

FOURTH EDITION

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# ENCOUNTERING *the* NEW TESTAMENT



A HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SURVEY

ENCOUNTERING BIBLICAL STUDIES

Walter A. Elwell  
Robert W. Yarbrough

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**Walter A. Elwell**  
**Robert W. Yarbrough**

  
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## CHAPTER ONE

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# Why Study the New Testament?

### OUTLINE

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- **The Bible: A High-Stakes Book**
- **Old and New Testaments**
- **Why Study the New Testament?**
  - It Mediates God's Presence—and with It, Truth
  - It Is of Ultimate Personal Significance
  - It Is Foundational to Cultural Literacy
- **Why *These Twenty-Seven Books*?**
  - Old Testament Precedent for a Canon
  - The Divine Authorship of the New Testament: Inspiration
  - Recognition of the Canon in the Church
- **The Integrity of the New Testament Text**
  - Wealth of Evidence
  - Brief Time Lapse
  - Versions and Fathers
  - So Many Translations!
- **Why *Study* the New Testament?**
  - To Avoid the Tyranny of Preformed Personal Opinion
  - To Avoid Misguided Reliance on the Holy Spirit
  - To Enable Historical-Theological Interpretation

### OBJECTIVES

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*After reading this chapter, you should be able to*

- Explain how the New Testament differs from the Old Testament
- Justify study of the New Testament
- List and classify the books of the New Testament
- Explain why the New Testament canon is regarded as reliable
- Give reasons for upholding the integrity of the New Testament text
- Discuss reasons for studying the New Testament

## The Bible: A High-Stakes Book

resurrection  
Bible

In the centuries after Christ's death and **resurrection**, Christians sometimes died for refusing to hand over the **Bible** to hostile authorities.<sup>1</sup> Twentieth-century believers in the West took great risks to smuggle Bibles to eager readers behind the Iron Curtain, sometimes suffering dire consequences for doing so.

Qur'an  
salvation

Even today Christians who cling to the Bible's words rather than the **Qur'an's** are persecuted and killed in Muslim lands and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Millions of mainland Chinese Christians long fervently for a personal copy of the Bible; however, government printing and import restrictions limit the number available. No missionaries traveling to Africa or Latin America can bring along enough Bibles to satisfy the demand they will find there. Even in Western nations like Canada and the United States, where Bibles are not scarce, more of them are sold each year than

Scriptures

church

Handwritten Torah scroll from the 1740s on display at the Ramhal Synagogue, Acre, Israel



any other single book published, including popular best sellers. New translations appear as steadily as the seasons.<sup>3</sup> More copies of the Bible have been printed than any other single book in human history. The American Bible Society estimates that there have been around nine hundred full and partial biblical translations into English.

Why such a fuss about a book? How is it that a volume you can hold in one hand has been instrumental in the rise and fall of nations, the life and death of civilizations, and—Christians believe—the **salvation** or damnation of multitudes of souls?

To answer such questions would fill the hours of a semester-long college-level course, titled perhaps “The Christian **Scriptures** in World History.” We cannot attempt to sketch that story here.<sup>4</sup> But we can say that it is one of the reasons why you are reading these words. The Bible, consisting of both Old and New Testaments, has shaped the world you live in. You may or may not have read much of it personally. You may or may not hear a sermon based on it in **church** each week. It doesn't matter. No one in today's world is free from the influence, whether direct or indirect, that the Christian Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, have exerted.

## Old and New Testaments

By Old Testament we mean the Scriptures that God gave, over the course of many centuries, to an ancient people with whom he chose to deal in a unique way (Deut. 7:7). (In this book we will often refer to Bible passages. It would be wise to look them up as

## Old Testament Apocrypha

Roman Catholics and some Eastern Orthodox churches recognize the writings listed below as Scripture. Protestants acknowledge their literary value and historical significance but do not view them as possessing spiritual authority.

|  |                     |                             |
|--|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Additions to Esther                            | Judith              | Prayer of Manasseh          |
| Baruch   | Epistle of Jeremiah | Psalms 151                  |
| Bel and the Dragon                             | 1 Maccabees         | Song of the Three Young Men |
| Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach) | 2 Maccabees         | Susanna                     |
| 1 Esdras                                       | 3 Maccabees         | Tobit                       |
| 2 Esdras                                       | 4 Maccabees         | Wisdom of Solomon           |
|  | Prayer of Azariah   |                             |

you are reading. A key to the abbreviations used, like “Deut.” above, is found in the abbreviation list.) These ancient people were known first as Hebrews or Israelites and later as Jews. People like Moses, David, and Isaiah were moved by God’s Spirit to express divine truths in human words. The writings that resulted were eventually divided into three sections. The first was **the Torah** (the word means guidance, teaching, law). These were the five books of Moses. The second section was **the Prophets**. These consisted of longer works like Isaiah, along with some very short ones like Joel and Obadiah. The third section was called simply **the Writings** and consisted of historical writings, Psalms, Proverbs, and other works.

Together these books form what came to be called the Old Testament. They are God’s ancient “testament” (solemn declaration) of his creation of the world and of humanity, their **fall** into sin, and God’s saving work over many centuries to address sin’s disastrous consequences. These books point to a people and ultimately a person who would save people from their sins and restore **righteousness**. The Old Testament ends on a strong note of future expectation. There is the hope for **redemption** as God keeps the promises he has made.

The New Testament tells of the fulfillment of what the Old Testament promises.

It is the “testament” of God’s saving work in the very lifetime of the biblical writers.<sup>5</sup> The one who saves is born of a virgin named Mary (Isa. 7:14) in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). A **prophet** named John announces his coming (Isa. 40:3; Matt. 3:3). He is named “Jesus” by angelic decree (Matt. 1:21), and he preaches in Galilee as Isaiah predicted (Isa. 9:1–2). He attracts many followers and works miracles (Matt. 12:15–21; see Isa. 42:1–14). His message remains a mystery to many (Matt. 13:13–15), as the Old Testament had foretold (Isa. 6:9–10). Because his message and his very person are such an affront (Matt. 15:3–9; see Isa. 29:13), steps are taken to silence him. Jesus can see it coming. He tells his followers that even they will desert him, just as the Old Testament had foreseen (Matt. 26:31; see Zech. 13:7). But he also predicts that he will be raised from the dead (Matt. 26:32). Both his death and resurrection are foretold in Old Testament Scripture (Luke 24:45–46). So are the church and its ministry of preaching salvation through Jesus the **Christ** (Luke 24:47). “Christ” means anointed one or king.

The New Testament, then, announces the arrival of the royal Savior whom the Old Testament awaits. Both Testaments also point to an eternal order beyond the world as we know it, a world of heavenly glory for those who seek God but of judgment for those

prophet

the Torah

the Prophets

the Writings

fall

Christ

righteousness

redemption

whose lives remain centered on themselves. The Old and the New Testaments together are what we call the Bible. As we study the New Testament in this book, we will often refer to the Old Testament, for both stand together. But the New Testament will be our main focus.

Some modern Bibles include a third section called the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament. These were written after the lifetime of the last Old Testament prophet (Malachi, ca. 430 BC), mainly between about 200 BC and AD 100. Some contain valuable historical and religious information.<sup>6</sup> But Protestants have historically maintained that these books lack the earmarks of divine authorship that distinguish the recognized Old and New Testament books. Jesus and the apostles did not quote them as Scripture. In citing the apocryphal books, we are recognizing their importance for our knowledge of the period without endorsing them as Holy Scripture.

## Why Study the New Testament?

The New Testament has affected the whole world and also your life. That is one good reason to study it. This book will help you do that. But let us consider some other reasons why studying the New Testament is worthwhile.

### *It Mediates God's Presence—and with It, Truth*

Assembled in solemn worship, English-speaking Christians can often be heard singing hymns with lyrics like these: “Bless the Lord oh my soul, oh my soul / Worship His holy name, sing like never before.”<sup>7</sup>

Christians who speak other languages have their choruses and rhythms too. Lofty words combined with haunting tunes can

make God's presence seem real. And why not? “He is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:27). Songs of worship come to be cherished because through their message and emotional power, with the Holy Spirit's help, they convey God's presence.

The New Testament is loved for the same reason. God is present in it and through it. The Bible's words are God's words. A stirring book underscoring this is *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God*.<sup>8</sup>

By his own personal spiritual presence, God used various writers of long ago to observe events, record impressions, and convey truths. As a personal follower of Jesus wrote, “No prophecy of Scripture originates in personal explanation, for prophecy was not ever produced by human will; rather, men spoke from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:20–21, author's own translation). This means that the New Testament is worth studying because it is the Word of God. In a bewildering world of social change, political turmoil, economic uncertainty, moral confusion, and disasters both natural (tsunamis, pandemics) and man-made (wars), there is something firm to hold on to. There is light for the path ahead. There is a script, a story of God's saving work, in which we participate. This script orients us, indicates our location, bestows tasks and tools upon us, and assures us of our destination.

### *It Is of Ultimate Personal Significance*

A second good reason to study the New Testament follows from the first. Although Scripture is of divine origin, it is also of personal significance. It is important to you and me personally. The direction that our whole life takes depends on whether we embrace or ignore, or perhaps twist, the Word of God. And though we may be young now and not think much about dying, the New Testament has weighty things to say about the end of our



## Is Everything Relative?

In his best-selling book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom wrote, “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”<sup>a</sup> That was in the 1980s. Since then, some have given up on truth altogether. There is only what works for each individual. We all think whatever we choose to think.

Full knowledge of all truth belongs to God alone (Rom. 11:33–34). But while there is much that mere mortals cannot discern, there is also much that God has revealed (Deut. 29:29). God’s Word gives his people a sure place to stand as they move through a world where most things may seem up for grabs.

Peter, like Paul (2 Tim. 3:16) and other biblical writers, held a high view of Scripture. This does not mean that they thought they knew everything. But they were convinced that because God had revealed his Word, God’s people have a firm vantage point. As Peter puts it, the Bible comes to us because God-appointed persons “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21).

If God has spoken reliably and authoritatively—and Jesus teaches that he has (John 10:35; 17:17)—then not everything is uncertain. There is a final standard.

a. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25.

We can know some things for sure because our God has entered this world by his Son and his Spirit. He has given us guidance by his written Word.

True, there may be ambiguity in our perception of what the Bible says. But this doesn’t mean that everything we read in it is cast in doubt. From New Testament times forward, we can trace a core of conviction about the central message of Scripture. Only in recent generations has the view arisen that we may dismiss what the Bible says (see chap. 10) and still be considered Christians.

Someone may say that it is God we worship, not the pages of a book. Yet God uses the Bible to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). Jesus asked skeptics, “Since you do not believe what he [Moses] wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” (John 5:47). Jesus taught fidelity to Scripture. Affirmation of the Bible is a mark of Christian discipleship.

Even in an age of uncertainty, disciples of Jesus may build on the foundation of the words of their Master, who said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt. 24:35). He is with them always (Matt. 28:20), to guide them in their reading, understanding, worship, and lives of service.

lives as well: “It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment” (Heb. 9:27 NRSV). In life and in death, the New Testament has a status that no other book can rival.

The New Testament is important personally because it is the means that God uses to heal searching souls. We all know what it is like to search. We experience times in our lives that seem unbearable. Our future is uncertain, our present unappealing. We are weighed down with vexing cares. We are crushed by questions. Who am I? Why am I alive? Most of us know of people who have chosen to end it all by suicide. What is the

meaning of life? Why is there so much evil and suffering? What will happen to Earth as it seemingly reels from one environmental crisis to the next? What is the destiny of the human race? What is my own destiny? Why do I do things that I know are wrong? Is there any way for my own life to be sorted out so that I can be part of building a better world?

These are searching questions. The New Testament invites them. Late one night a desperate prison guard about to take his own life blurted out, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). He found the answer he was looking for. It was not a simplistic or pat answer—the New Testament is God’s



The primary source of information about Jesus is the New Testament.

Word, not a 1–2–3 self-help pamphlet. But it is powerful. It reaches down to the depths of our hearts. It draws us out of our laziness, doubt, and misery—or perhaps our indifference and cocky self-confidence—and places us before One who hears, understands, convicts, and heals.

The New Testament is worth studying because it is what we may call a means of grace. To read it with the hungry curiosity of the needy sinner—not the haughty condescension of the smug skeptic—is to open yourself to rich depths of challenge, mercy, purity, and joy. It is to start down a path of profound and desirable personal transformation. It is to become part of the people of God, with all the privileges and responsibilities that entails. It is to be prepared properly for life to the fullest in this world—as well as in the age to come.

### *It Is Foundational to Cultural Literacy*

The late University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom was not a Christian, but he spoke glowingly about the importance of the Bible in the lives of his grandparents: “My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards, and my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich because all the things done in it . . . found their origin in the Bible’s commandments, and their explanations in the Bible’s stories and commentaries on them, and had their imaginative counterparts in the deeds of the myriad of exemplary heroes.”<sup>9</sup> Bloom went on to say more about the importance of the

Bible for informed and lively intellectual activity:

I mean . . . that a life based on the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things. Without the great revelations, epics and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing left to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished.<sup>10</sup>

We have already touched on the Bible’s importance in what we might call spiritual matters. Bloom reminds us of its significance for the life of the mind. The New Testament (like the Old) has occupied the world’s great thinkers ever since it appeared. Whoever wishes to engage in serious thought in the contemporary world is well advised to be conversant with it.

Studies show, however, that Western society is biblically illiterate. Even where lip service is paid to the Bible’s importance, many have not read it through, and most possess little knowledge of even basic facts about it. If part of the decline in Western civilization in recent decades is due to failure to appropriate the cultural accomplishments of former generations, ignorance of the Bible is one of our chief **sins**. To build a better tomorrow, we need to lay a foundation of better understanding of the New Testament (and the whole of Scripture) than we currently possess.

At issue here is cultural literacy. By this we mean acquaintance with at least the broad aspects of science, the humanities, and the fine arts. We also mean familiarity with the beliefs, social organization, and moral traits of a society. The shared knowledge of any society will influence what that society looks like. It can be argued that at

sins

## Ancient Devotion to Old Testament Scripture

Nearly two centuries prior to the rise of the church, Jewish communities showed the same zeal for Old Testament teaching and commands that Jesus and the early church did. These excerpts from the Old Testament Apocrypha dramatize that zeal. The hostile “king” is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Syrian overlord of Jerusalem from 175 to 164 BC.

The king sent an Athenian senator [to Jerusalem] to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their fathers and cease to live by the laws of God, and also to pollute the temple in Jerusalem and call it the temple of Olympian Zeus. . . . Harsh and utterly grievous was the onslaught of evil. For the temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the Gentiles, who dallied with harlots and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts. . . .

It happened also that seven [Jewish] brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled

by the king, under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine’s flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, “What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers.”

The king fell into a rage, and gave orders that pans and caldrons be heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, “The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared.”

—2 Maccabees 6:1–2a, 3–4a; 7:1–6a (RSV)

one time our society was more influenced by such New Testament teachings as love for others (rather than violence), truth telling (rather than deceit and theft), sexual purity and veneration of marriage (rather than sexual laxity and easy divorce), and self-sacrificial living (rather than destruction of the unborn and neglect of children in the interest of adult self-gratification). True, there was no golden yesterday to which we should seek to make a return. But many feel that however lowly our cultural situation may have been before the cultural revolution of recent decades, it is even lower now. Renewed attention to the New Testament is sure to be an important part of a better tomorrow.

Certainly Christians who have come to know God through the Bible’s pages and have had their own lives changed by its guidance will be eager to learn as much about it as they can. But everyone should share this eagerness, given Scripture’s widespread impact on past generations in cultures around the world. No culturally literate person can af-

ford to disregard the profound insights that the New Testament offers into the human condition. Far less should anyone be ignorant of the will of an all-knowing, sovereign, and personal God to transform that condition from darkness into light.

“Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries.”<sup>11</sup> The premier source of information about this dominant figure is the New Testament.

### Why These Twenty-Seven Books?

The New Testament consists of four books called Gospels, one book (Acts) that sketches the rise and spread of the early church, twenty-one letters, and one book of prophecy. What makes these twenty-seven documents so unique?

### Old Testament Precedent for a Canon

By at least the time of Jesus (first century AD), the Old Testament consisted of the same writings that are familiar to us today. No one knows all the details or chronology of the process by which these writings gained recognition; the finer points are subjects of ongoing scholarly debate. But first-century sources like the New Testament, as well as extra–New Testament sources like the **Dead Sea Scrolls** and the Jewish writer JOSEPHUS (see next chapter), confirm that a unified and recognized body of writings existed. There was widespread agreement among Jewish authorities that in certain writings God had revealed his will to his people and indeed to the whole world. This **revelation** was preserved in the documents that we have already mentioned: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

These writings became the standard for faith and life among a people who loved and feared their God. They became a **canon**, an authoritative collection of documents. The Jewish people used this canon as the basis for their personal lives and their corporate existence. A Jewish writing called **2 Maccabees** tells of the torture of seven sons and the murder of their mother, resulting from their refusal to break the law of Moses during the tyrannical reign of ANTIOCHUS EPIPHANES (ca. 170 BC). At the heart of their refusal

to betray their faith was their belief that in Moses’s law God had made his eternal will known. Their brave trust in Scripture is emblematic of the high view of God’s written revelation that the Jewish people shared, even if they did not all interpret that Scripture in the same way.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus, speaking as a Jew, said, “We worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). The community he founded, the church, recognized the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament, as the basis of its very existence. But just as Jesus himself fulfills the Old Testament, the community he founded gave rise to more than two dozen writings that stand alongside the Old Testament in importance and authority. These writings, written by close followers of Jesus, later came to be called the New Testament.

In other words, the Old Testament canon served as a precedent and analogy for the New Testament canon.<sup>13</sup> It was to be expected that if God’s people had found life and nurture through inspired writings pointing forward to the Savior, they might also be given inspired writings to explain their Savior to them and to the world after he had appeared. And that is exactly what happened. As New Testament scholar and translator Bruce M. Metzger writes, “The belief in a written rule of faith was primitive [i.e., existed

Dead Sea Scrolls

revelation

canon

2 Maccabees



The Isaiah Scroll, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, is the oldest complete copy of the book of Isaiah.

from the very earliest days of the church] and apostolic.”<sup>14</sup> We rightly treat the New Testament writings with particular care and reverence as a result.

### *The Divine Authorship of the New Testament: Inspiration*

We devote careful attention to the twenty-seven-book collection called the New Testament for a second reason: it is comprised of inspired (God-breathed) writings.

Early in his ministry Jesus chose a dozen men, handpicked pupils who would (except for one) carry on his legacy after he ascended into heaven. On the night Judas Iscariot betrayed him, he gave the remaining eleven several important pieces of information about their future roles. After his death and resurrection, Jesus’s Spirit would come to them, sent by the Father, to give them insight. In Jesus’s words:

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:26)

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26–27)

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. (John 16:12–14)

Two things should be noted about Jesus’s statements. The first is that after Jesus’s departure, the Holy Spirit would teach the **disciples** and remind them of what Jesus had told them. On that basis, they would testify

## The Twenty-Seven Books of the New Testament

Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.

—Athanasius’s Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter  
(*NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 4:552); AD 367

to Christ. The Spirit would assist them by guiding them “into all the truth” and telling them “what is yet to come.” These words establish a unique link between Jesus and a select group of his earliest followers. Through them he chose to disclose information about himself to subsequent generations. After his death the Holy Spirit would confirm among them the truth about who Jesus was and what he had accomplished. His followers were already grounded in Jesus’s teachings and had witnessed his miraculous works. But by the Spirit, and in the light of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, they were empowered to arrive at unique and authoritative accounts of the good news about Jesus Christ—the **gospel**. We can surmise that it was Christ’s intention that his story and commands be preserved in the witness, and eventually writings, of these closest followers. A direct result of Jesus’s promise can be seen today in the writings we call the New Testament.<sup>15</sup>

Second, we should note that Jesus’s words point to what theologians call **inspiration**. The Holy Spirit worked together with the minds and hearts of Jesus’s followers to produce trustworthy understanding, recollections, and ultimately writings. The

gospel

inspiration

disciples

combination of divine and human elements is sometimes called **concurus**, the complementary interworking of God and the human writers in the composition of the Bible. As Gerhard Maier has written:

Revelation, formed through the Holy Spirit, given written form by people, meets us as something unified and entire. . . . As Scripture took form, word of God and word of man became fundamentally intertwined: God wanted to speak in just this manner through human agency (2 Pet. 1:21). Just as Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man, yet is not divisible into two persons, but remains thus the Son of God, so Scripture is simultaneously God's word and man's word, yet not divisible into two "words." It remains, finally and ultimately, God's word.<sup>16</sup>

All this points to a second major reason why we honor the New Testament writings, or the canon. It is inspired by God. In this sense Paul's statement applies to the New and the Old Testaments alike: "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16).<sup>17</sup>

### *Recognition of the Canon in the Church*

A third reason we recognize the importance of the New Testament writings lies in the preeminent role they gradually assumed in the ancient church. In the second through ninth centuries AD, numerous writings arose that claimed to be written by Jesus's apostolic followers. Such works included so-called gospels, acts, epistles, and even books resembling Revelation in certain respects. There was much debate about these books. Christians who might be persecuted for hiding Christian Scriptures wanted to know which ones they should be willing to die for. Pastors and theologians sought the most reliable available documents for information about the faith they held dear. Over the span of a few generations, the canon as we know it

emerged. It comprised a standard by which all other writings were judged. The books in it possessed the marks of apostolic authorship (i.e., written by Jesus's handpicked followers, the **apostles**, or their close aides). They bore evidence of their first-century origin. (Few noncanonical writings were written nearly so early. Only a few can even be dated to the second century and perhaps none with certainty to the first.) They also contained the apostolic message of the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

The twenty-seven New Testament writings are the ones that earned the recognition of early Christians as having been inspired by God and given to the church "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16 NRSV). It is not naive, therefore, to honor this same canon today but sober recognition of the Holy Spirit's work as well as humble acceptance of God's provision for knowledge of his will among Christians throughout all ages.<sup>18</sup>

Some years ago a scholar who rejected the distinctive place of the New Testament canon remarked that to accept it is to place oneself under the authority of second- to fourth-century bishops.<sup>19</sup> This comment is historically misleading. "Debates over the canon were so vigorous that no church council reached a decision about it before Trent in the sixteenth century."<sup>20</sup> The ancient church did not force the canon on unsuspecting members. "In the most basic sense neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead, they came to perceive and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church."<sup>21</sup> It can reasonably be argued that to reject the canon is to put yourself under the authority of the modern spirit of disbelief in Jesus Christ and his authority in the church through the Scriptures.

## Greek Manuscripts of Part or All of the New Testament

|                          |       |
|--------------------------|-------|
| Papyri Cataloged         | 139   |
| Uncial Mss. Cataloged    | 323   |
| Minuscule Mss. Cataloged | 2,936 |
| Lectionaries Cataloged   | 2,476 |
| Total                    | 5,874 |

Note: Numbers in this chart are from [http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/service/kurzgefaste\\_Liste\\_Juni\\_2018.pdf](http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/service/kurzgefaste_Liste_Juni_2018.pdf). This document augments Kurt Aland et al., *Kurzgefaste Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994). Numbers in all categories inch up periodically with new discoveries.

papyrus

uncials

minuscules

lectionaries

on **papyrus**, a paper made from reeds. Over three hundred others are called **uncials**; this means they record the New Testament in capital letters, usually on some kind of leather surface. The largest group consists of **minuscules**. These display a kind of cursive writing that developed in **BYZANTIUM** around the ninth century. Finally, there are **lectionaries**, books used in church worship that include portions of Scripture. They too are important witnesses to the New Testament text as it was passed down through the centuries.

### Brief Time Lapse

Another reason for confidence in our knowledge of what Matthew, Paul, and other writers originally wrote is the brief time span between the date when the documents were written and the date of the earliest copies we possess. It is not uncommon for a gap of a thousand years or more to separate an ancient work and the earliest known copy of it. Things are different in the case of the New Testament, where “several papyrus manuscripts . . . are extant which were copied within a century or so after the composition of the original documents.”<sup>22</sup> A papyrus fragment of John’s Gospel found in **EGYPT** is commonly dated to AD 125. This is barely one generation later than the AD 90s, when many scholars think that Gospel was first written. Textual evidence is consistent with the view that all four Gospels were written in the first century.

manuscript

## The Integrity of the New Testament Text

The Gutenberg printing press was invented in the fifteenth century. Before that, writings had to be copied by hand. A handwritten copy is called a **manuscript**. All of the New Testament documents were passed down through the centuries in manuscript form. Our modern translations are made by scholars who consult these manuscripts and produce, say, English versions from them.

But as anyone who has tried to copy something (perhaps a newspaper quote or a recipe) by hand discovers, it is easy to make a mistake. If the New Testament writings were passed along for over a thousand years with one copy being made from another, can we be certain that our English translations reflect what Paul or Peter or Luke originally wrote in Greek?

### Wealth of Evidence

Happily, the answer is a resounding yes. A major reason for this is the wealth of evidence available. *The New Testament is by far the best-attested writing of antiquity*. Close to six thousand manuscripts containing at least a fragment of the New Testament have been cataloged. The earliest of these are written

### Versions and Fathers

Still another ground for optimism about our knowledge of the original text of the New Testament comes from the widespread distribution of it from a very early date. We refer here to what scholars call the ancient versions. As the gospel spread to non-Greek-speaking lands, the New Testament was translated into languages such as Syriac, Latin, and Coptic. More than eight thousand manuscripts exist

in Latin alone! These versions are generally less important for our knowledge of the ancient Greek text than the Greek manuscripts themselves are. But at some points they are quite significant. And overall they show that the New Testament was faithfully rendered as it passed from scribe to scribe and even language to language. Transmission was not perfect, but it was more than reliable enough for us to be in very little doubt about what the New Testament authors first wrote.

textual criticism

The writings of the early church fathers are yet another important witness to the shape of the earliest Greek text. Dozens of church leaders such as CLEMENT OF ROME (AD 95), JUSTIN MARTYR (AD 150), IRENAEUS (AD 170), and Origen (AD 250) quoted the New Testament in writings that are still extant.<sup>23</sup>

We may conclude, then, that there are sparse grounds for doubting our knowledge of what the original manuscripts of the various New Testament writings contained. True, at individual points scholars debate precisely what the original said. Did Jesus send out seventy-two or seventy workers into the harvest (Luke 10:1)? Some confusion exists among various manuscripts here. Did

Syriac New Testament



the original copy of Matthew contain 12:47? Some ancient and important manuscripts omit it. And what about the woman accused of adultery (John 7:53–8:11)? Modern translations place it in brackets or mark it off from the rest of John’s Gospel by other means. The original ending of Mark is also disputed, as most modern Bibles indicate. All of this is a reminder that there are points of ongoing investigation into the precise wording of the original New Testament writings. (This scholarly pursuit is called **textual criticism**; books discussing its methods and findings are listed at the end of this chapter.)

But estimates of the degree of certainty in our knowledge of the New Testament text invariably run to near 100 percent. And experts agree that none of the points of discussion affect the gospel message or even any single Christian doctrine. Although we may struggle with how to interpret the New Testament and find it challenging to apply what we interpret, we are free from serious doubts about the integrity of the text.

**So Many Translations!**

In recent decades English-language translations have multiplied rapidly. For centuries the King James Version (1611) dominated. But in 1952 the Revised Standard Version appeared, largely the product of mainline Protestant scholarship. Roman Catholics produced a pair of new translations: the Jerusalem Bible in 1966 and the New American Bible in 1970. Evangelical scholars published the New American Standard version in 1960 and the New International Version in 1978. The latter



has become the most widely used translation for many, and an updated version appeared in 2011 with inclusive language refinements.

The Revised English Bible (1989) and the English Standard Version (2001), a revision of the Revised Standard Version, are recent examples of continuing efforts to make available the most accurate and readable renderings of Scripture possible. The Revised Standard Version had already appeared in an inclusive-language edition, the New Revised Standard Version (1989). In 2000 yet another team of scholars published a fresh translation of the New Testament, the Holman Christian Standard Bible. This was revised and reissued in 2009 as the Christian Standard Bible. In 2011 another whole-Bible translation project appeared under the title of the Common English Bible.

Also worth mentioning are paraphrases, renderings that are freer than translations in the strict sense but that still attempt to be faithful to the original languages of the ancient manuscripts. Examples include the New Living Translation (1996), itself a revision of the older Living Bible (1971), and the Contemporary English Version (1995).

The situation might appear chaotic, but these attempts reflect the high value placed on the Bible's meaning and the importance of the best possible rendering of it into English. Translations vary depending on the target audiences and the commitments of the scholars who produce them.<sup>24</sup> Study of various translations reveals that they differ mainly in emphasis, style, and nuance. Some are better for personal reading; others lend themselves to formal use, such as public reading. They do not present radically differing pictures of God, Jesus, or Christian doctrine. Rather, they offer rich possibilities for serious students to delve into the Bible's full meaning for themselves. This brings us to the whole matter of formal *study* of the New Testament.

## Why Study the New Testament?

We have already touched on good reasons for paying serious and extended attention to the New Testament and matters related to it. But is there really any need to *study* what it says? If it is inspired by God and its text is reasonably secure, then why is it necessary to expend energy pondering what it says, learning ancient names and dates, summarizing various New Testament teachings, and exploring different writings and their contents? Why not just confess faith in it, learn some key verses, and get to work doing what it says?

### *To Avoid the Tyranny of Preformed Personal Opinion*

An obvious reason for study relates to what we have already said: the New Testament is an immensely important book, with much to offer the receptive reader. To reap the benefits of the whole, one must pay the price of mastering the various parts. But let us now go a step further.

The New Testament is a book with religious content, read by humans who are religious by nature. This can be a wonderful combination: the reader has a religious thirst; the New Testament satisfies it. What could be wrong with that?

The answer is "Plenty." We all stand in danger of seeing in the Bible only those things that our prior experiences or convictions dispose us to see. And for some this is where study of the New Testament becomes nearly impossible. They already have their minds made up about their religious commitments—and therefore about the New Testament too. They will perhaps read it for additional strengthening of what they already think. But they are not open to a depth and mode of study that might call into question their established outlook. While it is good (and inevitable) that we approach any

## Focus 1: The Old Testament Apocrypha

The Apocrypha contains documents that have not been recognized by the Protestant church as part of the canon. These include books or parts of books that appeared in the two centuries before Christ and the first century after his birth. Whereas many of these documents provide insight into the religious, political, and social conditions during this period, they fail to meet the criteria for inspired Scripture that other biblical documents reflect.

The following story comes from a brief apocryphal text titled “The History of the Destruction of Bel and the Dragon,” which some took to be an addition to the book of Daniel. The passage demonstrates how stories from the Apocrypha are blended with stories and ideas found in the Old Testament canon.

[Now in that place] there was also a great dragon, which the Babylonians revered. And the king said to Daniel, “You cannot deny that this is a living god; so worship him.” Daniel said, “I will worship the Lord my God, for

he is the living God. But if you, O king, will give me permission, I will slay the dragon without sword or club.” The king said, “I give you permission.”

Then Daniel took pitch, fat, and hair, and boiled them together and made cakes, which he fed to the dragon. The dragon ate them, and burst open. Then Daniel said, “See what you have been worshipping!”

When the Babylonians heard it, they were very indignant and conspired against the king, saying, “The king has become a Jew; he has destroyed Bel, and slain the dragon, and slaughtered the priests.” Going to the king, they said, “Hand Daniel over to us, or else we will kill you and your household.” The king saw that they were pressing him hard, and under compulsion he handed Daniel over to them.

They threw Daniel into the lions’ den, and he was there for six days. There were seven lions in the den, and every day they had been given two human bodies and two sheep; but these were not given to them now, so that they might devour Daniel.

—Bel and the Dragon 23–32 (RSV)

book, including the Bible, with convictions, it is dangerous for those convictions to function as censors of the text’s message to us.

A minister was once preaching from Acts 17:26: “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live” (NRSV). To the astonishment of some listeners, he angrily stressed the point that he resented seeing interracial dating and marriage between Caucasians and African Americans. “It makes my blood boil!” he declared. He explained that Acts 17:26 prohibited this—God “allotted . . . the boundaries of the places where they would live.” To the minister this meant that Blacks and Whites ought to stay away from each other and not intermarry. But he could arrive at this conclusion only by ignoring the same verse’s opening words: “From one ancestor he made all nations.” Because Adam and Eve are, as the Bible teaches, everyone’s first parents,

we share a commonality that ought to rule out racist attitudes.

The minister had not studied the Bible sufficiently at this point but simply read into it the prejudices that he had before coming to this particular text. Unfortunately, we all tend to do this with Scripture, unless we gain wisdom and self-control in the way we handle it. “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” (Prov. 18:2 ESV). Careful study can help us to avoid misinterpretation and see what God really has to say, rather than stick to what we already think.

### *To Avoid Misguided Reliance on the Holy Spirit*

A related danger, and an enemy of study, is the notion that because the Holy Spirit influences our lives, he will somehow fill us with knowledge of the New Testament’s truth without our having to work at master-

ing it ourselves. Although we should not minimize our dependence on God’s Spirit to understand Scripture correctly, it is a mistake to substitute spiritual influence alone for the substantive means of grace that God has given in the form of Scripture. Without solid understanding of God’s revelation of himself in Scripture, how can we be sure that the spiritual influence we sense is truly from God? The primary standard for making that determination must in the end be Scripture!

Martin Niemöller, heroic Christian leader and war prisoner in Nazi Germany, told of a young German minister who said that instead of study, he trusted the Spirit for his sermons. An older colleague commented: “As for me, the Holy Ghost never spoke to me in the pulpit. Yes, I remember, he did speak to me once. When I was going down the pulpit steps after a poor sort of sermon, the Holy Ghost spoke to me. He said only three words, and what he said was, ‘Heinrich, you are lazy!’” In other words, “the Holy Spirit has much more important work to do than to substitute for human indolence.”<sup>25</sup>

Based on the Gospels we can see that Jesus had learned, mastered, and was submissive to Scripture. Jesus’s disciples were likewise serious students of Scripture—despite the benefit of personal instruction at Jesus’s feet. Paul had extensive formal training in **rabbinic** interpretation and continued to develop his understanding of the Old Testament following conversion. Yes, all these people trusted God and were empowered by the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit actualized the fruits of their prayer and study; he did not replace it. If study of Scripture was central to their lives, it probably should be to ours as well.

### *To Enable Historical-Theological Interpretation*

A final reason for study of the New Testament is that it provides the historical dimension by which theological understanding and application must be informed.

God has seen fit to reveal himself and to do his saving work using historical means. The gospel is not the proclamation of an

Archaeology informs our interpretation of the Bible.



## Key Terms

|                  |              |                   |
|------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| AD               | gospel       | redemption        |
| apostles         | inspiration  | resurrection      |
| BC               | lectionaries | revelation        |
| Bible            | 2 Maccabees  | righteousness     |
| canon            | manuscript   | salvation         |
| Christ           | minuscules   | Scriptures        |
| church           | papyrus      | sins              |
| concursus        | prophet      | textual criticism |
| Dead Sea Scrolls | the Prophets | the Torah         |
| disciples        | Qur'an       | uncials           |
| fall             | rabbinic     | the Writings      |

## Key People/ Places

|           |            |               |
|-----------|------------|---------------|
| Antiochus | Clement of | Irenaeus      |
| Epiphanes | Rome       | Josephus      |
| Byzantium | Egypt      | Justin Martyr |

otherworldly, mystical experience. It is not an obscure insight or philosophical theory gained by skilled meditation or subtle reasoning. It is the message that through Christ God has acted in love and mercy in the affairs of the world, over which he is Lord. It is the good word about God's moving and communicating himself across the gamut of human life in its broadest sense. It is God renewing human life, giving it heavenly quality and hope, in history—a word that here includes the whole spectrum of both the natural world and human civilization.

We have already established that Scripture is ultimately divine in character. It is God's Word. But it comes to us in earthly dress and through human agents. Understanding of the earthly and human components (history) is essential to realizing its theological meaning. These components include elements of geography, political and cultural history (Israelite, Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, etc.), literature, and various languages. Informed interpretation of the New Testament may involve modern fields of study as varied as archaeology, the social sciences, econom-

ics, linguistics, musicology, astronomy, and many others.

All of this suggests that study of the New Testament is necessary for the kind of interpretation of it that is most basic and responsible in the long run. Admittedly, other kinds of interpretation are possible. A *devotional* interpretation may read the New Testament with little regard for historical considerations, seeking instead a word of encouragement or mystical guidance. A *literary* interpretation may examine how formal features like plot and structure help us understand a book's message. A *political* interpretation may look for injustices that the Bible appears to sanction or for insights about good government that it may contain.

But basic to all such interpretations is understanding of the Bible that most clearly approximates the purpose for which God inspired it. Devotional, literary, political, and other interests are valuable in their place, but they are secondary to (because they are dependent on) the divine will and activity that created Scripture to begin with. Historical-theological interpretation—grasping the Bible's redemptive message to people *then* as a means of receiving and sharing its message *now*—is perhaps the most elementary and taxing yet ultimately fruitful way to approach the New Testament that we can attempt. It involves learning and processing a good deal of information that may at first seem foreign and a little unnecessary. It takes work. It often requires (sometimes humbling) personal response, as increased understanding triggers conviction of personal need and awe at divine greatness. In hostile settings, obeying the Word may put us in harm's way, as martyrs both ancient and modern remind us. All of this requires, in the sometimes daunting sense of the word, study.

But the authors of this book, having gained a little more love for God and his book through such study themselves, wish to help the reader along the path of engaging God's

## Summary

1. The Bible has shaped the world in which we live, and no one is free from its influence.
2. The Old Testament tells of God's creation of the world, humankind's fall into sin, and God's saving work to undo sin's consequences. It is divided into three parts: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.
3. The New Testament is the testament of God's saving work in more recent times and announces the Savior (Messiah) whom the Old Testament awaits.
4. Study of the New Testament is important because it mediates God's presence, is of ultimate personal significance, and is foundational to cultural literacy.
5. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament include four books called Gospels, one book that traces the rise of the early church (Acts), twenty-one epistles or letters, and one book of prophecy.
6. The New Testament writings are inspired by God. The Holy Spirit worked together with the hearts and minds of the followers of Jesus to produce these trustworthy writings.
7. The New Testament canon is a collection of writings that came together in the opening generations of the church's existence. Like all Scripture, it was given to the church for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).
8. New Testament manuscripts were first written on papyrus and, later, on leather. The manuscripts are of several types: papyri, uncials, minuscules, and lectionaries.
9. The New Testament text we have is secure because extensive evidence supports it, the authors of the books wrote them within living memory of Jesus's life, and ancient versions of the text were widely distributed.
10. Christians should study the New Testament so that they will avoid misinterpretation based on preconceived ideas and misplaced reliance on the Holy Spirit, and so that they will have the appropriate historical foundation for understanding and applying its teachings.

Word. Generally the road ahead is engrossing and pleasant. But even if things get a little steep, dusty, and sweaty at points, we trust you will find it profitable as you make your way.

## Further Reading

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Cowan, Stephen B., and Terry L. Wilder, eds. *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013.

An international roster of scholars addresses seventeen questions such as “Does the Bible

contain forgeries?” and “Does the Bible conflict with science?”

Doriani, Daniel. *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001.

Develops a systematic approach to moving from *knowing* the Word to *doing* it.

Evans, Craig A. *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.

Comprehensive listing of extracanonical writings. Valuable bibliography.

Hill, C. E. *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Advanced-level examination of conspiracy theories regarding New Testament origins.

Hixson, Elijah, and Peter J. Gurry, eds. *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament*

## Study Questions

1. What does “testament” mean in the titles “Old Testament” and “New Testament”?
2. What is the relationship of the Old Testament to the New?
3. What is cultural literacy? What part does the New Testament play in acquiring it?
4. What is a canon? What are the ancient divisions of the Old Testament canon?
5. Give three reasons for special study of the New Testament canon.
6. What are the bases of our high level of certainty regarding the text of the New Testament?
7. What other subjects have you found it necessary to study in order to master them? What differences are there, if any, between study of those subjects and study of the New Testament?

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A collection of articles defending the inerrancy and authority of the Bible.

Thompson, Mark. *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006.

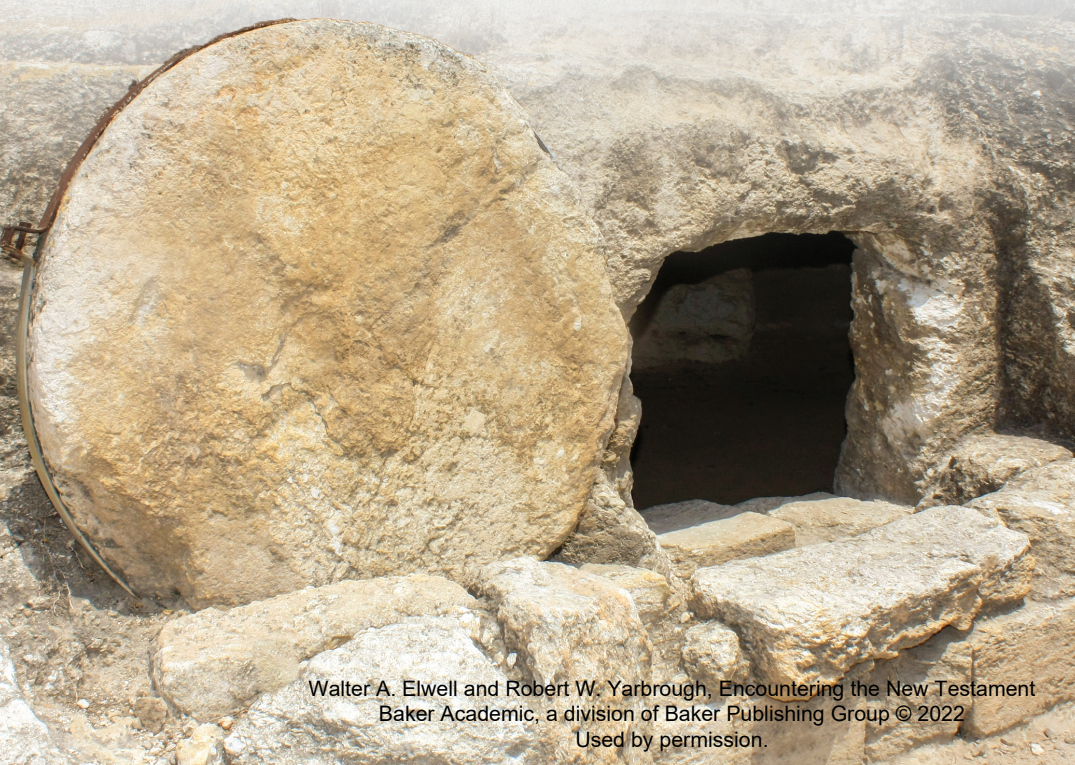
Explores and explains the proposition that the biblical text, as God’s communicative act, bears meaning that is accessible to all who come to it in faith.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016.

A fresh look and commendation of Christian understanding of the Bible in a framework of professed and lived-out faith.

PART  
1

# Encountering Jesus and the Gospels



Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*  
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## CHAPTER TWO

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# The Middle East in the Days of Jesus

### OUTLINE

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- **The Land of Palestine**
- **The History of Palestine from the Return to the Destruction of Jerusalem**
  - The Maccabean/Hasmonean Period (166–63 BC)
  - The Domination of Rome (63 BC–AD 70)
    - The Rule of Herod the Great (37–4 BC)
    - The Rule of Herod's Descendants (4 BC–AD 66)
      - Archelaus (4 BC–AD 6)
      - Philip (4 BC–AD 34)
      - Antipas (4 BC–AD 39)
      - Herod Agrippa I and II (AD 37–66)
    - The Jewish War and the Destruction of Jerusalem (AD 66–70)
- **Jewish Religion in Jesus's Day**
  - The Unifying Factors in Judaism Religious Groups
    - Pharisees
    - Sadducees
    - Essenes
    - Zealots
    - The Apocalyptic Movement
    - Other Groups in Palestine
  - The Samaritans

### The Literature of the Jews

- The Old Testament
- The Old Testament Apocrypha
- The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha
- The Dead Sea Scrolls
- Rabbinic Writings
- Other Writings

- **Conclusion**

### OBJECTIVES

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*After reading this chapter, you should be able to*

- Describe the essential geographical features of Palestine
- Outline the major historical events occurring in Palestine from 539 BC to AD 70
- Explain how various factors unified Judaism
- Identify the differences among the major religious groups of this historical period
- Contrast the writings of the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha
- List the various rabbinic materials and what they teach



We search for *personal* meaning in a world that sometimes seems bent on denying it. Cosmology reveals that the universe is vast and we are fly-specks by comparison. World population tops seven billion; what is one person? By many measurements, our identities are broken down into data: a Social Security number, debit card number, cell phone number, student ID number, student loan number—not to mention dozens of passwords. And that is if we are lucky enough to have been allowed into this world: with developments in medical technology, hundreds of millions have been aborted internationally during the past century (and especially since the 1970s). The self struggles for identity, a voice, a reason to get up and face things each day. No wonder one of the most penetrating statements to emerge from World War II and the Holocaust was Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (original German title: *Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager* [A psychologist experiences the concentration camp]). It remains worth reading today. The human search for personal validation is acute in every generation.

Could a sense of personal meaning emerge from study of Scripture? Perhaps, but it is tempting to pick up the Bible, especially when it is slickly packaged with the latest and greatest study aids, and succumb to the suspicion that this is just church hype. What does some old book have to do with me, really? But the biblical documents, like God himself, appeal “to every nation and tribe and language and people” (Rev. 14:6 ESV). They are particular, not impersonal, in nature. They have the potential to lift souls

swimming in dehumanizing anonymity and to confer on them dignity and personhood.

The New Testament especially is striking in its personal tone. Out of twenty-seven documents, twenty-four are personal letters,<sup>1</sup> and the remaining three Gospels are personalized accounts of the life and work of Jesus Christ.

The apostle John begins his Gospel by telling us that the eternal **Word** of God, Jesus Christ, “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14); in his first epistle John says that he and the other apostles saw Jesus with their eyes and touched him with their hands (1 John 1:1–2). The Christian doctrine of the incarnation asserts that the Son of God became a human being and shared our human life with us. This means, of course, that he had to appear at a certain time, in a certain place. To enter history meant that Christ became a particular person (Jesus of Nazareth), at a particular time (during the reigns of Augustus [27 BC–AD 14] and TIBERIUS CAESAR [AD 14–37]), and in a particular place (Palestine, on the MEDITERRANEAN SEA). When the apostle Paul spoke to the philosophers in Athens, he portrayed history as a prelude leading up to the coming of Christ, before whom we all must someday stand (Acts 17:22–31). This idea caused some of the early church fathers to speak of the history before Christ as a *praeparatio evangelium* (preparation for the gospel). Contemporary theologians speak of the “scandal of particularity”—the fact that Jesus is available for all but was to be found only in one place. All of this is important for New Testament students because it speaks of the significance of the particular history

of which Jesus was a part and of the place he filled in it.

For this reason any study of the New Testament must begin with a look, however brief, at the circumstances that led up to and surrounded the major events that constituted the beginning of the Christian faith. Otherwise, it would be difficult to get a clear picture of Jesus and how his time on Earth brings personal meaning to us today.

## The Land of Palestine

The land of Palestine has always been very important to the Jews and to the Middle East in general.<sup>2</sup> About one-third the size of Illinois, it is approximately 45 miles wide (east–west) and 145 miles long (north–south). The region as a whole is typically divided into five longitudinal regions,<sup>3</sup> with several sub-regions of varying importance. The main regions, going from west to east, are the coastal plain, the Shephelah or foothills, the central mountain range, the wilderness and the Jordan Valley, and the eastern mountain range. The striking ruggedness of the territory produces marked changes of climate from place to place, so that snow might be found in one place while a few miles away there are palm trees and sunshine. The “West–East” map provided shows something of this contrast by slicing into the land from west to east roughly through JERUSALEM. As you look at this map, imagine yourself standing in the desert to the south of Jerusalem, looking north.

A look at the land as it lies north to south is also revealing, showing it to be almost impassable, except for the PLAIN OF ESDRAELON that cuts east to west between SAMARIA and GALILEE. In the “South–North” map provided you are standing on the eastern side of the JORDAN RIVER looking west. Sea

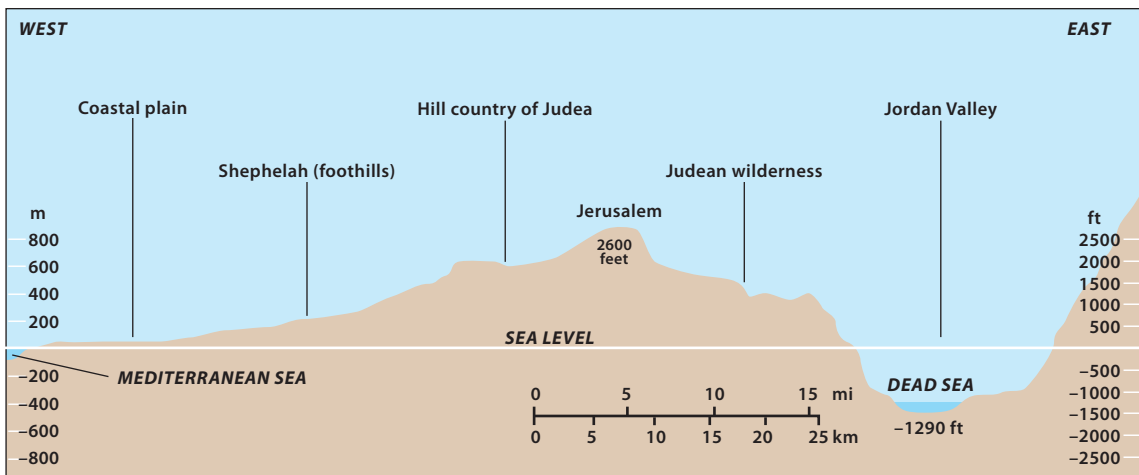


level is the straight line that cuts horizontally through the land.

In Jesus’s day the land consisted of several administrative districts governed by the Romans. Three were on the western side of the Jordan River: Galilee, Samaria, and JUDEA. East of the Jordan to the north was a collection of smaller districts, ruled by Herod’s son Philip. Another, called the DECAPOLIS, was a sprawling area encompassing ten cities that were given a rather large measure of self-government. South of this was PEREA, an area ruled along with Galilee by HEROD ANTIPAS. Let’s take a brief look at these districts.

The district of Galilee to the north, where Jesus grew up, is of great physical diversity, an area about thirty-three miles wide and sixty miles long (north–south), bordered by PHOENICIA on the northwest, SYRIA on

**PALESTINE IN THE TIME OF CHRIST, AD 6–44**



**WEST-EAST  
CROSS SECTION  
OF PALESTINE**

gentiles

the north, the Jordan Valley with the SEA OF GALILEE on the east, and the Plain of Esdraelon on the south. Galilee was surrounded by **gentiles** (Matt. 4:13–16).<sup>4</sup> The Sea of Galilee, which Jesus knew so well, is not really a sea at all but rather a medium-sized lake about twelve miles long by eight miles wide. It supplied the region with an abundance of fish. On its northwestern edge was the marvelous PLAIN OF GENNESARET, which produced fruits and vegetables almost all year long, even in the dead of winter. This was possible because it was more than six hundred feet below sea level and was not subject to the temperature extremes of higher altitudes.

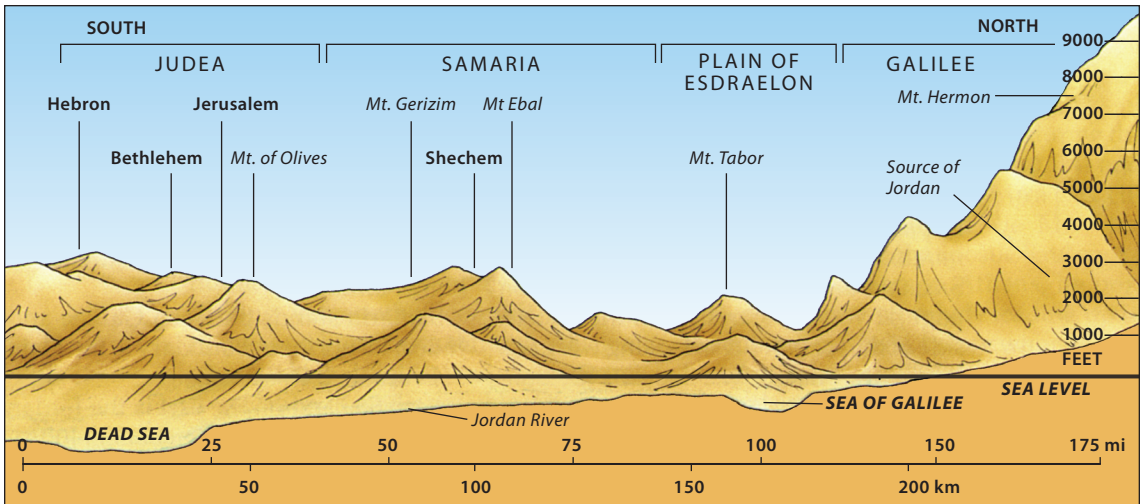
Samaria stands between Galilee and Judea. Its northern boundary is the Plain of Esdraelon. On the west is the Mediterranean Sea, and on the east is the Jordan River. To the south, it merges into Judea. The exact boundaries have always been somewhat fluid, so it is difficult to fix them precisely. Samaria was a mountainous area of rounded hills and fertile plains, where agriculture flourished, yielding fruits and grains of every sort. Large herds of sheep and goats also found pasture among its hills. It has remained so down to modern times. As William Thomson long ago observed, “One may be excused for becoming somewhat enthusiastic over this pretty vale of Nablus, sparkling with fountains and streams, verdant with olive groves and fig

orchards, interspersed with walnut, apple, apricot, orange, quince, pomegranate, and other trees and shrubs.”<sup>5</sup>

Judea is directly to the south of Samaria and extends from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the Jordan River and the DEAD SEA on the east down to the desert on the south, including the old area of EDOM, or IDUMEA as it was called in New Testament times. Its major city was, of course, Jerusalem, but it also included many other ancient holy sites.

The physical features of Judea show the basic divisions of the land most clearly. The coastal plain and foothills were noted for their crops and pasturage. The west winds blowing off the sea provided enough moisture for everything to grow well, and throughout history these regions have been wonderfully productive. Up in the hills, olives and figs can grow, but the rough and stony land makes it difficult to farm. Flocks of sheep and goats abound. On the eastern side of the mountains lies the wilderness, a wild and barren area, utterly desolate, where little was to be found other than scorpions, jackals, and bandits. It was here that Jesus went to be tempted by the devil.

The eastern boundary of both Samaria and Judea is the Jordan River. In many ways it forms a region unto itself. It takes its rise in the mountains to the north, passes through



the Sea of Galilee, and wanders through dense thickets for about sixty-five miles. It ends in the Dead Sea, so called because it is so salty from the evaporation of water that nothing can live there. JERICHO and its fertile plain are nearby, in stark contrast to the barrenness that surrounds it. The Dead Sea is the lowest natural place on Earth (more than 1,290 feet below sea level) and is surrounded by wilderness. A monastic group called the **Essenes** built a community nearby to get away from civilization and hid their precious library in its caves when the Romans attacked in AD 66. These documents were found in the mid-twentieth century and are called the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The area to the northeast of the Sea of Galilee was ruled by HEROD PHILIP (4 BC–AD 34). It consisted of some smaller districts that included Batanaea, Trachonitis, Auranitis, Gaulanitis, and the territory surrounding Pnias, a city Philip rebuilt and named CAESAREA PHILIPPI. The entire area was excellent for farming and herding. Jesus traveled infrequently in the area but did cross it on more than one occasion. Best remembered is his extraordinary self-revelation of divine sonship and his messianic mission of suffering and death at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13–28). BETHSAIDA was also in Philip’s territory, and it was here that Jesus

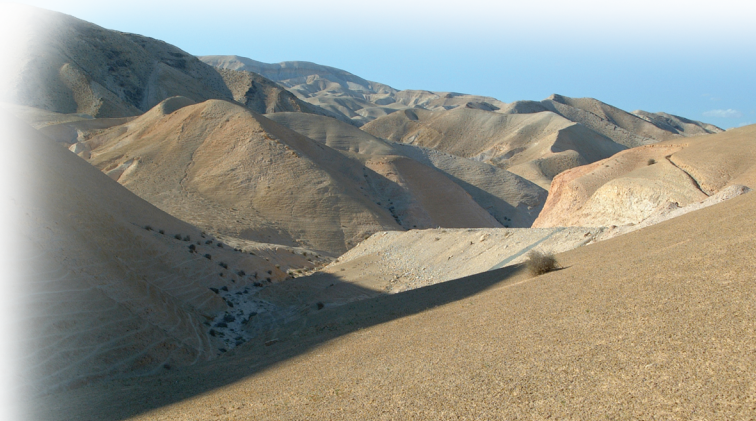
performed some of his mighty works (Matt. 11:21–22).

The Decapolis was an extended area, mostly on the eastern side of the Jordan River, that contained ten Greek cities and their surrounding areas. They were probably organized at the time POMPEY invaded Palestine (66–64 BC). The area was rich in farming and herding, renowned in antiquity for its dairy products. Jesus made no extended trips through the area but did cross it on occasion (Mark 7:31). People from the Decapolis came to hear Jesus preach in Galilee (Matt. 4:25). Jesus’s memorable healing of an out-cast demoniac took place in the Decapolis, on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. The pigs that rushed into the sea are evidence of the region’s gentile population (Mark 5:1–20).

**SOUTH-NORTH  
CROSS SECTION  
OF PALESTINE**

Essenes

The Judean wilderness



Perea was a rather large area east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea that was ruled along with Galilee by Herod Antipas. JOSEPHUS, a first-century Jewish writer whom we will say more about at the end of this chapter, described it in this way:

The greater part of it is desert, and rough, and not much disposed to the production of the milder kinds of fruits; yet a moist soil [in other parts] produces all kinds of fruits, and its plains are planted with trees of all sorts, while yet the olive tree, the vine, and the palm tree, are chiefly cultivated there. It is also sufficiently watered with torrents, which issue out of the mountains, and with springs that never fail to run, even when the torrents fail them, as they do in the dog days. (Josephus, *J.W.* 3.3.3 [Whiston])<sup>6</sup>

There was a large Jewish population in Perea, and many Jews from Galilee preferred to detour through it when traveling to Jerusalem rather than go through Samaria. John the Baptist preached and baptized in Perea (John 1:28; 10:40), and Jesus traveled extensively there in the six months prior to his death and resurrection. Jesus probably sent the seventy-two disciples into Perea to preach about the coming kingdom of God (Luke 10:1–17). MACHAERUS was a major fortress city of Perea. It was here that Antipas had his regional palace and that John the Baptist was imprisoned and, according to Josephus, executed for denouncing Herod's illegal marriage (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.5.2; see also Mark 6:17–29).

Overall, Palestine is a small land, but it has been of immense value historically because of its strategic location as a land bridge between the mighty nations surrounding it. It has been fought over throughout history. But its significance is not just geographical. For Christians, it stands as the land promised to Abraham and the land of fulfillment for the Lord Jesus Christ. It was here that God chose

to effect his great plan of salvation through the **incarnation**, death, and resurrection of his only Son.

## The History of Palestine from the Return to the Destruction of Jerusalem

After CYRUS became the king of Persia (modern Iran) in 559 BC, his vast empire spread from Greece to India and from the Caucasus to Egypt. His enlightened policy allowed conquered peoples who had been sent into exile to return to their native lands and reestablish themselves as semiautonomous units under his benevolent leadership. Numerous Jews living in exile in Babylon since the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC were eager to return to their homeland. A series of emigrations brought many of them back to Palestine for a new start. This was the “time of restoration,” as it is usually called in surveys of the Old Testament. Life was far from easy for these returnees, and as the decades went by it was hard not to become thoroughly discouraged. In time, however, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, the temple was rededicated, homes were established, and an uneasy existence was begun. The Jews had come to realize that they were no longer in charge of their own destiny but were part of the larger world scene, subject to the changing fortunes of the large nations around them.

During the fourth century BC, Cyrus's Persian Empire began to crumble, and European might was felt for the first time in Middle Eastern history. It came in the form of ALEXANDER THE GREAT. A century earlier, the Persians had attempted to extend their borders into Greece. A seemingly invincible force, they burned and pillaged Athens; a disastrous naval defeat at the Sea of Salamis in 480 BC, however, forced their withdrawal

back into Asia Minor. To avenge the desecration of the temple of Athena, Alexander pushed east to establish the rule of Greek civilization in what was formerly Persia’s domain. He died in 323 BC, and it was left to his military successors, called the **Diadochi**, to fight bitterly among themselves as they carved up his empire. Antigonus Cyclops seized the whole of Asia Minor, including Syria and Palestine; PTOLEMY took Egypt and North Africa; SELEUCUS NICATOR took the enormous territory stretching from Mesopotamia east to India; and others took smaller, insignificant portions. In 301 BC, at the Battle of Ipsus, Antigonus was defeated and his territory was added basically to that of Seleucus, who founded the city of ANTIOCH in Syria in 300 BC and made it his capital. Meanwhile, Ptolemy had gained control of the Holy Land to the south of Syria. This set the stage for the bitter struggles over Palestine that raged until Roman military might made its presence felt there about a hundred years later.

In 198 BC ANTIOCHUS III, THE GREAT, ruler of the Syrian (Seleucid) Empire, defeated his Ptolemaic rival at the Battle of Panias and annexed Palestine to his territory. Later at Magnesia in Turkey, Antiochus was defeated by Scipio of Rome. The destiny of the region was in Roman hands for the next five hundred years.

ANTIOCHUS IV EPIPHANES was allowed by ROME to become the ruler of the **Seleucid Empire** in 175 BC. He set about hellenizing (forcing Greek ways on) all his territory. This program included the worship of the Greek god Zeus (the Roman Jupiter). A series of

outrages over two years—including murder, treachery, the ravaging of Jerusalem, and the establishment of a pagan citadel in Jerusalem called the ACRA—finally culminated in the establishment of an altar to Zeus in the temple. Swine’s flesh was offered there in December 167 BC (1 Macc. 1:54, 59; 2 Macc. 6:5). Daniel had mentioned this sacrilege earlier in his prophecy (Dan. 11:31; cf. Matt. 24:15).

**The Maccabean/Hasmonean Period (166–63 BC)**

In the small town of MODEIN, about seventeen miles northwest of Jerusalem, an aged **priest** named MATTATHIAS resisted Antiochus’s attempt to force pagan worship on all of Israel by killing the king’s representative (1 Macc. 2:19–26). He then fled into the hills with his five sons, JOHN, SIMON, JUDAS, Eleazer, and JONATHAN. From there, with the help of the **Hasidim**, a group of pious warriors, they waged war against the Syrians. Leadership was exercised by this family, called the **Hasmoneans**, for the next 103 years until Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC.

Mattathias died shortly after the revolt started. His son Judas (nicknamed “Maccabeus,” probably meaning “the Hammer”) assumed leadership of the revolt. After defeating the Syrians at EMMAUS (166/165 BC) and BETHZUR (165/164 BC), the Temple Mount was cleansed and rededicated on Kislev 25, 164 BC, three years after it had been desecrated by Antiochus. The celebration lasted eight days and became known as the **Feast of Dedication** or of Lights (present-day Hanukkah) because the lamps in the temple were relit



Coin featuring Antiochus IV Epiphanes

Diadochi

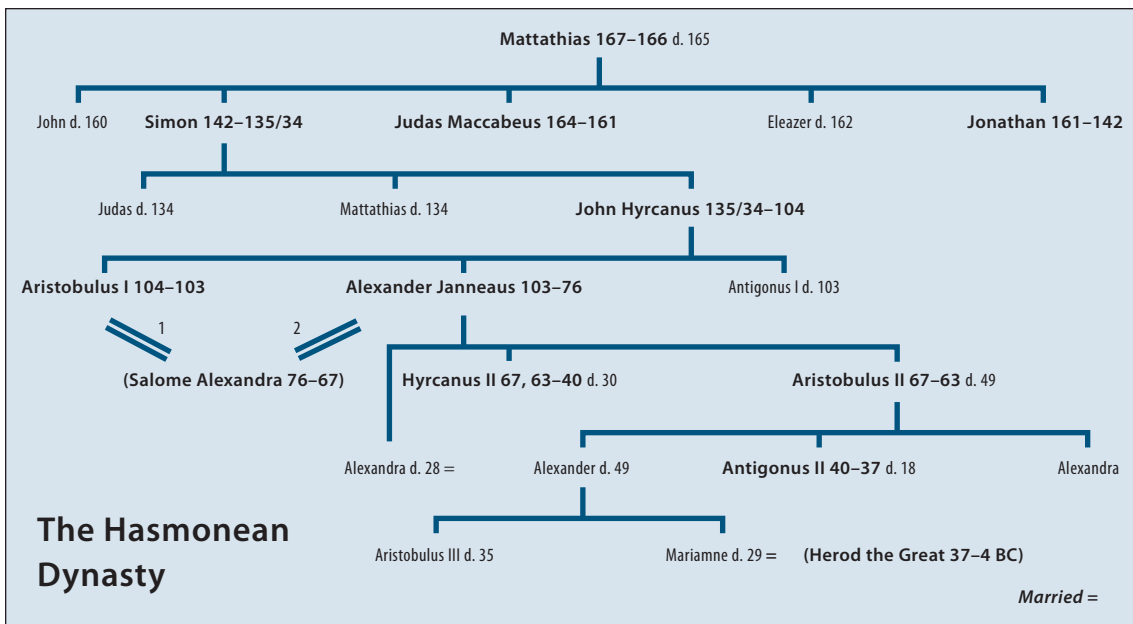
priest

Hasidim

Hasmoneans

Seleucid Empire

Feast of Dedication



(see John 10:22). Judas won yet another decisive victory against a Syrian general, Nicanor, in 161 BC but was then killed in battle near Elasa that same year by the Syrian Bacchides.

Bacchides returned to Syria, and an uneasy peace prevailed, despite sporadic civil unrest. Jonathan, Judas's brother, assumed leadership and extended his authority to numerous areas of Palestine. Jonathan was wise enough to reestablish relations with Rome but in the end was foolish enough to trust a Syrian general named Trypho, who massacred a thousand of his unsuspecting troops and eventually Jonathan as well in 142 BC (1 Macc. 12:46-48; 13:20-24).

Simon followed Jonathan as leader, and from 142 BC until his death in 135/134 BC things were relatively calm.

He established peace in the land,  
and Israel rejoiced with great joy.  
Each man sat under his vine and his  
fig tree,  
and there was none to make them  
afraid.  
No one was left in the land to fight  
them,

and the kings were crushed in  
those days.

He strengthened all the humble of  
his people;  
he sought out the law, and did  
away with every lawless and  
wicked man. (1 Macc. 14:11-  
14 RSV)

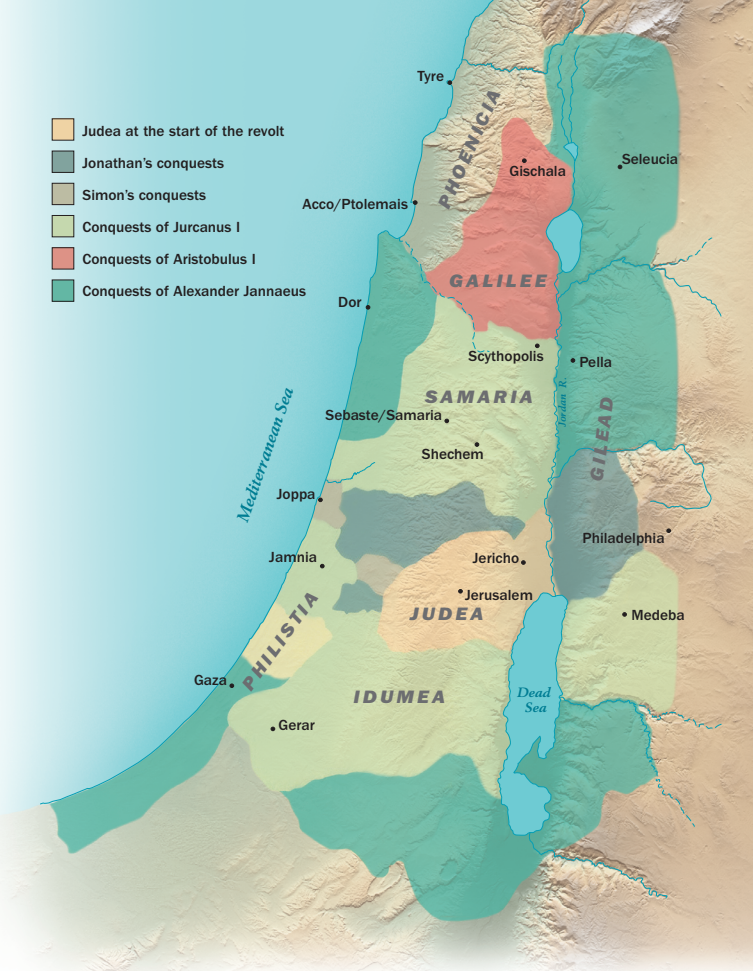
The people were so grateful to Simon that they bestowed the high priesthood on him and his family in perpetuity. Thus was founded the Hasmonean dynasty of priesthood. Simon also renewed his alliance with Rome, which no doubt strengthened his position against Syrian attack.

Simon's son, JOHN HYRCANUS I, ruled over the land from 135/134 to 104 BC. He secured his position by appealing to Rome for support, but he also hired a professional mercenary army rather than relying on a volunteer force of farmers and tradesmen. Because he was a good general and Syria's power was in decline, Hyrcanus was able, by a series of victories, to extend his territory through Samaria northward and Idumea southward until he ruled over a kingdom almost as large as that of David

and Solomon. Hyrcanus had a falling out with the **Pharisees** (descendants of the Hasidim mentioned earlier). But his reign was generally remembered as a time of peace and prosperity. Josephus says, “He lived happily and administered the government in the best possible manner for thirty-one years. . . . He was esteemed by God worthy of three privileges—the government of his nation, the dignity of the high priesthood, and prophecy, for God was with him” (*Ant.* 13.10.7 [Whiston]).

The disastrous reign of Hyrcanus’s son Aristobulus lasted only one year (104–103 BC) and was followed by the turbulent twenty-seven years of ALEXANDER JANNAEUS, his brother. Alexander was constantly embroiled in war, turmoil, and internal political dissension. He was unprincipled and ruthless and is said to have had hundreds of captives crucified in the center of the city to entertain himself and his mistresses during a drunken party. The falling out that Alexander’s father, Hyrcanus, had with the Pharisees became an outright break during Alexander’s reign. They considered him totally unworthy to be the high priest because of his evil ways. At one point Alexander had six thousand Jews massacred because they ridiculed him when he was officiating as the high priest (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.13.5).

When Alexander died in 76 BC, his widow, Alexandra, became the queen. She was well liked by the people, but the Pharisees at this time basically dominated the country. After the death of Alexandra in 67 BC, a war broke out between her two sons, HYRCANUS II and ARISTOBULUS II. Aristobulus II managed to stay on top until 63 BC, when the Roman general Pompey, who by this time had conquered virtually all the territory in Asia Minor up to Syria, arrived and conquered Jerusalem. In this way, the new power that was to control the area for



centuries established its dominance, and a new era had effectively begun.

**PALESTINE UNDER THE MACCABEES**

Pharisees

***The Domination of Rome (63 BC–AD 70)***

After conquering Jerusalem, Pompey appointed Hyrcanus II as the high priest, but without any royal title, and sent Aristobulus II to Rome as a prisoner. Hyrcanus II’s years of limited religious rule were filled with intrigues and political ups and downs and culminated in his humiliation. He was taken prisoner by the Parthians, mutilated by having his ears cut off to disqualify him for the priesthood, and replaced by Aristobulus II’s ineffective son, ANTIGONUS II, in 40 BC. Antigonus remained only a turbulent three years until the Romans confirmed Herod as the ruler in 37 BC, after a series of military victories, even calling him king.



## Chronology of Herod the Great's Rule

### BC

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| 37     | Herod conquers Jerusalem<br>Executions  |
| 31     | Earthquake in Palestine<br>Herod defeats the Nabateans  |
| 30     | Hyrchanus II executed<br>Herod confirmed king by Octavian   |
| 29     | Mariamne executed   |
| ca. 29 | Alexandra executed  |
| ca. 25 | Herod rebuilds Samaria and names it Sebaste<br>Famine and pestilence  |
| ca. 22 | Herod starts to build Caesarea  |
| 19     | Herod starts to rebuild the temple  |
| 14     | Herod's sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, fall out   |
| 12     | Augustus settles quarrel between Herod's sons   |
| 10     | Dedication of Caesarea<br>Increasing discord in Herod's family  |
| ca. 7  | Alexander and Aristobulus executed at Sebaste<br>Antipater all-powerful at Herod's court  |
| 5      | Antipater tried for conspiracy<br>Herod falls ill   |
| 4      | Herod puts down popular uprising led by rabbis Judas and Matthias<br>Herod's health deteriorates<br>Antipater executed<br>Herod names Archelaus king and Antipas and Philip tetrarchs<br>Herod dies five days after Antipater's execution |

### The Rule of Herod the Great (37–4 BC)

As we saw, when Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 BC, the fortunes of Palestine became tied up with those of Rome. During those uncertain years a new dynasty was arising in the person of ANTIPATER, an Idumean (from the ancient kingdom of Edom, just south of Judea), who was astute enough to support JULIUS CAESAR when he was in need of help in Alexandria, Egypt, in 48 BC. For this, Antipater was rewarded by being made **ethnarch** (local governor or prince) of Palestine. In 47 BC Antipater appointed

his son Phasael governor of Jerusalem and his son Herod as governor of Galilee. The assassination of Caesar on the Ides of March (March 15), 44 BC, threw the Middle East into turmoil. Two factions were vying for power: Cassius and Brutus against Anthony and Octavian (later CAESAR AUGUSTUS). After Cassius and Brutus were disposed of, Anthony and Octavian fought for supremacy; Octavian ultimately triumphed. The Parthians had made Antigonos II the ruler of Palestine in 40 BC, but in that same year the Roman Senate had made Herod the king of Judea. War followed, and after a stubborn defense Jerusalem fell in 37 BC to the Romans; Herod was now the sole ruler of the territory. When Octavian became the supreme ruler (Caesar) of the Roman world after defeating Anthony in the Battle of Actium on September 2, 31 BC, Herod switched his allegiance to Octavian; he was accepted by Octavian as a loyal subject in 30 BC and confirmed as the king of Judea.

Herod had married MARIAMNE, Hyrcanus II's granddaughter, to legitimate his claim to royalty, but he was also profoundly in love with her. His jealousy caused him to listen to court gossip started by his sister. Eventually he executed Mariamne and her mother, Alexandra. He had already had Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II killed. After his ill-advised murder of Mariamne (she was innocent), Herod's none-too-stable mental condition deteriorated. His reign was filled with political intrigue, plots, murders, wars, and brutality until his death in April of 4 BC.

In spite of his many obvious shortcomings, Herod accomplished some good for his territory. He could be quite generous when the occasion demanded it. He was often sensitive to the religious feelings of the Jews and was a master builder of cities. He rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, built a port city at Caesarea, beautified and refortified other important cities, and kept Rome satisfied,

ethnarch



LANDS OF THE BIBLE

thus providing a stability that Israel would not otherwise have known.

Herod died an agonizing death, perhaps from colon cancer, universally unmourned, “a man of great barbarity towards all equally and a slave to his passions” (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.8.1 [Whiston]). It is ironic that during the reign of this brutal, inhumane ruler, the Prince of Peace was born.

### The Rule of Herod’s Descendants (4 BC–AD 66)

Immediately after the death of Herod, riots broke out in Jerusalem that had to be put down by force. These riots continued while three of Herod’s sons, ARCHELAUS, Philip, and Antipas, made their way to Rome to present their case before Caesar Augustus. Each wanted to be the sole ruler. After much scheming and intrigue, Augustus divided the land three ways. He gave Archelaus Idumea,

Judea, and Samaria, and the title of ethnarch rather than king (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.13.5). Antipas was given Galilee and Perea and the title of tetrarch (local ruler). Philip received Batanaea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis, as well as other territories to the northeast, and was also titled tetrarch. The riots that were occurring all over the country were brutally put down; Sepphoris in Galilee was destroyed, the temple in Jerusalem was burned and looted, and thousands were crucified by the Romans.

### Archelaus (4 BC–AD 6)

The rule of Archelaus was “brutal and tyrannical” (*Ant.* 17.13.2 [Whiston]) and was strongly resisted from the very beginning. His evil reputation forced Joseph and Mary to take Jesus back to Nazareth, rather than return to BETHLEHEM, which was in Archelaus’s territory (Matt. 2:22–23). He

constantly interfered with priestly matters, caused great offense by his illegal marriage to a brother's widow, and treated his subjects harshly. When the Jews could stand it no longer, they sent a delegation to Rome, where they bitterly complained of Archelaus's misrule. He was summoned to Rome and in AD 6 was banished to Vienne in Gaul, where he spent the rest of his life.

Archelaus's territory was placed under direct Roman rule that lasted from AD 6 to 41, when the nation was unified under Agrippa I. There were six or seven Roman governors, mostly called procurators, during this time, but only the fifth one is of importance for New Testament studies: PONTIUS PILATE, who was in control from AD 26 to 36. As procurator he would have resided in Caesarea, yet he visited Jerusalem for festivals and notable events. He was a harsh and insensitive ruler, with little consideration for his subjects. His excessive and brutal behavior caught up with him in the end. He was deposed and then exiled by Tiberius Caesar in AD 36.

Excavated remains of Herod's palace-fortress at Herodium

#### *Philip (4 BC–AD 34)*

We know little about the reign of Philip except that he was universally praised. He limited personal ambition and kept extravagant building to a minimum. He rebuilt the ancient city of Pnias, north of the Sea of Galilee, renaming it Caesarea Philippi in honor of Caesar and himself. It was here that Peter made his great confession of Jesus's messiahship. Here too Jesus explained how he must go to Jerusalem to die and rise again (Matt. 16:13–27). Bethsaida, on the northeast coast of the Sea of Galilee, was also rebuilt and renamed Julias in honor of Augustus Caesar's daughter. Philip died a natural death (unusual for Herod's family) in AD 34 after ruling for thirty-seven years. Josephus describes his reign in this fashion:

He had shown himself a person of moderation and quietness in the conduct of his life and government: he constantly lived in that country which was subject to him; he used to make his progress with a few chosen friends; his tribunal also, in which he sat in judgment, followed him in his progress; and when any one met him who wanted his assistance, he made no delay, but had his tribunal set down immediately,



wheresoever he happened to be, and sat down upon it, and heard his complaint: he there ordered the guilty that were convicted to be punished, and absolved those that had been accused unjustly. (*Ant.* 18.4.6 [Whiston])

### *Antipas (4 BC–AD 39)*

Herod Antipas received the territories of Galilee and Perea and hence was ruler of two areas where Jesus ministered extensively. He was a vain, arrogant ruler who was also weak in times of moral crisis. He was married to the daughter of Aretas, the Nabatean king, but fell in love with HERODIAS, his niece, who was at that time the wife of his brother, Philip. He set plans in motion to marry her. Aretas was enraged, went to war with Antipas, and decisively defeated him. It was Herodias who engineered the death of John the Baptist because he denounced the marriage as illegal (Mark 6:17–29). John had been imprisoned at Machaerus in Perea, east of the Dead Sea (*Ant.* 18.5.2). The Jews attributed Herod's defeat in battle to God's judgment of Herod for having allowed John, whom they considered a prophet, to be executed.

It was this Herod to whom Jesus was sent by Pilate just before his crucifixion, while Herod was in Jerusalem for the Passover feast (Luke 23:6–12). Herod seems to have had some spiritual sensitivity (Matt. 14:9; Mark 6:20), but he was more interested in spectacular displays than in spiritual substance. The breach between Herod and Pilate, perhaps caused by Pilate's murder of some Galilean citizens (Luke 13:1), was, oddly, healed by their joint condemnation of Jesus (Luke 23:12).

Herodias proved to be Herod's undoing when she cajoled her husband into going to Rome and demanding of CALIGULA, the emperor, that he be made king rather than just ethnarch. For this he was banished to Spain, where he and Herodias died (*J.W.* 2.9.6; see also *Ant.* 18.7.2).

### *Herod Agrippa I and II (AD 37–66)*

HEROD AGRIPPA I was the son of Aristobulus and Bernice and hence the grandson of HEROD THE GREAT and Mariamne. He had lived in Rome and was well known to Tiberius Caesar, Tiberius's son Drusus, and Caligula. When Tiberius died in AD 37 and Caligula was made emperor, he bestowed the territories of Philip and Lysanias on Agrippa, after releasing him from prison. Agrippa was given the title of king (Acts 12:1). As we saw, Antipas and Herodias's jealousy drove them to Rome in AD 39 to seek the same title, but instead they were banished, so Galilee and Perea were also given to Agrippa (*Ant.* 18.7.2). In AD 41, after exceptional service to the new emperor CLAUDIUS, Agrippa was awarded Judea and Samaria, thus making his domain almost as large as that of his grandfather Herod the Great. Agrippa was very sensitive to Jewish feelings (*Ant.* 19.7.3), even to the point of executing James the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus's apostles, and putting Peter in prison (Acts 12:1–4). He died unexpectedly in AD 44, while attending a festival in Caesarea and accepting acclamation as a god (Acts 12:21–23; see *Ant.* 19.8.2).

In time, Agrippa's son, HEROD AGRIPPA II, was made nominal ruler of much of his father's old territory. It was not given to him immediately because he was not old enough to rule. He was more like his grandfather than his father and cared little for the feelings of the Jews (*Ant.* 20.7.11; 20.8.4). Paul appeared before Agrippa II while he was imprisoned in Caesarea (ca. AD 60), but Agrippa arrogantly dismissed the apostle's words (Acts 25:13–26:32). When the Jewish War broke out in AD 66, Agrippa sided with the Romans and after the destruction of Jerusalem retired to Rome, where he died in AD 100.

## The Jewish War and the Destruction of Jerusalem (AD 66–70)

During the AD 44–66 period a succession of bad procurators ruled over the territory of Judea and Samaria. This and other conditions would eventually lead to a disastrous revolt against Rome. These rulers were, in order, Fadus (44–46), Tiberius Julius Alexander (46–48), Ventidius Cumanus (48–52), Felix (52–60; see Acts 24:1–27), Festus (60–62; see Acts 25:1–22), Albinus (62–64), and GESSIUS FLORUS (64–66). Of these, the last two were exceedingly corrupt, greedy, and ruthless. The country by this time was in an uproar, heading toward the disaster that began in the spring of 66. There was enormous religious unrest, which the Romans never really understood because their **polytheistic syncretism** did not involve such unshakable convictions. The Jews, however, could not bend, convinced as they were that their law alone was from God and that rival religions amounted to blasphemy. In addition to the religious persecutions, there were

economic problems, unfair taxes, bands of robbers roaming the country, excessive interest charged on loans, political assassinations, brutal treatment of innocent citizens, and government corruption. It was, in short, a nation ready to explode. Also, the priesthood, which should have been leading the country spiritually, was as corrupt as everything else. The priests “used violence with the people, and were very ready to plunder those that were weaker than themselves. And from that time it principally came to pass that our city [Jerusalem] was greatly disordered, and that all things grew worse and worse among us” (*Ant.* 20.9.4 [Whiston]).

The spark that ignited the fire began in Caesarea, where a **synagogue** was desecrated by some Greeks in the month of Iyyar (April–May 66). A riot broke out that spread to Jerusalem, where it was brutally put down by Gessius Florus; more than thirty-six hundred people were slaughtered. For the Jews the break seemed complete, and the daily temple **sacrifice** in honor of the emperor was suspended, which meant the war had begun in earnest. Josephus offers this account:

And at this time it was that some of those that principally excited the people to go to war, made an assault upon a certain fortress called Masada. They took it by treachery, and slew the Romans that were there, and put others of their own party to keep it. At the same time Eleazar, the son of Ananias the high priest, a very bold youth, who was at that time governor of the temple, persuaded those that officiated in the divine service to receive no gift or sacrifice for any foreigner. And this was the true beginning of our war with the Romans: for they rejected the sacrifice of Caesar on this account: and when many of the high priests and principal men besought them not to omit the sacrifice, which it was customary of them to offer for their princes, they would not be prevailed upon. (*J.W.* 2.17.2 [Whiston])

synagogue

polytheistic  
syncretism

sacrifice

Aerial view  
of Masada



During the next three years the Romans systematically destroyed the country. The Jews occasionally met with some success against the battle-hardened Roman legions but in the end were no match for them, in large part because they were fighting among themselves. By the summer of 69 all that remained to the Jews were Jerusalem, the Herodium, MASADA, and Machaerus. A civil war in Rome and the suicide of NERO in 69 caused VESPASIAN, the Roman general, to back off his conquest of Jerusalem, and in July 69 he was proclaimed emperor when he departed for Rome. But in the spring of 70 he sent his son TITUS to finish the destruction of Jerusalem, and with four legions of soldiers Titus accomplished the task. It took about four months for them to break through the walls one by one and ultimately subdue the city. It was completely leveled with the exception of a few towers and walls to show how mighty the city had once been and how invincible the Romans were. The siege of the city was horrible, almost beyond description, and the slaughter of people when it fell was excruciatingly brutal. Thousands were tortured, crucified, or sold into slavery, and the city was left in absolute ruin.

To complete the story, more ruin was to follow. Masada fell in AD 73, thus ending the first Jewish revolt, and a second revolt occurred in AD 132–135, led by a messianic pretender named BAR KOKHBA, who promised a divine intervention that never came. The devastation of the city at that time was total, and a law was passed that forbade any Jew from ever setting foot in it again.

Jesus's dreadful prophecy (Luke 21:20–24) had come to pass. The Jews did not know the time of their visitation. Most of them had rejected God's offer of salvation. Because of the hardness of their hearts, only a frightful judgment remained, and they were forced to drink the cup to the bitter dregs.

The significance of the fall of Jerusalem for the Christians and the Jews at that time can hardly be overestimated. From the Jewish point of view, the break with the Christians was complete. Many Jewish Christians had fled Jerusalem because of Jesus's prophecy. Other Jews considered them traitors, and later rabbis even blamed the fall of the city on them. As for the Christians, they realized that they must now move away from Jerusalem; the center of Christianity would have to be elsewhere, in fact everywhere, just as Jesus had said to the woman in Samaria when he told her that God must be worshiped neither in Jerusalem nor in Samaria but in spirit and in truth (John 4:21–24). Paul also emphasized this in Athens when he noted that God does not dwell in temples made with human hands but is everywhere (Acts 17:24–28). The fall of Jerusalem also contributed to the Christians' developing a new theological vocabulary and worship styles designed to reach the gentiles, who now became their primary mission. Out of this arose the New Testament canon that took its place alongside the Old Testament, thus creating the Bible we use today.

The widespread refusal of Jews to accept Jesus as their promised Savior was tragic, but the apostle Paul surveys the situation with a note of hope. This rejection by the Jews

This relief of the Arch of Titus in Rome shows items taken in plunder from the temple in Jerusalem after it was destroyed by Titus in AD 70. Notice the silver trumpets, the table for shewbread, and the menorah.



was the reconciliation of the world. God has something yet in mind for Israel (Rom. 11:25–29). In the great mystery of God’s dealings with us, he has bound all over to disobedience so that he might have mercy on us all (Rom. 11:32).

## Jewish Religion in Jesus’s Day

The brief look we have just taken at the complex history of the Jews leading up to the New Testament era should prepare us for the colorful diversity of Jewish religious thought as it existed in Jesus’s day. There was no single, normative point of view but rather overlapping or even conflicting collections of ideas and practices that all together are called **Second Temple Judaism**. Josephus mentions four groups in particular that are important, but there were others, some of which are themselves quite diverse. Nonetheless, they did hold certain beliefs or at least attitudes in common that set them apart from other religious groups among the Romans and the Greeks.

### *The Unifying Factors in Judaism*

What must be emphasized at the outset is that **Judaism** was primarily a way of life rather than an accepted set of doctrines. It is not that theological ideas weren’t important, but rather no single interpretation was demanded with regard to them. Frequently a number of ideas about a given point were held within a group, but these views were not necessarily viewed as normative for members of other groups. Deviation on a matter of life or lifestyle, however, such as eating, washing, or ritual purity, would bring about instant ostracism from the group. A certain amount of doctrinal diversity could be accommodated but not much variation in style of life. This was one reason why the religious leaders saw

Jesus as a threat: he took what they regarded as liberties in such matters.

The single most important idea that unified the Jews related to God and their own sense of uniqueness in the history of the world. They had been chosen by the one and only God to fulfill a singular destiny. He had established an eternal covenant with them. The experience of the exile (587 BC) had, of course, shocked them, but in the end they understood it as a punishment for their sins, especially their sin of putting other gods before the Lord (2 Macc. 6:12–16). The exile had also forced them to see how small they really were when compared to the vast empires of the world, such as Babylon or Persia. They recovered from the initial shock with an even deeper sense of mystery—God chose them rather than any of the great nations of the world to be the bearers of truth. This called forth a profound sense of commitment to carry out their task. They had failed before, but nothing would shake them again. It was *God* who chose them, the *only* God. All the gods of the nations were idols and were to be despised. The Jews were unique because they worshiped the one true God of the universe, who had revealed himself especially to them in choosing them to be his people. They would never again allow the worship of idols, even if it cost them their lives.

Allied to this conviction regarding their historical uniqueness and their fierce monotheism was the idea that God had placed them in a particular place. God was the God of the whole universe and of all the nations, but he had placed the Jews in the land of Palestine, which was to be theirs forever. God had chosen Jerusalem to be the only place of true worship, and that city and the land of Israel must be protected and defended at all costs. What created a problem in Jesus’s day, of course, was that the entire territory was under Roman occupation. How could this be? When would God do something about

Second Temple  
Judaism

Judaism