in the Gospel of John. Many of the details here are similar to Mark: the same persons are involved and many of the same stories are told. There are differences, however, and some of these are significant. John's account of the trial before Pilate, for example, is much more elaborate (18:28–19:16). In part, this is because in his version the Jewish leaders refuse to enter Pilate's place of residence and send Jesus in to face Pilate alone. As a result, Pilate has to conduct the trial by going back and forth between the prosecution and the defendant, engaging in relatively lengthy conversations with both before pronouncing his verdict. What is particularly striking, and significant for our investigation here, is that we are told exactly when the trial comes to an end with Pilate's verdict: "Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover, and it was about 12:00 noon" (John 19:14). Jesus is immediately sent off to be crucified (19:16).

The day of Preparation for the Passover? How could this be? That is the day before the Passover meal was eaten, the day the priests began to sacrifice the lambs at noon. But in Mark, Jesus had his disciples prepare the Passover on that day, and then he ate the meal with them in the evening after it became dark, only to be arrested afterward.

If you read John's account carefully, you will notice other indications that Jesus is said to be executed on a different day than he is in Mark. John 18:28, for example, gives the reason that the Jewish leaders refuse to enter into Pilate's place of residence for Jesus' trial. It is because they do not want to become ritually defiled, and thereby prevented from eating the Passover meal that evening (recall, according to Mark, they had already eaten the meal the night before!). This difference in dating explains another interesting feature of John's Gospel. In this account Jesus never instructs his disciples to prepare for the Passover, and he evidently does not eat a Passover meal during his last evening with them (he does not, for example, take the symbolic foods and say, "This is my body" and "This is my blood"). The reason for these differences should by now be clear: in John's Gospel, Jesus was already in his tomb by the time of this meal.

We seem to be left with a difference that is difficult to reconcile. Both Mark and John indicate the day and hour of Jesus' death, but they disagree. In John's account, he is executed sometime after noon on the day on which preparations were being made to eat the Passover meal. In Mark's account he is killed the following day, the morning after the passover meal had been eaten, sometime around 9:00 a.m. If we grant that there is a difference, how do we explain it?

Some scholars have argued that John's account is more accurate historically, since it coincides better with Jewish sources that describe how criminal trials were to be conducted by the Sanhedrin. If these scholars are right, then Mark or one of his sources may have changed the day on which Jesus was killed in order to promote the idea that Jesus himself had instituted the Lord's Supper during the Passover meal. This is possible, but may not be the best explanation. The Jewish sources that describe the procedures of the Sanhedrin were written nearly 200 years after this event, and thus are probably not our best guide.

If we concede that the later account (John's) is on general principle less likely to be accurate, since so many more years and so many more storytellers would have intervened between the account and the events it narrates, an intriguing possibility arises to explain why John, or his source, may have changed the detail concerning Jesus' death. John is the only Gospel in which Jesus is actually identified as "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Indeed, he is called this at the very start of the Gospel, by his forerunner, John the Baptist (1:29; cf. 1:36). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' death represents the salvation of God, just as the sacrifice of the lamb represented salvation for the ancient Israelites during the first Passover. Perhaps John (or his source) made a change in the day and hour of Jesus' death precisely to reinforce this theological point. In this Gospel, Jesus dies on the same day as the Passover lamb, at the same hour (just after noon)—to show that Jesus really is the lamb of God.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 3.2 Mark and John on the Time of Jesus' Death

MARK	JOHN
The Jewish Passover meal takes place on a Thursday evening.	The Jewish Passover meal takes place on a Friday evening.
Jesus' Last Supper is a Passover meal; it occurs on a Thursday, the evening after the Passover lambs are slaughtered.	Jesus' Last Supper is not a Passover meal; it occurs on a Thursday, the evening before the Passover lambs are slaughtered.
After the supper, Jesus is arrested. He spends the night in jail and is tried by Pilate in the morning.	After the supper, Jesus is arrested. He spends the night in jail and is tried by Pilate in the morning.
Jesus is crucified at 9:00 a.m., the morning after the Passover meal was eaten.	Jesus is crucified after noon, the day before the Passover meal was eaten.

Conclusion: The Early Traditions about Jesus

This analysis gives just one example of how historical facts may have been changed to convey theological "truths." We could easily examine other examples pertaining to such key events in the Gospels as Jesus' birth, his baptism, his miracles, his teachings, and his resurrection. The main point is that the stories that Christians told and retold about Jesus were not meant to be objective history lessons for students interested in key events of Roman imperial times. They were meant to convince people that Jesus was the miracle-working Son of God whose death brought salvation to the world and to edify and instruct those who already believed. Sometimes the stories were modified to express a theological truth. For the early Christians who passed along the stories we now have in the Gospels, it was sometimes legitimate and necessary to change a historical fact in order to make a theological point. Moreover, these are the stories that the Gospel writers inherited.

This conclusion has some profound implications for our investigation of the Gospels. The first concerns the Gospels as pieces of early Christian literature. Just as the Gospel writers inherited stories that try to make a point, they themselves have attempted to produce coherent accounts of Jesus' life and death to make certain points. Each Gospel

author may have had his own points to make, and these may not have been the same in every case. Mark's point may not have been John's point in his story of Jesus' crucifixion. It is important then—indeed, absolutely crucial—that we allow each author to have his own say, rather than assume that they are all trying to say the same thing. We need to study each account for its own emphases.

The second implication concerns the Gospels as historical sources for what happened during the life of Jesus. If the Gospels have differences in historical detail, and each Gospel preserves traditions that have been changed, then it is impossible for the historian simply to take these stories at face value and uncritically assume that they provide historically accurate information. We will therefore need to develop some criteria for deciding which features of the Gospels represent Christianizations of the tradition and which represent the life of Jesus as it can be historically reconstructed.

Over the course of the next five chapters we will devote our attention to the first aspect of our study, the literary emphasis of each Gospel. Once we understand in greater detail where the Gospels came from and what each one has to say, we will then be equipped to address the second issue, asking broader historical questions in an attempt to establish what actually happened in the life of Jesus.

AT A GLANCE

Box 3.3 The Traditions of Jesus

1. Jesus died around 30 C.E.; the Gospels were written thirty-five to sixty-five years later, between 65 and 95 C.E.
2. The authors of the New Testament Gospels are anonymous; they did not claim to be eyewitnesses to the events they narrate.
3. The authors of the Gospels inherited their accounts of Jesus from oral traditions that had been in circulation during the intervening decades.
4. Stories passed on by word of mouth tend to change over time, sometimes significantly.
5. There is evidence that the Gospels contain stories changed in the long process of retelling, for example, when different Gospels tell the same story in different, even irreconcilable, ways.
6. From a literary perspective, each account should thus be studied on its own terms. We should not assume that all the accounts have the same message.
7. Moreover, from a historical perspective, differences in our sources require us to devise methods for determining what *really* happened in the life of Jesus.

SOME ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS: THE AUTHORS OF THE GOSPELS

Proto-orthodox Christians of the second century, some decades after most of the New Testament books had been written, claimed that their favorite Gospels had been penned by two of Jesus' disciples—Matthew, the taxcollector, and John, the beloved disciple—and by two friends of the apostles—Mark, the secretary of Peter, and Luke, the traveling companion of Paul. Scholars today, however, find it difficult to accept this tradition for several reasons.

First of all, none of these Gospels makes any such claim about itself. All four authors chose to keep their identities anonymous. Would they have done so if they had been eyewitnesses? This certainly would have been possible, but one would at least have expected an eyewitness or a friend of an eyewitness to authenticate his account by appealing to personal knowledge, for

example, by narrating the stories in the first person singular ("On the day that Jesus and I went up to Jerusalem. . .").

Moreover, we know something about the backgrounds of the people who accompanied Jesus during most of his ministry. The disciples appear to have been uneducated peasants from Galilee. Both Simon Peter and John the son of Zebedee, for example, are said to have been peasant fishermen (Mark 1:16–20) who were "uneducated," that is, literally, unable to read and write (Acts 4:13). Now it is true that the Gospels do not represent the most elegant literature from antiquity, but their authors were at least relatively well educated; they write, for the most part, correct Greek. Could two of them have been disciples?

Again, it is possible. Jesus and his apostles, however, appear to have spoken Aramaic, the common language of the Jews in Palestine. Whether they could also have spoken Greek as a second language is something that scholars have long debated, but at the very least it is clear that Greek was not their native tongue. The authors of the Gospels, on the other hand, are absolutely fluent in Greek. Did the apostles go back to school after Jesus died, overcome years of illiteracy by learning how to read and write at a relatively high level, become skilled in foreign composition, and then later pen the Gospels? Most scholars consider it somewhat unlikely.

Perhaps an even more important aspect of the authorship of the Gospels is the evidence that they appear to preserve stories that were in circulation for a long period. This observation certainly applies to narratives for which no eyewitnesses were evidently present. For example, if Pilate and Jesus were alone at the trial in John 18:28–19:16, and Jesus was immediately executed, who told the Fourth Evangelist what Jesus actually said? An early Christian must have come up with words that seemed appropriate to the occasion. The same principle applies to the other accounts of the Gospels as well. All of them appear to have circulated by word of mouth among Christian converts throughout the Mediterranean world.

One of our four authors, Luke, explicitly tells us that he used oral and written sources for his narrative (Luke 1:1–4), and he claims that some of these sources were drawn ultimately from eyewitnesses. This circumstance raises another interesting question. Is it likely that authors who extensively used earlier sources for their accounts were themselves eyewitnesses? Suppose, for example, that Matthew actually was a disciple who accompanied Jesus and witnessed the things he said and did. Why then would he take almost all of his stories, sometimes word for word, from another written account (as we will see in Chapter 6)?

In short, it appears that the Gospels have inherited traditions from both written and oral sources, as Luke himself acknowledges, and that these sources drew from traditions that had been circulating for years, decades even, among Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Dibelius, Martin. *From Tradition to Gospel*. Trans. B. L. Woolf. New York: Scribner, 1934. This ground-breaking study deals with the character of the traditions about Jesus in circulation orally prior to being written down in the Gospels.

Gerhardsson, Birger. *Manuscript and Memory: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*. Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1961. One of the most influential studies to maintain, contrary to the present chapter, that the traditions about Jesus in the New Testament Gospels were not changed, for the most part, in the process of being retold; for advanced students.

Harris, William V. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989. A brilliant analysis by a major classicist who seeks to determine how many people could read and write in the ancient world and what their reasons were for doing so; for advanced students.