

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM JESUS TO THE WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

As we have discussed, the New Testament is not a single, uniform book but is composed of multiple compositions, written by numerous authors, with diverse literary forms and theological perspectives, yet sharing a fundamental unity in its focus on the identity of Jesus and the implications of his life, death and resurrection for human destiny. This ensemble of New Testament texts emerged within the framework of the first century Jewish and Greco-Roman world and the experience and convictions of the earliest followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The way the New Testament was formed and transmitted to later generations has a lot to do with it being viewed as a “sacred” text. It is to a closer look at the formation and transmission of the New Testament writings that we now turn.

The traditions about Jesus that circulated in the early church were not contained in a sealed envelope but were transmitted in and through the living reality of these first Christian communities. Stories about Jesus were told in preaching and in instruction about the Christian faith. How best to describe who Jesus is? What titles should be used to illustrate his unique identity? What were the key events of his life? The life of Jesus was viewed as exemplary. Therefore, questions of how best to live in the spirit of Jesus and his teaching were discussed and debated within the Christian community. What are the virtues that reflect the authentic Christian life? What are the vices and habits to be avoided? How do we as Christians handle disputes and tensions in the community? How should we relate to non-Christians and to the civil authorities of the Roman Empire? What is the meaning of the Lord’s Supper left to us through tradition?

The lived experience of the early Christians reflected in such questions left its mark on the traditions about Jesus and the Christian life that circulated through the early community, and acted as a kind of “filter” determining which traditions about Jesus were to be retained because they were viewed as most relevant for Christian life. Not everything originally known about Jesus was handed on: for example, we know nothing about his physical appearance or the sound of his voice. What was handed on was vital information about the perceived identity of Jesus and the purpose and spirit of his mission.

#### **After Jesus: Stages in the Development of the New Testament Writings**

Although the New Testament has a unifying focus on Jesus of Nazareth, not a single New Testament writing claims Jesus as its author. Our knowledge of Jesus and his mission derives not from his own direct testimony in any written form but from the transmission of such knowledge by his followers within the early Christian community. In the prologue to his Gospel, the evangelist Luke informs “Theophilus” (his prime reader or perhaps patron) of his intention to write an account of Jesus’ life and cites previous examples:

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 world, 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).

While Luke’s prologue offers a theological perspective on the flourishing of the Christian message from Jerusalem out into the Mediterranean world, the major stages of his theological perspective also reflect a historical reality about the formation and transmission of the New

Testament. Luke's prologue sketches three stages in the transmission of traditions about Jesus:

**Stage 1.** "Eyewitnesses," that is, the contemporaries of Jesus who experienced the impact of his person, were recipients of his teaching, and witnessed the dramatic events of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, and later were caught up in the exhilarating experience of faith in his resurrection. These first followers were mainly Jews of Palestine, with Jesus only occasionally interacting with Gentiles and Samaritans.

**Stage 2.** A second stage emerged with the early "servants of the word," those followers of Jesus, some but not all of them eyewitnesses, who, fired by resurrection faith, began to proclaim the "gospel," that is, their shared conviction that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God, proclaimed first to Jews and then to Gentiles. According to Acts the very first Christians were Jews, some Hebrew-speaking native to Judea, and other Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora or wider Mediterranean and Arab world. Fairly quickly, the gospel message was carried by such Jewish Christians out to the wider world, including northern Africa (see the story of the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch by Philip in Acts 8:26-40) Syria (Acts 9:1-25 refers to the Christians already in Damascus at the time of Paul's conversion), Arabia (see Paul's testimony in Gal 1:17), Asia Minor, Greece and Rome (there are multiple references in Acts and Paul's letters and other New Testament writings).

**Stage 3.** A final stage took place, roughly in the last third of the first century, when most of the New Testament books were composed, including the Four Gospels and the later writings of the New Testament (with the exception of Paul's letters which were written during the second stage of transmission before the Gospels). These were all written in Greek and most, if not all, were composed outside of Palestine.

Several events probably served as a trigger for this third stage where the early traditions were put into writing, although the accompanying oral communication did not cease overnight. First of all, in 70 AD, in a violent response to the Jewish revolt that began in 66 AD, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, causing major adjustments in both Judaism and early Jewish Christianity. Judaism had to survive without the unifying focus of the temple and the temple priesthood as a center of orthodoxy. Christians (and especially Jewish Christians) were also profoundly affected by the loss of Jerusalem and its temple. Jesus himself revered the temple and in Luke's Gospel called it the "My Father's house" (Luke 2:49). The Acts of the Apostles depicts the early Jewish Christian community in Rome as praying daily in the temple (Acts 2:46). Gradually, however, the epicenter of the Christian world would move west to Rome, a move accelerated by the calamity of Jerusalem's destruction. From this point on, the mission to the Gentiles would accelerate.

Another important impetus for the "third stage" in the formation of the New Testament books, was the fact that the early apostolic generation of eyewitnesses and missionaries was passing from the scene, and there was a need to consolidate and make permanent traditions about Jesus that up to this point were transmitted mainly in oral form. And with advancing time, the early Christian community realized that it had a history in front of it, and the early enthusiasm for a rapid culmination worldhistory with the triumphant return of Christ was increasingly viewed as an event of the distant future.

In the first two stages traditions about Jesus would have been transmitted mainly in oral form, which, in fact, was the main form of communication in the largely illiterate culture of the first century Mediterranean world. There were, of course, educated people who knew how to read and write, but most of the population was not so equipped. Some historians estimate that less than 30% of the population was literate. When there was a need for official written

documents, such as marriage contracts or public decrees, or business transactions or important letters sent to family, friends, or business and government associates, professional “scribes” who were literate could be engaged to produce such written texts. As we will note later, Paul’s letters were obvious examples of written texts, possibly dictated to scribes or secretaries and then read to groups of Christians most of whom were probably illiterate.<sup>1</sup> Oral transmission was not haphazard in such a cultural context but was carefully observed and controlled. Modern society depends on the written text and much less on memory. But ancient oral cultures cultivated careful memorization of key texts and there were techniques that insured relative accuracy. Audiences or congregations who listened to the recital of respected literature or familiar religious texts would be attentive and ready to correct errors in the recitation. It is likely that in many instances, a public speaker would use a written text as something of a prompt or script for his oral presentation<sup>2</sup>

The third stage we are describing involved written composition such as the Four Gospels and the other texts of the New Testament. As we will point out, the traditions that had been handed on to this later generation of Christians had not passed through some kind of insulated pipeline but would have been influenced by or filtered through the faith and experience of the earlier generations of Christians. As we will note, the impact of Christian religious experience on the substance and expression of these early traditions will be an important factor in making it “sacred.”

We cannot be entirely sure what Luke meant by informing Theophilus that he intended to write an “orderly account” (Luke 1:1.) In Luke’s own case “orderly” might mean attempting to put his narrative about the mission of Jesus and that of the early church into a wider and overarching perspective. For Luke this meant the rooting of Jesus’ life in Judaism, as illustrated in the account of his birth in the Davidic city of Bethlehem and his early encounter with the Jerusalem temple (Luke 1-2), then showing the unfolding of his mission through Galilee and back to Jerusalem, and there the finale with his death, resurrection, and ascension back to his Father. Finally, in the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes the sending of the Spirit which provides the dynamism to propel the apostles and disciples of Jesus from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Thus the “order” in Luke’s account is the unfolding of the plan of God to bring salvation to the world.

### **The Pauline Letters**

Paul’s letters are the first written New Testament texts, composed during what we have termed Stage 2, from roughly from 50 to 70 AD. Although we cannot be precise about the date of Paul’s martyrdom, it likely took place during the reign of the Emperor Nero around 64 to 68 AD. Therefore, what is termed the “undisputed” letters: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon were written before that date. The other letters attributed to Paul’s authorship—Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus--may have been composed later, citing Paul’s name and authority, and therefore falling into Stage 3, that is, in the period after 70 AD.

We will consider Paul’s theology later on in discussing why his writings were deemed “sacred” by early Christianity.<sup>3</sup> For now we can note that his letters illustrate the process of

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<sup>1</sup> See below, Chapter 5, pp. xxx.

<sup>2</sup> See the work of Brian J. Wright, *Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 5, pp. xx.

transmission we are considering. It may be that Paul happened by chance on using letters to extend his mission. After arriving in Macedonia on what Acts considers the apostle's second missionary journey (covered in Acts 15:36 to 18:22), he went to the Roman colony of Philippi and then westward along the Via Egnatia, a major Roman road that stretched from present day Albania clear across Macedonia (the northern region of present day Greece) to the western shore of the Greek peninsula, in present day Croatia. A major stop for Paul and his companion Silas was the city of Thessalonica, even then an important seaport and significant city. According to Paul's own testimony (1 Thessalonians 1-3) and the account in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 17:1-10), his preaching succeeded in attracting both Jews and Gentiles to this new religious movement. As was typical of Paul's missionary strategy when arriving at a new city, as an observant Jew he would go first to the local synagogue and proclaim his message there. Frequenting many of the synagogues in the Mediterranean world were not only Jews but also some Gentiles enamored of Jewish tradition and moral codes. Called "Godfearers" or "devout" Greeks (see the description of the centurion of Capernaum in Luke 7:1-7; also in Acts 17:4, 7; 18:7), they were often responsive to Paul's message, enabling them to become part of God's people but without the ethnic markers of circumcision, kosher diet, and other religious observances required of Jews. Understandably, Paul's successful inroads among these Gentile participants could cause friction with some of the Jewish members of the synagogue (Acts 17-4-5).

According to Acts (17:1-10), this seems to have been the case in Thessaloniki where those opposed to Paul started a riot in the city and attacked the home of Jason, apparently the manager of the synagogue who was accused of offering hospitality to Paul and his companions. Eventually some of the Christians spirited Paul and Silas out of the city and send him on to Berea, a Greek city some 45 miles west of Thessaloniki. There, the irrepressible Paul again preaches in the synagogue with good success (see Acts 17:10-12). But when troublemakers pursue Paul from Thessaloniki to Berea, the Christians send Paul on to Athens, leaving behind Silas and Timothy to continue the work of evangelization. Acts charts Paul's continuing (but apparently less than successful) mission in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) and then to Corinth where he will stay for a considerable time (Acts 18:1-18). But his concern for what might be happening with the new community in Thessaloniki troubles Paul and, when he is not able to return there himself, he sends Timothy to check out the situation. When Paul learns from Timothy that the Christian community there is thriving in spite of everything, he is prompted to write a letter of relief and joy (see 1 Thess 3:1-10), praising the faith and courage of these new Christians and answering some of their questions and concerns (e.g., What happens to those members who pass away before the triumphant return of Christ? See 1 Thess 4:13-18),

Thus the Letter to the Thessalonians, probably the very first New Testament book to be written, sets a pattern for Paul's subsequent correspondence. Through letter-writing—a well-developed art in the ancient world—Paul is able to extend his pastoral presence both to communities he founded (e.g., Philippi, Thessaloniki, Corinth, Galatia) and to Rome, where he intended to go but had not yet visited. His letters are "occasional" often prompted by circumstances or questions raised by the community to which he writes. For example, in writing to Corinth, a dynamic and somewhat turbulent community, Paul deals with the problems of factions, of lawsuits taken to public courts, cases of incest, abuses at the Eucharist, the question of proper conduct of women in the assembly, and many other pastoral issues. His letters are, therefore, not systematic presentations of his theology. The near exception is the Letter to the Romans that lays out in a fairly comprehensive way Paul's views of salvation. Otherwise, his

perspectives on Christ, on the nature of the church, and on issues of Christian conduct appear in clumps, most of time in response to a specific question or problem.

In many ways, the content of Paul's letters is a perfect illustration of what we have described as Stage 2 in the formation of the New Testament. The substance of Paul's letters reflects his own faith experience of Christ and the apostle's exceptional ability to express the profound meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This, no doubt, was also the content of his missionary preaching. Paul both advances Christian reflection but is also influenced by it. He includes in his letters verses of early Christian hymns (for example Phil 2:6-11), credal formulae that had been handed on to him (1 Cor 11:23-26; 15:3-11), and basic information about the life and teaching of Jesus about which he had been informed. In the latter category Paul refers to the birth of Christ (Gal 4:4-5) and especially to his death by crucifixion. In fundamental ways, Paul's teaching coincides with the core teachings of Jesus such as the love command and the need for love and forgiveness in community.<sup>4</sup> Paul no doubt had a profound influence on early Christian thought and experience but was also shaped by it—the kind of impact that proclaiming the Christian message has had on subsequent generations of thoughtful preachers and missionaries.

The so-called “deutero-Pauline” letters such as Colossians and Ephesians, as well as the Pastoral Letters of Timothy and Titus, even though perhaps composed after the lifetime of Paul in Stage 3 of the transmission of the New Testament materials, nevertheless, reflect the same basic principle. They are texts profoundly shaped not only by the theology of their composers but also by the living tradition and the specific concerns of the later Christian communities to which they are addressed. In the latter case, particularly in the case of a letter like 2 Timothy, part of that tradition now includes Paul's own missionary sufferings and triumphs (see, for example, 2 Tim 3:10-12; 4:6-8).

#### **The Four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles**

The Gospels, too, emerge from the various stages of the early church we have been describing. As already noted in our discussion of the prologue to Luke's Gospel, the written Gospels do not appear until some decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In a very true sense, the Gospels are not a preexisting “blueprint” for the early church but they themselves emerge from the life of the early church and are, in that sense, the “church's books.”

There is much discussion today about what literary form or genre in the first century world best describes the Four Gospels.<sup>5</sup> Most scholars today consider the gospels closest to what is called a “historical biography.” But ancient Greco-Roman culture had a different understanding of what constituted a “historical biography” than we do today. A good biography today attempts to reconstruct as accurately as possible the facts of a person's life—their family background, their education, their careers and accomplishments, and the impact of their life. Having access to the person's own letters, diaries and personal documents becomes a valuable source for reconstructing their life and perspective. The author of a modern biography ultimately must interpret the meaning of all these facts about a person's life. But the ideal is to base such an interpretation on objective facts.

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<sup>4</sup>On the impact of Jesus' life and teaching on Paul, see James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus According to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), esp. pp. 99-139.

<sup>5</sup>Regarding the literary form of the Gospels, see Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2018); also, Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography. Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019) and Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus. Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

Ancient biographies shared some of these qualities but in a very different mode. In most instances, ancient biographers did not have access to the hard facts of a person's life or the personal effects of the object of their biography, but were aware in a more general manner of the lives and accomplishments of their subjects. And a primary goal of ancient biography was to extol the virtues and example of their subject, not, as is often the case in modern biography, to be as objective and factual as possible.

Although the Four Gospels reflect some of the style and goals of ancient historical biographies, the Gospels have unique features all their own. Their portrayals of Jesus are much more detailed than most other ancient biographies, and above all, there is a singular religious interest in the identity and mission of their subject. Also significant is the concentration of all Four Gospels on the circumstances of Jesus' death and the dramatic events that follow. Great details are given about the final days of Jesus' life, including his final meal with his disciples, his arrest and interrogations by the authorities, and the sequence of his condemnation, crucifixion, and burial. The Four Gospels conclude, although in varied ways, with the accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb and several appearances of the Risen Christ to his disciples. In some ways, the Gospels are built "backwards, that is, the entire life of Jesus is oriented to the finale of his death and resurrection. The example and meaning of Jesus' earthly ministry finds its full expression in the manner of his death and ultimate triumph over death. Similar to Paul's writings, but in a quite different literary mode, the Gospels focus on the significance of Jesus' ultimate destiny

Again, similar to Paul's writings, the Gospels' contents are composed both of traditions transmitted and shaped by early Christian experience and by the unique circumstances of the communities and the evangelists from which each Gospel emerges. The stories of Jesus' healings, teachings, conflicts with authorities, interaction with his disciples, and the circumstances of his death had been handed on in the living traditions and faith experience of the early Christian community. As we noted earlier, the whole story of Jesus is told from the vantage point of his resurrection. At a certain moment—sometime after the traumatic events of 70 AD—the evangelists knit together these various accounts about the life and mission of Jesus into a narrative whole, a "biography." The circumstances of the Christian community from which a Gospel emerges and to which it is first directed have an influence on the tone and content of the gospel narrative.

### **The Gospel of Mark**

Modern biblical scholarship has concluded that Mark's Gospel was the first to be so composed. While certitude about its historical circumstances is not possible, a strong possibility is that Mark's Gospel was written for the Christian community at Rome, somewhere around the year 70 AD. The third century Christian historian Eusebius quotes Papias, a late first century bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, who asserted that Mark was a companion of Peter in Rome and served as a kind of secretary or interpreter for Peter's remembrances of Jesus' life. Given Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome at this period, this might explain some of the tone of Mark's Gospel—its focus on the suffering of Christ, on Jesus' confrontation with the raw power of evil in his many exorcisms, and Mark's emphasis on the frailty of Peter and the disciples in the face of suffering.

### **The Gospel of Matthew**

Mark's pioneering composition of the gospel narrative about Jesus served as a primary source for Matthew's Gospel. The evangelist absorbs almost the entirety of Mark's account, including its organization of Jesus' public life into his ministry in Galilee and then a fateful

journey to Jerusalem where he will suffer rejection and death. Matthew (along with Luke) apparently had access to other traditions about Jesus that had been circulating in the early community and fuses these onto the framework provided by Mark. But here, too, the circumstances of Matthew's own Christian community come into play. Matthew's Gospel is clearly the most Jewish of the Gospels, emphasizing continuity between the sacred traditions of Judaism and the mission of Jesus. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, the Matthean Jesus declares that he has not come "to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17). The "law and the prophets" is a kind of shorthand reference to the Hebrew Scriptures and the tradition of interpretation that surrounded them. Jesus also declares that his mission is only "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5; 15:24). During his public ministry, the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel concentrates on his fellow Israelites. Only at the end of Matthew's Gospel, does the Risen Christ extend the mission of his disciples beyond Israel to the "nations," that is, the Gentiles (Matt 28:17-20).

Matthew's assertion that Jesus's teaching and example "fulfills" the law may also explain some of the polemical material in this Gospel. In the chaotic period after 70 AD, when both the Jewish Christians and other Jewish groups were adjusting to the dramatic changes imposed by the destruction of the temple, there was a struggle to claim legitimacy. Matthew's Jewish Christian community believed that in following Jesus it was fully faithful to its Jewish heritage; however, the majority of "non-Christian" Jews would not agree with this assessment. Thus Matthew's Gospel harshly criticizes the Jewish leaders, reflecting the tension between these communities in the period after 70 AD. Matthew's Gospel may have been written in Antioch of Syria, then the third largest city in the Roman empire where there was also a large Jewish community. The Acts of the Apostles (Acts 11:19-26) and the testimony of Paul in his letter to the Galatians (Gal 2:11-14) confirms that a strong Christian community, composed of Jewish and Gentile Christians developed there—a likely place where the concerns of Matthew's Gospel would be in play.

### **The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles**

The two volume work of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles is yet another example of the handing on of traditions about Jesus forged in the wider Christian community and now taking on a particular accent due to the circumstances of the evangelist and his community. Scholars are less certain about the location where Luke's work was composed, with both Ephesus and Antioch being strong candidates. What is clearer is that Luke directs his two-volume work to a mainly Gentile audience. In his prologue (Luke 1:1-4) the evangelist addresses his work to "Theophilus" as his ideal reader and wants to show him both the origin of Jesus' unique mission of salvation and its dynamic continuity as it moves, in Luke's phrase, "from Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth" (Luke 24:47 ; Acts 1:8). As does Matthew but in a quite different mode, Luke emphasizes the Jewish roots of Jesus and his mission. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the city of David, fulfills the hopes of Israel for redemption and the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple and his warm reception by the prophets Anna and Simenon connect Jesus to Jerusalem and its temple—the heart of the Jewish experience. Luke follows Mark's basic narrative framework of moving from Galilee to Jerusalem, but underscores this journey of Jesus and his disciples—an anticipation of the "journey" of the gospel in the persons of Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles. Luke concludes his Gospel and transitions to the Acts of the Apostles by having the Risen Jesus exalted to God's right hand through the Ascension and then sending the Spirit upon the assembly of Jerusalem apostles and disciples (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:1-11). The dynamic power of God's Spirit will propel these Jewish Christian missionaries out

into the wider Mediterranean world, an outreach that culminates in the powerful missionary work of Paul.

Through this narrative of the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, Theophilus (and Luke's gentile readers) learn about the "events that have been fulfilled among us" and are assured of the "truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (Luke 1:1, 4). Some interpreters of the Acts of the Apostles believe that beyond providing perspective to his Gentile readers, Luke also wants to make the case to Roman authorities that the Christians are law-abiding and not to be feared. Where disturbances do take place, such as riots in Jerusalem (e.g., Acts 21:27-36), Thessaloniki (17:5), or Ephesus (19:21-41) these are due to false testimony against the Jerusalem apostles or Paul. Eventually, the Roman officials involved discover the apostles' innocence or dismiss the charges as groundless (for example, Acts 16:35-40; 18:12-17). While Luke may emphasize that the Christians are not overt rebels against legitimate civil authorities, on another level, the portrayal of God's sovereignty over all these events and the kind of values exemplified in the Gospel and Acts are ultimately quite different and even counter to many of the values and suppositions of the Roman Empire.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Gospel of John**

As we have noted previously, John's Gospel is obviously quite different in style and content compared to the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.<sup>7</sup> Yet, John's Gospel, too, is a blend of traditions about Jesus that circulated in the early Christian community and then were fashioned into a complete narrative by the evangelist and the circumstances of his own community. Modern biblical scholarship has debated why John's Gospel is so different from the Synoptic Gospels. It is likely that the author of John's Gospel drew on a different stream of tradition than that available to Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Yet it is also possible that these two streams were not totally independent of each other, since there is some overlap such as the scenes of Jesus' walking on the water and the feeding of the multitudes (compare John 6:1-24 with Mark 6:30-44) and the passion narrative (compare John 18:1—19:42 with Mark 14:43---15:47).

As with the Synoptic Gospels, the circumstances of John's Christian community have also left their imprint on the gospel. Many scholars believe that John's community is rooted in Palestinian Judaism—yet a brand of Judaism somewhat different from that reflected in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. John's Gospel is very familiar with Jerusalem and some of its features (e.g., the Temple area; the Sheep's Gate, the pools of Bethesda; the Siloam pool; the Kidron valley; the Mt of Olives, Golgotha, etc.).<sup>8</sup> There is also evidence, as we noted especially in Matthew's Gospel, of post-70 AD conflict with the Jewish authorities. There is a sharp conflict between Jesus and the authorities at several places in John's Gospels (see the sharp exchange in John 8:39-59) and in the account of the healing of the man born blind, the narrator notes that the man's parents were fearful of the "Jews" (John's frequent term for the religious authorities opposed to Jesus): "His parents...were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22)—a circumstance that reflects tension after the events of 70AD.

At one point during the feast of Tabernacles, Jesus' opponents misconstrue his words about "going to a place where you cannot come" to mean that Jesus "intends to go to the Diaspora among the Greeks and teach the Greeks" (John 7:35). This suggests that at one point,

<sup>6</sup> See on this perspective, C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> See above, chapter 1, pp. xx.

<sup>8</sup> See Senior, *The Gospel Landscape*, pp. xx.



perhaps in the chaos surrounding the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66—70 AD, the Johannine community moved away from Palestine to another location in the Mediterranean world, such as the major city of Ephesus. Some ancient traditions locate the death and burial of the Apostle John in that city that had a significant Christian community since the time of Paul. This probable movement of John’s community also fits with the conviction of many scholars that the Gospel itself has gone through more than one stage in its composition—originating in Palestinian Judaism but reaching its final shape towards the end of the first century in a Greco-Roman city such as Ephesus. Thus, as in the case of the Synoptic Gospels, the experience of the Johannine community leaves its mark on the content and style of the Gospel. As we will consider later, some aspects of the theology of John’s Gospel bear the imprint of both Palestinian Judaism and Greco-Roman thought.

### **Gospels for the Whole Church?**

Modern biblical scholarship has demonstrated that each of the Gospels has a distinctive perspective and emerged from different locations. The question remains—when the evangelists composed their Gospels did they intend them only for a local audience or, as one scholar has phrased it, were they written “for all Christians”?<sup>9</sup> This is difficult to answer, especially since the authors of the Gospels remain anonymous and except for Luke’s prologue do not state their reasons for writing. And in Luke’s case, his prologue is directed to one person, Theophilus, whether a real individual or a fictitious ideal reader, although we can assume he intended his two-volume work to be read by more than Theophilus! It is possible that a “both and” answer is most likely. Each evangelist, in harmony with his own local community or region, shaped the Gospel in view of the experiences and traditions he was engaged with. But, given the level of communication and travel already taking place among these early Christian communities, it is also likely that the evangelists expected that the gospel narratives they composed would be shared with other Christians beyond their local communities. We know from Paul and from the traditions in Acts that Christians moved all around the Mediterranean world over the network of the good Roman roads that then existed and visited their fellow Christians in other places. Paul was able to organize a collection among several communities to be presented to the church in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4)—a feat that must have involved considerable communication and travel among these early Christian groups.

It is likely, then, the Gospels were composed both for a local community—which may have involved more than one community in a region—and for the wider church. The Gospel of Mark is a prime example of this. If written in Rome sometime around 70 AD, it had already reached a city such as Antioch and was read and heard by Christians there shortly after its composition, with enough reverence and respect that Matthew and Luke must take this Gospel into account in composing their own versions. We will take up this question from another angle in the next chapter concerning the formation of the New Testament canon.

### **Handing on The New Testament**

By the end of the first century and the first few decades of the second century, most of the New Testament books were composed and in circulation in the early church. As we will note in the next chapter, there were debates about the inclusion of a few books but the Four Gospels, the thirteen letters attributed to Paul, and most of the so-called Catholic Epistles and Revelation were considered part of the “New Testament.” By this time, these texts were circulating among the extant Christian communities, read at their assemblies and worship, pondered and discussed

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<sup>9</sup> See Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

by the leaders and members of these communities, and gaining status as sacred writings on a par with the Hebrew Scriptures. There were also a few early writings considered important and sacred but not considered canonical, such as the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas, but for the most part, it was the writings now included in our New Testament that were gaining authority as both sacred and normative.<sup>10</sup>

### **Composed in Greek**

Most early Christians were Greek speaking. “Koine” (that is, “common”) Greek was used at least as a second language throughout most of the Roman Empire, much like English in many parts of the world today. Even among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem there were “Hellenists” or Greek speakers, as the famous dispute in Acts testifies. The “Hellenists” complained to the Hebrew-speaking Christians that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of rations (Acts 6:1-6), leading to the appointment of “deacons” to ensure equity. So it is no surprise that all the New Testament writings were composed in Greek. It is possible that some previous portions of the New Testament texts were originally formulated in Hebrew or Aramaic. There are a few Hebrew and Aramaic words sprinkled throughout the Gospels and even in Paul’s letters. Some are quotations from the Old Testament, such as the citation of the first verse of Psalm 22 in Mark 15:34:, or key terms such as the affectionate Aramaic or Hebrew term *abba* for God as “father” found in Mark 14:36 and in Paul’s Letter to the Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6, or the reference to *korban*, a Hebrew term for a type of sacrifice referred to in Mark 7:11, or the snatch of Aramaic prayer that concludes Paul’s first Letter to the Corinthians—*maranatha*, “come, Lord.” (1 Cor 16:22). But the assumption of all the New Testament authors is that their “audiences” would comprehend Greek. Likewise, for the most part, these early Christians also used the Septuagint or Greek translation of the Old Testament writings as their sacred scriptures.

### **Manuscripts**

No original copies of Paul’s letters or of the Gospels or any of the New Testament writings exist, presumably worn out by use or damaged and lost over time in various natural and manmade calamities. However, early on “scribes” who knew how to read and write made copies of these sacred texts and ensured their circulation and use among the various local Christian communities. These early texts were written on parchment (i.e., fashioned from animal skins) or papyrus (formed from the treated stalks of the papyrus plant) which were stitched together to form scrolls. These scrolls were bulky and expensive. A later technology would be the codex, the ancestor to the modern “book,” consisting of folded leaves that were then sewn together and given a cover. Texts in this form were much more portable, especially handy for the circulation of the New Testament texts among the various Christian communities. In 2 Tim 4:13, Paul refers to both formats when he requests that Timothy bring with him a cloak he left with Carpus in Troy and “also the books (in Greek, *biblia* or “books”), and above all, the parchments” (*membranas*, Greek for parchment sheets). Although we do not have access to precise historical information, it is probable that toward the end of the first century and into the beginning of the second, “collections” of Paul’s letters and of the four gospels began to appear.

Virtually all of these earliest copies have disappeared, with only some early 2<sup>nd</sup> century fragments surviving.<sup>11</sup> Only later, into the third and fourth centuries of the Common Era, do we find manuscripts containing substantial portions of the New Testament writings. The science of

<sup>10</sup> This is the issue of the formation of the canon which we will consider in Chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> On the production and transmission of these early Christian texts, see Brent Nongbri, *God’s Library. The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

helping reconstruct the most reliable text is called “textual criticism” which by comparing the variants in extant manuscripts, scholars attempt to sort out scribal errors that may have crept into the transmission of the texts. For the most part, the transmission of the New Testament writings from their origin to their later more fixed format has been remarkably accurate and trustworthy, even though many variants exist.

### **Translation**

With the spread of Christianity through most of the Roman world by the fourth century, the use of Greek was waning, being replaced by Latin. This led to another important phase in the transmission of the New Testament over time—namely, translations. As early as the third century BC, Judaism had translated biblical texts from their original Hebrew form into Greek, for the sake of the substantial number of Jews living in the Mediterranean world who spoke Greek and would know little or no Hebrew. In a similar fashion, the gradual transition from the use of koine Greek to Latin among ordinary people led to the translations of the New Testament. One of the most famous and long-lasting is Jerome’s translation of the Bible into Latin, known as the Vulgate (that is, “popular”). Jerome (325-420 AD) was born in the region of Dalmatia on the eastern coast of the Adriatic but spent the last several years of his life in Bethlehem and Roman Palestine. He learned Hebrew and studied the topography of the Holy Land as background for his monumental translation work. Even earlier translations were made in Syriac and other eastern languages.

Translation, of course, is not a perfect art. The translator must choose which words and grammatical constructions best convey the meaning embedded in the original language, in this case Hebrew and Greek. And over time usage and style of expression change in any living language, requiring that translations be revised and updated. Some modern translations are intentionally adapted to a specific readership such as youth or taking into account the teachings and practices of a particular denomination. Others, to make the Bible more comprehensible to a modern audience, reduce the complexity of the biblical text by using explanatory “paraphrase” instead of a literal translation. In some instances, a “translation” is equivalent to an outright ideological editing of the biblical text, for example, screening out passages that speak of miraculous or that call for moral stances deemed outmoded by the translators. In 1804 Thomas Jefferson produced a Bible that omitted any reference to Jesus’ miracles or his resurrection!

While no modern translation of the biblical text can claim to be definitive, several modern English translations have a high degree of accuracy—choosing the most reliable reconstructions of the original Hebrew and Greek biblical text and striving to translate the Scriptures in the most accurate and consistent way possible. In most cases, the translators identify the particular Hebrew and Greek texts they are using and supply explanatory notes explaining their decision to translate a work or passage in a particular way. This would include such major English language translations as the New Revised Standard, the New American Bible Revised Edition, and the New International Version. Through such translations, the modern readers of the Bible can have confidence that what they are reading is in substantial harmony with the biblical writings of the first century.

### **Conclusion**

Being aware of the process that led to the writings of the New Testament and the manner in which these writings were transmitted to the early Christian communities helps explain in part why the New Testament is considered “sacred.” The Gospels were not the result of the evangelists searching through some ancient historical archives to construct the story of Jesus’ life. The accounts of Jesus’ healings, his parables and sayings, the conflicts he endured with his

opponents, the example of his tenderness with the poor and rejected, the series of encounters that led to his arrest, condemnation, and crucifixion, along with the reports of his resurrection and his post-Easter appearances to his disciples—all of this fund of traditions about Jesus made an impact on his disciples and were embedded in the faith, worship, and lived experience of the earliest Christian communities. This accumulated portrayal of Jesus, sustained for most part orally, would ultimately be shaped into coherent narratives by the evangelists, but the story they attempted to tell was already profoundly influenced by Christian belief and practice. Thus these traditions were not historically neutral but already were considered sacred.

The same is true of Paul's letters and the other New Testament writings. Paul's epistles were not in any way casual correspondence with his communities but extensions of his proclamation of the gospel and passionate testimonies of his own faith in the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Paul, too, drew on the traditions of the earliest Christian community in forging his own powerful portrayal of the Christian message. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul was prepared for his mission in the Christian community of Antioch (Acts 11:25-26; 13:1-3). Through his letters Paul extended what he considered his God-given mission of proclaiming the word of salvation to the world, a mission shared with Peter, Barnabas, Aquila, Priscilla, Phoebe, Silas, Timothy, and many others. The same case can be made for all the New Testament writings from the Gospel of Matthew to the Book of Revelation. In the view of both the composers of these texts and of the audiences who received them, these texts revealed the divine presence and were inherently sacred.

Further stages in this process include the formation of the canon and the actual content of these revelatory texts. It is to these questions we now turn.