

# The New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature

## Overview: The Early Christians and Their Writings

### Four Gospels, One Jesus, and Luke’s “Many” Witnesses

The author of the Gospel according to Luke begins by telling us that he consulted with “many” earlier writings and eyewitness accounts about Jesus:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1–4)

Sometimes I wonder what happened to all those “many” other writings and witnesses. Doubtless, some of them are reflected in the writings that comprise our New Testament. Early Christians, such as the author of Luke, would eventually produce quite a number of narratives about Jesus and the early Church, letters, and other writings as witnesses to their faith, their experiences as followers of Jesus, and their attempts to form nurturing communities. Several of these writings came to be included in the New Testament; others were not.

This short introduction to the New Testament has three main parts. Part 1 briefly mentions the twenty-seven writings included in the NT, as well as several other early Christian writings that date to the first or early-second centuries. Part 2 considers the four New Testament Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and what these four authors emphasize in their accounts of Jesus’ public ministry and death. Part 2 also discusses where written Gospels came from and introduces a comparative approach to the Gospels and their sources. Part 3 looks at letters that the early Christians wrote to one another and focuses on the apostle Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Because most of the New Testament writings are letters, this section offers some guidelines on how to read early Christian letters.

### What Is the New Testament (and What Is It Not)?

The New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven of the earliest Christian writings. Christians today (whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant) receive these twenty-seven writings as their Second or New(er) Testament of Scripture.

The Old Testament includes different kinds (or genres) of literature—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The New Testament likewise contains different literary genres. In addition to the four narratives about Jesus (commonly referred to as “Gospels”), there is one narrative about the earliest Church (Acts), twenty-one letters (or writings with at least some characteristics of an ancient Greek letter), and one apocalypse. These writings were composed between approximately AD 50 and AD 120 and may be summarized as follows:

1. Historical narratives: Five writings total (the four Gospels and Acts). For the sake of simplicity, this article refers to the four narratives about Jesus as “Gospels.” The first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are oftentimes referred to as the synoptic Gospels because of the large amount of



overlapping materials. (In Greek, *synoptic* means “seen together” [= *optic* + *syn*].) The Fourth Gospel, or Gospel according to John, is distinguished from the synoptic Gospels by its theological emphases and extensive sections on Jesus’ discourses and miracles. In addition to these four narratives about Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles offers a selective history of the earliest Church. The author of the Gospel of Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. These two volumes together are commonly referred to as Luke-Acts and in terms of their length comprise approximately one fourth of the New Testament.

2. Letters: Twenty-one writings total. Thirteen of the New Testament letters are attributed to the apostle Paul. Of these thirteen, seven are known today as the undisputed Pauline letters (Romans, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, First Thessalonians, Philemon) because virtually all scholars are persuaded that Paul did in fact write them. The undisputed Pauline letters date to the AD 50s and are the earliest surviving Christian writings. The other six New Testament letters attributed to Paul are commonly called the Deutero-Pauline letters (a “second” [= *deutero*] group of Pauline letters), as many scholars doubt that Paul himself wrote them (Second Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus). The last three Deutero-Pauline letters are oftentimes called the Pastoral Epistles. The eight other New Testament letters (or letter-like writings) were either written anonymously or attributed to other apostolic figures, such as Peter. They are the Book of Hebrews and the seven Catholic or General Epistles (James, First Peter, Second Peter, First John, Second John, Third John, Jude).
3. Apocalypse: The Revelation of John is the only New Testament example of this genre.

So, in terms of the number of writings, most of the New Testament is composed of letters (twenty-one out of twenty-seven) from a Church leader such as Paul to an early Christian community. Because the New Testament includes the works of different authors and different literary genres, you may find it helpful to think of the New Testament as a library of early Christian writings rather than as a single “book.”

In addition to these twenty-seven writings, we either possess or know something about numerous other writings by the first generations of Christians. The following list offers other examples of early Christian historical narratives, letters, and apocalypses:

1. Other early Christian historical narratives include the gospel of *Thomas*, the gospel of *Peter*, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the *Protevangelium of James*, the gospel of the *Ebionites*, the gospel of the *Nazareans*, the gospel according to the *Hebrews*, one writing (possibly two) known as the gospel of *Truth*, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.
2. Other early Christian letters include a lost letter of *Paul to the Church at Corinth* (mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9); *Third Corinthians* (a second-century writing known not to be written by Paul); seven letters of Ignatius, a bishop and martyr from Antioch in Syria; *First Clement*; the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*; Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians; and the *Letter of Barnabas*.
3. Two other early Christian apocalypses are the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*.

When did the Church decide upon the New Testament as a collection of (only) twenty-seven particular writings? The short answer is that this was a complicated process and took several centuries. In fact, the earliest surviving document listing the New Testament’s twenty-seven writings (and no others) as comprising the authoritative Christian New Testament comes from a single (albeit influential) bishop in Egypt, Athanasius of Alexandria in the year AD 367. What this means is that if you were a follower of Jesus in the early centuries of the Church, you may well have heard some—but most likely not all, or even many—New Testament writings read in your church community. You may also have come into contact with any number of other early Christian writings as well.



## Why Is the New Testament Written in Greek?

All the New Testament writings were written in ancient Greek—not Hebrew (the primary language of the Jewish Scriptures), Aramaic (the mother tongue of most Palestinian Jews, including Jesus), or Latin (the main language in the western parts of the Mediterranean, such as Italy, North Africa, and Spain). More specifically, the writings of the New Testament are in the *Koine* (“common”) dialect of ancient Greek. After the conquests of Alexander the Great (who died in 323 BC and over three centuries before the birth of Jesus), *Koine* Greek had become the standard language for commerce in most cities in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean, including Syro-Palestine. *Koine* Greek remained a common language in the Greek East even after Roman rule spread to these eastern regions during the second and first centuries BC. The ancient Mediterranean world included numerous different languages, cultures, and ethnic groups. Within this multicultural milieu, the writers of the New Testament, like so many of their non-Christian neighbors, chose the “common” dialect of Koine Greek for their written communications.

In addition, most citations of the Jewish Scriptures in the New Testament are from the Old Testament in a Greek translation known as the Septuagint (LXX). The “Bible” of many early Christian communities was the Old Testament in Greek.

## What Does “New Testament” Mean?

The term *New Testament* can also be translated as “new covenant.” Three New Testament writers—the author of Luke, the Apostle Paul, and the author of Hebrews—refer to the “new testament / covenant” to differentiate between the relationship God established with the Jewish people, as related in the Torah, and the extension of that relationship to all humanity in Jesus Christ (see Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6a; Hebrews 7:22, 8:6–13, 9:15, 12:24). For example, the Apostle Paul writes that God “has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant[/*testament*]” (2 Corinthians 3:6a). Paul also mentions “the old covenant[/*testament*]” (3:14), and the author of Hebrews refers to “the first covenant[/*testament*]” (Hebrews 9:1, 15, 18). The possible connotation that the Jewish Scriptures are somehow “old(er)” need not suggest to us today that the “new covenant/*testament*” has outdated or superseded the first covenant/*testament*. Although this is apparently the view of certain early Christian writings, such as Luke-Acts, early Christian literature reflects a variety of views toward Jews and the Jewish Scriptures.

## Early Christian Gospels

Each of the four Gospels offers distinctive information about Jesus, his public ministry, death, Resurrection, and significance. We shall first survey the main emphases in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and then consider from where these writings about Jesus came. When we look at the sources the Gospel authors used and examples of how they edited their sources, we can learn much about these authors’ theology and recognize the points about Jesus that they especially wished to emphasize to their communities.

## What Are the Main Themes of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John?

### Mark

Each of the New Testament Gospels deserves to be read for its distinctive characterization of Jesus. In each Gospel you will notice certain themes that are not emphasized as much—or at all—in the other



Gospels. For example, the earliest of the three synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, follows three prominent themes:

1. Secrecy about Jesus' messianic identity
2. The disciples' lack of understanding about Jesus and his teachings
3. The suffering of Jesus

Here is an example of the first theme in connection with a miracle of Jesus:

He [Jesus] took her by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha cum*," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. (Mark 5:41b–43)

Next follows an example of the second theme, or the disciples' lack of understanding:

But when they saw him [Jesus] walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. (Mark 6:49–52)

It is not until the middle of Mark's narrative that Jesus starts to reveal that he will suffer and die, the third theme:

Then he [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Mark 8:31–33)

You may have noticed that this last passage ties together two different themes in Mark—Jesus' suffering and the obtuseness of one prominent disciple, namely Peter.

## Matthew

Although the Gospel of Matthew shares many points in common with the Gospel of Mark, it gives its own particular presentation of Jesus. One theme we may not expect to find in Matthew is Jesus' affirmation of the Mosaic Law (Torah) to his followers:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17–20)



At the end of this passage, the scribes' and Pharisees' "righteousness" is regarded positively as a goal that Jesus' true followers must achieve and then surpass, in order to "be called great in the kingdom of heaven." This points to an element of conflict or competition between Matthew's community and (other) Jews who do not follow Jesus (or who do not follow Jesus in the way that the author of Matthew prescribes). Such conflict is further underscored by Matthew's depiction of Jesus as entering "*their* synagogue" (Matthew 12:9) to heal a man who had a withered hand. Compare the parallel passage in Mark 3:1, which reads "*the* synagogue." Mark does not distinguish, as Matthew does, between Jesus' followers and those associated with a synagogue.

Such differentiation from the synagogue can likewise be seen in two of Matthew's references to the disciples' missionary activities. During his lifetime the Matthean Jesus commands a limited outreach only toward Jews: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5b–6). By contrast, at the very end of this Gospel, Jesus sanctions a universal mission to all nations:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19–20)

In Matthew's community, making disciples and "teaching them to obey everything" Jesus commanded apparently included keeping the Mosaic Law (Torah), which according to Matthew 5:17–20 will never pass away. We therefore find in Matthew's narrative an attempt to bring together several contrasting themes and emphases, including missions to Jews and Gentiles and the importance of the Torah.

## Luke

The third synoptic Gospel, Luke, also has its own distinctive themes and emphases. Most scholars agree that, different from the other three Gospels, the Gospel of Luke displays a special interest in establishing his version of Jesus' story among other ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish historical narratives. Luke makes this aim evident in his prologue (see 1:1–4), where he claims that his account will start at the beginning, be based on eyewitness reports, investigate with accuracy, and focus on the truth. These four claims can be found at the beginning of many Hellenistic and early Roman period histories. Luke wanted dignified, intellectual readers like Theophilus (see Luke 1:3 Acts 1:1), the person to whom his book is addressed, not just to learn miscellaneous interesting details concerning Christian origins but also to be persuaded that his version of the events offered the "truth" about what actually took place. For Luke, earlier written sources (such as Mark and the common source known as Q) were extremely valuable but required the skillful hand of a trusted historian for ordering and interpretation. In addition to supplementing Mark with numerous fascinating stories about Jesus' birth and childhood and the birth and teachings of Jesus' role model, John the Baptist, Luke also highlights, among other things, the inclusion of women among early followers of Jesus and concern for the poor. Much more so than Matthew or Mark, Luke's Gospel highlights women who traveled with Jesus. Yet despite the additional attention women receive in this gospel, scholars today debate whether Luke's depictions of women are actually more positive than those in Matthew or Mark. Two passages in particular inform this debate:

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,



and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (Luke 8:1–3; cf. Mark 15:41)

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38–42)

In particular, Luke 10:38–42 seems to imply Jesus' rejection of the notion that a woman must assume a subordinate, servile role within the household.

Concerning the rich and the poor in this Gospel, Jesus warns about those who "store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21) and about the future punishment awaiting such people: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep" (6:24–25). Likewise, only in Luke does Jesus instruct the "very rich" ruler to sell "all" that he owns (see Luke 18:22–23, Mark 10:21–22, Matthew 19:21–22).

## John

For his themes and emphases, the author of the Gospel of John acknowledges that he writes in order to inspire faith in Jesus: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe. . . ." (John 20:30–31a); the author of the fourth Gospel also provides figurative "I am" sayings of Jesus, as well as a prologue (see John 1:1–14) emphasizing the role of Jesus the Word in creation:

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. . . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. (John 6:35,51)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1:1–3a)

You may find it helpful to read the entire Johannine prologue (see John 1:1–18) and reflect on how this passage compares with the presentations of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels, especially the genealogies (see Matthew 1:1–17, Luke 3:23–38, Mark 1:2–4).

By now you may agree that a person reading, for example, Mark in light of Matthew's narrative (or vice versa), would likely miss many important details in Mark (or Matthew). It is important to approach each Gospel individually in order to gain an appreciation for its author's overall theological concerns. Having surveyed each of these Gospels separately, in the following sections we shall consider the origin of written Gospels about Jesus and the oral and written traditions behind the New Testament Gospels in relation to one another.





## Jesus to the Gospels: Where Did the Gospels Come From?

The four narratives about Jesus' life, ministry, and Passion attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were originally written anonymously and were, moreover, not called "Gospels" by their authors. New Testament authors consistently use the Greek term *gospel* for oral proclamation of the "Good News." By the middle of the second century, the term *gospel* was added to gospel manuscripts as a literary designation for these writings, characterizing them as a written summary of the "Good News" of Jesus. Also in the second century, names were attached to these writings, presumably to distinguish between different written gospels in Christian communities that possessed more than one gospel. Although the Gospel authors chose not to indicate much about themselves in their writings, from careful study of these writings we can learn much about what they thought about Jesus and his significance.

Concerning *when* the Gospels were written, we can work forward from an approximate date for the Crucifixion of Jesus (AD 30). You have already read that the earliest surviving Christian writings are the Apostle Paul's seven undisputed letters, which date to the AD 50s. Most scholars date Mark's Gospel to around AD 70 because of its likely reference to the first Roman-Jewish War (AD 66–73), which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple:

Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. . . . But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains. (Mark 13:2,14)

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written after Mark and might be dated between AD 75 and AD 85, and John, probably toward the end of the first century in the 90s or early in the second century. One thing this means is that four (or more) decades passed between the lifetime of Jesus (AD 30) and the earliest surviving written gospels about Jesus (Mark, AD 70). This is one reason that the author Luke, in the passage with which this discussion began, acknowledges having made use of "many" written sources and eyewitness testimonies (see Luke 1:1–4). What Luke explicitly acknowledges was most probably true for the other three New Testament Gospels as well.

The circulation of oral traditions about Jesus for decades prior to—and, indeed, after—the emergence of written gospels can explain a number of the similarities between these four Gospels. For example, we read in all four accounts that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate (the Roman Prefect of Judea, AD 26–36) on a Friday at the time of the Jewish festival of Passover (the celebration of the Exodus and subsequent covenant with Yahweh in Sinai) (see Matthew 26:2, Mark 14:16, Luke 22:15, John 19:14). Despite these similarities the synoptics and John have developed these details into different narratives. Mark and the other two synoptic Gospels present Jesus' celebrating the Passover on Thursday evening with his disciples the day before the Crucifixion (for example, see Mark 14:12–25). Yet in the fourth Gospel, Jesus does not celebrate the Passover with his disciples because he is arrested prior to the Passover, which in John's account falls on Friday (not Thursday, as in the synoptics). Another disparity concerns the timing of the Crucifixion: Did it commence in the morning or the middle of the day? According to Mark 15:25, it begins around 9:00 AM, but in John 19:14–16, it starts shortly after 12:00 PM.

The telling and retelling of stories about Jesus by his followers over several decades prior to the writing of gospels about Jesus can account for many such similarities and differences.



## The Synoptic Problem (I): What Is It, and Can It Be Solved?

The synoptic problem addresses the need to account for both the similarities and the differences between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. How can there be so much overlapping material about Jesus' life, ministry, and death, yet such distinctive and even contradictory points in each Gospel? The most widely accepted solution to the synoptic problem has two main parts. Acknowledged by nearly all scholars today, the first part posits that the author of Mark wrote first and was used as a source by the authors of Matthew and Luke. Building on this hypothesis of Markan priority, we can learn much about the theology of Matthew and Luke by looking at what they chose to incorporate, edit, or leave out from Mark. Let's consider representative examples from Matthew and Luke. To see the differences, we will start with the Markan source. You have read that secrecy is a prominent theme in Mark. Mark 6:47–52 relates how Jesus' disciples were in a boat on the sea when they saw Jesus walking on water. This is how the disciples reacted:

. . . they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him [Jesus] and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. (Mark 6:49b–52)

Matthew includes some of this material from Mark 6:47–52 but takes it in a decidedly different direction:

. . . they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. . . . When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:26b–29,32–33)

Notably, Matthew passes over in silence Mark's depiction of the disciples' hard-heartedness and instead presents the Apostle Peter as joining Jesus in walking on water. Matthew's Jesus does not censure the disciples for their obstinacy. Instead the disciples acknowledge Jesus as God's Son (see Matthew 14:33). One thing that Matthew's editing of this Markan passage reveals is that Matthew is not merely a passive recipient of earlier gospel traditions. Rather, Matthew is an active author who finds his own creative theological voice through editing Markan (and other) materials available to him.

Let's consider our second example of editing, this time from the Gospel of Luke. Luke subtly edits material from Mark concerning the end of the world. In both the Markan and Lukan versions, Jesus speaks about what will happen in "this generation," that is, during the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. Let's look at the two texts together:

Mark 13:30	Luke 21:32
Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.	Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

With the exception of omitting one Greek word (*tauta*, a demonstrative pronoun meaning "these"), the Lukan version is essentially the same as that in Mark.





But do the two verses in Mark and Luke mean the same thing? In Mark 13:30, the occurrence of “all these things” within a generation of Jesus’ death includes colossal and observable changes in the heavens and the appearance of the Son of Man:

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” [cf. Daniel 7:13–14] with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. (Mark 13:24–27)

The author of Luke made use of eyewitnesses for his Gospel and, by implication, was not an eyewitness or a follower of the earthly Jesus. Luke wrote at some time after Mark, when the expectation of Mark 13:24–30 had not been realized. Luke eliminates this difficulty by removing a single word, *these*, from Mark 13:30. In Luke 21:32 “all things” is less specific than “all these things” (Mark 13:30) and need not be taken as a reference to Jesus’ prediction of the End, as in the Gospel of Mark.

We find a similar example of Luke’s editing of Mark to teach about the end of the world in Mark 9:1 and Luke 9:27:

Mark 9:1	Luke 9:27
There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.	There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.

In Mark’s narrative, the “coming” of God’s kingdom may be interpreted in light of Mark 13:24–30, which predicts the coming of the Son of Man within “this generation.” By deleting “having come in power” (Mark 9:1), Luke 9:27 makes no such claim. In Luke’s theology, seeing “the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:27) and “all things” taking place (21:32) is open to any number of interpretations and does not denote that the time of the End is near, as Mark 9:1 and 13:24–30 do. To be sure, Luke does expect Jesus to return at some future point (for example, see Luke 12:35–48, Acts 1:11), just not as soon as Mark’s narrative implies.

## The Synoptic Problem (II): What Is the Sayings Source “Q”?

The last section introduced the first part of the solution to the synoptic problem accepted by most scholars today: The hypothesis of Markan priority posits that Mark wrote first and that his Gospel was used as a source in Matthew and Luke. The second part of the solution to the synoptic problem builds on the hypothesis of Markan priority and notes that the authors of Matthew and Luke made use of Mark differently. Because neither Matthew nor Luke reflects the other’s particular editing of Markan materials, most scholars infer that Matthew and Luke wrote independently of each other.

Despite the independence of Matthew and Luke, these two Gospels share in common approximately two hundred verses that do not occur in Mark. Two hundred verses is a substantial amount of material that most likely would not have survived for decades in independent oral traditions until the writing of Matthew and Luke. Because Matthew and Luke wrote independently of each other and share so much non-Markan material in common, most scholars are persuaded that in addition to Mark’s Gospel, they made use of one or more other written sources. In German-language New Testament scholarship, the word *Quelle* (“source”) designates this non-Markan source material preserved in Matthew and Luke. The existence of this other



source material (“Q”) by Matthew and Luke is the second part of the solution to the synoptic problem. Matthew’s and Luke’s extensive borrowing from Mark and Q accounts for many of the similarities between the three synoptic Gospels.

In addition to materials from Mark and Q, it is likely that at least some passages contained only in Matthew came from pre-Matthean sources (M) and, likewise, that Luke made use of written sources not reflected in Mark or Matthew (L). The four-source hypothesis—encompassing Mark, Q, M, and L—offers the most complete explanation for why the synoptic Gospels contain so much overlapping material and also how each of these three Gospels offers distinctive material.

## Why Are Only Three of the Gospels “Synoptic”? The Synoptics and John

One thing that this short introduction to the New Testament will not attempt to resolve is the relation of the fourth Gospel to the synoptics. Scholars are not of one mind on this issue. On the one hand, if one posits that John borrowed from one or more of the synoptic Gospels, it is necessary to explain why this author offers such a different characterization of Jesus, as compared with those in the synoptics. On the other hand, maintaining the independence of John vis-à-vis the synoptics runs into the difficulty of explaining points where John overlaps with the synoptics. Examples of similar Gospel materials in John and one or more of the synoptics include Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand (see John 6:1–14, Mark 6:30–44); the healing of a Roman official’s son (see John 4:46–53; compare the healing of the centurion’s child or slave in Q / Luke 7:1–10 and its parallel in Q / Matthew 8:5–13); and especially numerous parts of the passion of Jesus in John, chapters 18–19. Nearly all scholars study the synoptics within the framework of Markan priority, and a strong majority is persuaded by the “Q” hypothesis, but there is not a consensus today concerning a possible literary relationship between the synoptics and John.

## Keeping in Touch: Early Christian Letters

This third and final section of this article focuses primarily on early Christian letters. We will present this section in two parts. Part 1 will consist of the following:

1. Some principles for reading an early Christian letter
2. Applying these to the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians

Building on the discussion of Galatians, in part 2 we will consider the following:

1. How the Book of Acts depicts Paul’s opponents and the unity of the Church
2. Understandings of faith and works in Paul and two other New Testament authors
3. Three New Testament authors’ perspectives on living as a Christian within the Roman Empire

### Part 1: Principles of Interpretation

#### Principles for Reading Early Christian Letters

Think about the last time you received a letter. Was it from a parent, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a friend from high school, or someone else? What prompted the person to write to you at this particular point in time?



The following are questions you ask intuitively when a letter (or some other form of communication, such as an e-mail or an instant message) arrives:

- a. **Author:** Who wrote it? What do I know about this person that will help me understand his or her communication?
- b. **Audience:** To whom did the person write? What is my relationship to the author? Is this a personal letter to me or an advertisement, mass mailing, or spam that others receive as well?
- c. **Opponents:** What persons, practices, or beliefs does the author oppose? Are the author's opponents non-Christian Jews, Greco-Roman polytheists, or Christians with a different theology or understanding of Jesus?
- d. **Purpose:** What led the author(s) to write this letter to me (us) now? What response does the author expect and encourage from me?

You can learn much about the twenty-one New Testament letters—and, indeed, all of the New Testament writings—by studying them with these questions in mind. Before you read further, let me invite you to read the New Testament Book of Galatians, which is one of the Apostle Paul's undisputed letters. Make a list of what Galatians reveals about its author, audience, and occasion, as well as Paul's opponents. After you have done this for Galatians, you can pose the questions outlined in this section to other New Testament letters. The following paragraphs offer a few remarks concerning each of these four areas in Galatians.

## Application of Principles

**Paul the author** As was standard practice in ancient Greek letters, Paul's Letter to the Galatians, territory in what is now Turkey, begins by identifying its author: "Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God's family who are with me" (Galatians 1:1–2). In this letter's opening statement, Paul assumes his authority as an Apostle sent by God. Later in Galatians we learn that Paul's Christian opponents disputed whether God had in fact commissioned Paul to proclaim the Good News to the gentiles.

Paul also recalls an earlier time in his life when his zealotry for his Jewish faith led him to persecute the Church:

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. (Galatians 1:13–17)

Paul was not one of Jesus' original twelve disciples (cf. Acts 7:57—8:1, 9:1–31, 22:1–21, 26:2–23). Scholars today debate whether Paul's first encounter with the Risen Jesus represents a particular "calling" within Paul's Jewish faith or a "conversion" to a different religion. This question is part of a larger debate about when Judaism and Christianity became separately defined religions.

Later in this letter, Paul recalls that he was the one who led the Galatians to faith in Jesus and that they received God's Spirit and beheld miracles that Paul performed when they came to believe (Galatians



3:1–5). From Galatians and Paul's other letters, we also learn something about Paul's ministry as a traveling evangelist. Paul used letters as a way to stay in touch and address problems in those congregations he was not able to visit as often as he may have wished.

**Galatian audience** Throughout this letter Paul expresses concern that the Christians in Galatia have rejected—or are about to reject—the Good News that Paul had earlier proclaimed to them:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. (Galatians 1:6–7)

In particular, Paul worries that the Galatians may have believed that becoming circumcised was required for all male converts to Christianity. Although circumcision for men was prescribed in the Jewish Law (Torah) and common in Judaism and in several other cultures in the ancient Near East, the practice was quite unpopular in Greco-Roman society. At the time Paul wrote Galatians, his Greco-Roman audience appears to have been pulled in three different directions: Should they continue to affirm Paul's teaching; embrace a different version of the Good News from other Christian missionaries, including circumcision; or return to their former polytheistic religion(s)? In the following passage, Paul reflects concern about the last of these possible reactions:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted. (Galatians 4:8–11)

Elsewhere in this letter, Paul uses the metaphor of a mother's pain in childbirth to describe his anguish and concern for this congregation's spiritual wellbeing (see Galatians 4:19–20).

**Paul's Christian opponents** Early in this letter, Paul offers the hypocrisy of the Apostle Peter, referred to as Cephas, as an example of his current opponents' untenable theology:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Galatians 2:11–14)

In Paul's theology, there is only one people of God made up of Jews and Gentiles, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, men or women, enslaved or free (see Galatians 3:27–28).

Yet the early Church included some followers of Jesus who believed that the covenant of circumcision given to the patriarch Abraham in Genesis, chapter 17, had created divisions in humanity—divisions that remained even after the time of Jesus. In Galatians, Paul claims that those who embraced this position and, accordingly, opposed his theology included the Apostle Peter and James (Jesus' brother, not an apostle and mentioned in Mark 6:3). It is important to underscore that Galatians reflects an inner-Christian debate over the relationship of the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Old Testament. From this letter we do not learn about a conflict between Christianity and Judaism. Instead, we see sincere followers of Jesus with



different understandings struggling to work out important theological positions some twenty years after the death of Jesus. Such conversations continue in the Church today as well, for example, on matters like euthanasia, abortion, divorce, sexuality, women, and money.

**Purpose** Now that we understand something about the author, audience, and opponents in Galatians, Paul's purpose for writing this letter to this particular congregation at this point in time becomes clear: Paul responds to the theology of his Christian opponents in an effort to reassure the Galatians of the legitimacy of their belief in the Good News that Paul had proclaimed to them. It is easy to understand why Paul's tone is so urgent in this letter. Rival Christian missionaries had come to Galatia, undermined Paul's authority, and challenged certain aspects of Paul's theology, including the notion that God accepts people because of their faith, or belief, in Jesus regardless of whether they are circumcised. Paul's opponents would have agreed with him concerning the importance of faith in Jesus but responded that faith should lead Jesus' followers to respect the continued validity of the covenant of circumcision that the Lord made with Abraham in Genesis. Paul's opponents would likely have found common ground with the author of Matthew, who you will recall assumes that followers of Jesus will keep the Law (see Matthew 5:17–20, 23:19–20).

## Part 2: Placing Paul in Conversation

### Acts of the Apostles: Paul's Opponents and the Unity of the Church

The preceding pages have examined Paul's Letter to the Galatians and given attention to what this letter reveals about its author, audience, occasion, and opponents. The remaining sections of this chapter build on this discussion of Galatians by examining three related topics. These are (1) Paul's opponents and the unity of the Church in Acts; (2) understandings of faith and works in the New Testament Letters of Ephesians and James; and (3) the Christian as a part of the Roman Empire, according to Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, the Epistle of 1 Peter, and the Revelation of John. Giving attention to these three topics helps us to see to what extent these theological discussions, like the matter of circumcision, remained living and unresolved issues in the early Church during, and after, the time of Paul.

Although in Galatians Paul identifies his opponents as rival Christian leaders, another early Christian author would portray differently this same crisis over circumcision. Writing several decades (or more) after Paul, the author of Luke-Acts presents Paul's primary opponents not as Church leaders but as non-Christian Jews. Luke's selective history of the early Church, the Acts of the Apostles, characterizes Jewish antagonists to the Pauline mission as follows:

But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul. . . . Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium. (Acts 13:45,49–51)

You can find additional allegations of persecution of the Pauline mission by Jews in Acts 17:5–7,13; 18:12–17; 21:27–28; 23:12–15; 24:1–2; 25:2b–5. In contrast to Galatians, the Acts of the Apostles never mentions that Paul had to defend himself against the accusations of Christian opponents, let alone rival Christian leaders. Most scholars regard the earlier witness of Paul as the more reliable account.

In the understanding of the author of Acts, the Church was unified and dealt with the question of circumcision rather easily. In Acts it is the Apostle Peter (not Paul) who first converts Gentiles and allows the male converts to remain uncircumcised (Acts 9:32—11:18). When Church leaders meet to discuss the



matter, James, the Lord's brother, affirms Peter's and Paul's labors among the Gentiles (Acts 15:13–21). How does this picture of a unified, harmonious Church compare with Galatians 2:11–14, where Paul opposes Peter (Cephas) to his face after James had sent spies to Antioch to report on Paul's missionary work among the Gentiles? Such differences between Acts on the one hand, and Galatians and Paul's other undisputed letters on the other hand, support the inference that Acts was likely written a generation or two after Paul by an author who had not personally known Paul or read Paul's letters.

## Faith and Works in Paul, Ephesians, and James

In Galatians, Paul responds to his opponents' accusation that not requiring the Mosaic Law (Torah), including circumcision, will lead to lawless conduct by followers of Jesus. The rationale for this accusation seems to be that if the Law is set aside as a guide for human behavior, there will be no limits or absolute ethical requirements governing the Christian life—much like some today believe that if a strict or narrow interpretation of the Bible is not followed (e.g., based on particular Scriptures about women's rightful behavior or corporal punishment), our society will go to "hell in a hand basket." In response Paul offers freedom in Christ as an opportunity to serve one's fellow believers and thereby govern ethical conduct: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another" (Galatians 5:13). For Paul, works of the Mosaic Law are entirely unnecessary:

Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. (Galatians 2:16)

Another of Paul's undisputed letters, Romans, likewise states: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (Rom 3:28).

Paul's teachings on faith and works in response to a particular crisis did not put an end to the issue in the early Church. The subject comes up, for example, in the Letter to the Ephesians. The theology of Ephesians differs at several points from that reflected in the seven undisputed letters of Paul. For this reason nearly all scholars believe that a later student or admirer of Paul wrote Ephesians. That is why Ephesians is classified among the New Testament's six Deutero-Pauline letters. An example of the distinctive theology in Ephesians concerns faith and works:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:8–10)

The Apostle Paul could have agreed with the statement that salvation is God's gift to humanity and is "not the result of works." Yet the notion that believers are "created in Christ Jesus for good works" is not a part of Paul's theological vocabulary in Galatians or the other undisputed Pauline letters. At the time of the Galatian crisis, Paul was too busy confronting works of the Law (Torah) to reflect on the importance of works in general for followers of Jesus.





Another New Testament letter, James, likewise reflects an interest in faith and works. James is one of the Catholic or General Epistles. Different from Ephesians but like Galatians, James reflects a polemical context and criticizes the position of certain other Christians:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14–17)

Like Ephesians, the Epistle of James refers to “works” but not specifically to works prescribed in the Mosaic Law. More than anything, James addresses how the faithful should live in a manner consistent with what they believe.

These three early Christian authors—Paul, the author of Ephesians, and the author of James—tell us about conversations and, at times, debates over the relative importance of faith and works in the Christian life. Such conversations are a necessary part of forming any religious community and continue today among Christians and people of other religions.

## Living as a Christian within the Roman Empire

The previous section mentioned Paul’s concern about the allegation that his theology could lead to lawlessness and any number of moral excesses (see Galatians 5:13). In his later letter to the Church at Rome, Paul again addresses this concern:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1–2)

The metaphor of a “living sacrifice” envisions believers who voluntarily limit their freedom because they have received God’s mercy and now wish to offer themselves to God’s service. In the following chapter of this letter, Paul expands upon this teaching about the believer’s ethical conduct to include principles for living within the (totalitarian) Roman Empire:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for (your) good. . . . Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. (Romans 13:1–4a,7)

Likewise, First Peter, one of the Catholic epistles, offers a similar exhortation to live as peaceful citizens under the authority of Rome:

For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As



servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Peter 2:13–17)

According to Paul and the author of First Peter, then, Christians are expected to make every effort to live within the constraints of the Roman Empire. Both authors maintain that the faithful must seek to live within that society without conforming to it.

By contrast the New Testament's only apocalypse, the Revelation of John, views Rome as fundamentally hostile to the people of God:

I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. (Revelation 17:3–6)

John thus identifies Rome with Babylon, the enemy of the ancient Israelites. Interestingly, the author of First Peter can likewise refer to Rome as "Babylon" (see 1 Peter 5:13) without expressing alarm about the danger that, according to Revelation, Rome poses to the Church.

Cultural and other differences have led sincere believers to variant experiences within a particular culture. Such was clearly the case for Paul and the author of First Peter, who accepted life within Roman society, and the author of Revelation, who viewed Rome as fundamentally corrupt and looked forward to the time of her downfall (see Revelation 18:1–4). In the centuries following these writings, numerous Christian authors attempted to address what it meant to live within Roman society, which at times could be hostile toward the Church. Following the rise of the first Christian emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, the question would have to be redefined to consider whether the Empire now led by a Christian emperor was too friendly toward certain expressions of Christianity and too severe toward others, not to mention Jews and polytheists as well.

## Summary

In this article we have learned that early Christians wrote historical narratives about Jesus (Gospels) and the early Church, apocalypses, and letters. Twenty-seven of these writings, composed between approximately AD 50 and AD 120, came to be included in the New Testament. The New Testament is written in the *Koine* ("common") dialect of ancient Greek, which was the common language in most cities in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Each of the four New Testament Gospels presents a distinctive picture of Jesus. One reason for the differences between these Gospels is that their authors borrowed from various oral and written traditions and wrote decades after the Crucifixion.

Twenty-one of the New Testament writings are letters. When reading an early Christian letter, it is helpful to ask what the letter reveals about its author, audience, opponents, and purpose. Despite their many points of agreement, the New Testament writings also highlight differences and even divisions in the early Church on matters such as circumcision, the relative unity of the earliest Church, the importance of faith and works, and living as a Christian within the Roman Empire.



## For Further Study

### New Testament

Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. Third ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

This book provides an excellent introduction to the New Testament and some two dozen other early Christian writings.

Holmes, Michael W., ed. *The Apostolic Fathers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989.

This affordable volume offers short introductions and English translations of fifteen of the earliest extracanonical Christian writings, known today as the “Apostolic Fathers” (Barnabas; the Didache; the seven letters of Ignatius of Antioch; Polycarp, Philippians; the Martyrdom of Polycarp; First Clement; Second Clement; the Shepherd of Hermas; and Diognetus).

Jefford, Clayton N. *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.

This volume offers helpful chapter-long introductions to the Apostolic Fathers.

Koester, Craig R. *Revelation and the End of All Things*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001.

In providing commentary on the New Testament’s apocalypse, the Revelation of John, this author engages certain popular contemporary approaches to Bible prophecy and interpretations of apocalyptic literature, such as in the *Left Behind* novels.

Powell, Mark Allan. *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998.

This text includes chapters on the historical Jesus and the origins of written gospels, the four New Testament Gospels, and other early Christian gospels.

Roetzel, Calvin. *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*. Fourth ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998.

This is a survey of the Apostle Paul’s Hellenistic and Jewish cultural contexts, the thirteen New Testament letters attributed to Paul, and models of interpreting Paul’s theology, legacy, and significance.

(This article by James A. Kelhoffer, PhD, is adapted from “The New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature” in *Theological Foundations: Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith*, by J. J. Mueller, SJ, et al. [Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2007], pages 65–91.)

