SECOND EDITION

ENGAGING THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

An Introduction to the Bible

Andrew E. Arterbury, W. H. Bellinger Jr.,
and Derek S. Dodson

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Places to Begin

Why Read the Bible?

Why read the Bible? For some, this may seem like a very odd question. Practicing Jews and Christians regard the Bible as divine revelation, and so reading the Bible is a spiritual practice that fosters formation and provides guidance. Communities of faith read the Bible as part of their worship services, and the Bible usually provides the basis for sermons or homilies presented in these services. We suspect, however, that this textbook is being used primarily in an academic setting, which approaches the Bible with an additional set of questions and modes of inquiry. With good reason, many people believe we live in a post-Christian and postmodern world that is characterized by increasing secularization and pluralism. The Christian tradition and its Bible can no longer be assumed to have unquestioned authority in society. Even religiously affiliated colleges and universities are experiencing more diverse student populations that reflect society's pluralism. So why include the study of the Bible as part of an academic curriculum? Why study the Bible if you do not identify yourself as Jewish or Christian? And if you are Jewish or Christian, why study the Bible in an academic setting?

First, the Bible offers a window into the ancient world, both ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman civilizations. History and cultural studies are integral to a liberal arts education, and the Bible can contribute to these studies. The Bible is a historical source that reveals how successive empires of the ancient world—Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Seleucid, and Roman—influenced and shaped cultures and societies. The Bible also provides a unique

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cross-cultural study that illustrates ancient conceptions of war, social structures, religion, ritual, cosmology, and cultural dynamics (e.g., honor/shame). The Bible serves as a rich resource for a variety of academic interests.

Second, the Bible has significantly influenced Western civilization. The stories of the Bible have inspired centuries of literature, music, and art. Biblical precepts have guided ethics, legal theory, and political policies. European and American histories are intimately linked with the history of biblical interpretation. Now certainly the histories of Europe and America are histories of political, social, geographical, and economic factors as well, but often the events of these histories were interpreted and justified by an appeal to the Bible (e.g., divine right of kings, Protestant Reformation, divine destiny of American expansion, and slavery). To engage in a study and reading of the Bible is to encounter one of the most significant influences on Western culture.

Third, the Bible continues to be viewed as authoritative by a majority of the world's population. Despite our previous allusion to a post-Christian world, for many people the Bible still has an aura of solemnity, if not a sense of the sacred. Appeals to the Bible continue to be made in political and cultural debates, often from opposing perspectives. Popular news and information websites regularly assert what the Bible says about this or that issue. Books, movies, and television productions about the Bible consistently succeed in sales and viewer ratings. Why study the Bible? In part, to evaluate contemporary interpretations of the Bible that one may encounter in various ways: in church-related and religious literature, in sermons, in politics, through the media, and in informal conversations with family and friends.

Finally, the academic study of the Bible is not at odds with more devotional readings of the Bible that are practiced privately or communally. Giving attention to the Bible's historical and literary contexts contributes to the meaning of the text, though it certainly does not exhaust its meaning. For those who hold the Bible to be authoritative for their faith and practice, studying the Bible in an academic setting can illuminate and deepen their understanding of the Bible.

We intend for this textbook to give beginning students the tools and information to become better-informed readers of the Bible. We want the reader not only to know the contents of the Bible but also to gain a critical appreciation and respect for the historical distance between us as modern readers and the ancient contexts of the Bible. We want the reader to consider how these texts were heard or read by their ancient audiences by asking historical, literary, and theological questions of the texts. We hope this study of the Bible initiates a journey of both discovery and intellectual curiosity, and thus deepens engagement with the biblical text.

How Did We Get the Bible?

For centuries, perhaps even from its earliest origins, the Bible has circulated in multiple forms. Anyone who has attempted to purchase a Bible has likely been overwhelmed with choices. We can speak not only of diverse Bible translations but also of diverse forms of the Bible: Jewish Bibles, Roman Catholic Bibles, Protestant Bibles, and Eastern Orthodox Bibles (including the Greek Orthodox Bible and the Russian Orthodox Bible). Below, we will briefly narrate the history of the Bible in terms of **canon**, text, and translation in an effort to explain the factors that have led to this immense diversity.

Canons of the Bible

Building on the Latin term for "covenant" (*testamentum*), the Christian Bible divides between the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament (a Christian title) contains the same texts as the Jewish Bible. The New Testament consists of writings from the earliest history of Christianity. Yet how did the Old Testament canon and the New Testament canon come into existence?

Definitions. We begin with terminology. The term *scripture* refers to those writings that function authoritatively for the faith and practice of a religious group. The word does not necessarily refer to a formal, fixed number of texts. The term *canon* comes from the Greek word *kanōn*, which originally referred to a reed or rod used for measuring or keeping straight. Eventually, *canon* began denoting what is "normative" or "standard" in a metaphorical sense. For our purposes, *canon* refers to the normative list of authoritative texts that function as scripture, and it reflects a religious community's attempt to discern and single out the writings that function authoritatively for their faith tradition. Notice, however, that by definition a canon not only identifies the authoritative texts but also excludes other religious texts from serving in an authoritative capacity. The following examples illustrate these concepts.

Second Kings 22 recounts a story about the renovation of the temple in Jerusalem in the seventh century BCE. During the repairs, the high priest discovers a lost text referred to as "the book of the law" (22:8). When the book is read to the king, he recognizes its authority and initiates a campaign of religious reforms based on the commands of the book. Most scholars believe the discovered book was an early version of the book of Deuteronomy. For the king and the high priest, this book became scripture, functioning authoritatively for the faith and practice of the Jerusalem temple and the **kingdom of Judah**. At that point, however, "the book of the law" functioned as a solitary text. No canon had yet been assembled—no Bible as we know it. And even when Deuteronomy became part of a larger authoritative corpus known as

the Torah, the complete Jewish canon that we have today was still centuries away from being finalized.

The second example comes from the New Testament. The apostle Paul wrote letters to individual churches in the 50–60s CE. By the end of the first century, however, these letters began circulating as small collections of letters among many churches. These collections of letters became authoritative for matters of Christian faith and practice among those churches. As a result, early Christians deemed these Pauline letter collections to be scripture. For example, the writer of 2 Peter affords Paul's letters the same authority as the Jewish Scriptures early in the second century CE (2 Pet. 3:15–16). At a much later point, perhaps two centuries later, Christians began making official lists (or canons) of what became known as the New Testament as they dialogued among themselves regarding which books should be authoritative and which should not.

At this point, it is important to note the significance of collected writings in the process of canonization. Once a collection of writings began to function as scripture, the process toward a canon was well under way, because adding to or taking away from that collection involved a discernment of what constituted Scripture. As a matter of fact, the Jewish and Christian canons are actually a collection of collections.

Hebrew Bible and Old Testament. The Christian Old Testament is in essence identical to the **Hebrew Bible**, because Christianity began as a Jewish movement. The Jewish Scriptures were authoritative for the Christian movement from its very inception. Any discussion of the Old Testament canon is dependent on the development of the Hebrew canon.

The Hebrew Bible is arranged into three parts: the **Torah**, the **Prophets**, and the **Writings**. Accordingly, the Hebrew canon of Scripture is often referred to as the "Tanakh," which is an acronym based on the Hebrew titles for the three parts—*Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*. The order of these three parts also reflects the chronological development of the Hebrew canon. As a corpus, the Torah came into existence first, and by the end of the fifth century BCE its authority gained wide acceptance. (We will explain the Torah's compositional history in chapter 2.) The development of the Prophets is more vague, but by the second century BCE we see references to the Prophets as a collection along with the Torah: "the Torah and the Prophets." Most likely the emerging book of Psalms was first grouped with the Prophets. Eventually, though, the Psalms were clustered with the last category of the Hebrew canon to develop, the Writings. This final collection of sacred texts remained fluid in its content during the first centuries BCE and CE before being finalized in the second century CE.

The primary difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament is the arrangement of the books, in particular the arrangement

of the Prophets. Whereas all of the Prophets constitute the second division of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian canon separates the **Former Prophets** (Joshua–2 Kings) and the **Latter Prophets** (Isaiah–Malachi). It places the Latter Prophets at the conclusion of the Old Testament and groups the Former Prophets with other biblical books that resemble historical narratives, thereby creating a "Historical Books" category.

When talking about the Christian Old Testament, though, we need to distinguish between the Catholic Old Testament and the Protestant Old Testament. Even though the Catholic Old Testament shares the same arrangement as the Protestant Old Testament, it contains additional writings not found in the Protestant Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible. These differences derive from the **Septuagint**, the Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the first half of the third century BCE, probably in Alexandria, Egypt, Greek-speaking Jews began translating the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the **Pentateuch**, into Greek. By the end of the second century BCE, the Septuagint expanded to include the Prophets, most of the Writings, and some additional Jewish religious texts. It is important to remember that at this point in the development of the Hebrew canon there was no third part known as the Writings, and therefore no fixed distinction existed between the books that eventually composed the Writings and these "additional texts." These "additional texts" are included in the Catholic Old Testament but not in the Hebrew Bible (which took its final form in the second century CE). We should also note that the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox canons also include the additional writings found in the Catholic Old Testament as well as a few extra texts (1 Esdras, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, and 3 Maccabees; plus 2 Esdras in the Russian canon). All of these extra texts also originated from the Septuagint.

The Septuagint served as the primary form of Scriptures for many Jewish communities both inside and outside **Palestine** in the first centuries BCE and CE. The Septuagint—with its "additional" writings—also became the most common version of the Jewish Scriptures used by early Christians. The Catholic Old Testament simply follows early Christian traditions in having the Septuagint as its Old Testament canon, both in its arrangement and its content. The Protestant Reformers (sixteenth century CE), however, decided that the Old Testament should correspond to the content of the Hebrew Bible, which in its final form excluded the additional Septuagint writings. So the Protestant tradition separated the additional writings from the traditional Christian Old Testament, put them in an appendix, and called them the **Apocrypha**. The Catholic tradition refers to these writings as deuterocanonical ("second canon"), indicating their continued authoritative status. Thus, the Christian Old Testament—both Catholic and Protestant versions—followed

CANONS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE AND OLD TESTAMENT

The Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)	Protestant Old Testament	Catholic Old Testament
Law (*Torah*)	**Pentateuch**	**Pentateuch**
Genesis	Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers	Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
Prophets (*Nevi'im*)	**Historical Books**	**Historical Books**
Former Prophets	Joshua	Joshua
Joshua	Judges	Judges
Judges	Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Samuel	1–2 Samuel	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings
Latter Prophets	1–2 Chronicles	1–2 Chronicles
Isaiah	Ezra	Ezra
Jeremiah	Nehemiah	Nehemiah
Ezekiel	Esther	*Tobit*
The Twelve	**Poetry & Wisdom Books**	*Judith*
Hosea	Job	Esther (*with additions*)
Joel	Psalms	*1–2 Maccabees*
Amos	Proverbs	**Poetry & Wisdom Books**
Obadiah	Ecclesiastes	Job
Jonah	Song of Songs	Psalms
Micah	**Prophetic Books**	Proverbs
Nahum	Isaiah	Ecclesiastes
Habakkuk	Jeremiah	Song of Songs
Zephaniah	Lamentations	*Wisdom of Solomon*
Haggai	Ezekiel	*Ecclesiasticus*
Zechariah	Daniel	**Prophetic Books**
Malachi	Hosea	Isaiah
Writings (*Ketuvim*)	Joel	Jeremiah
Psalms	Amos	Lamentations
Proverbs	Obadiah	*Baruch*
Job	Jonah	Ezekiel
Song of Songs	Micah	Daniel (*with three additions: the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon*)
Ruth	Nahum	Hosea
Lamentations	Habakkuk	Joel
Ecclesiastes	Zephaniah	Amos
Esther	Haggai	Obadiah
Daniel	Zechariah	Jonah
Ezra	Malachi	Micah
Nehemiah		Nahum
1–2 Chronicles		Habakkuk
		Zephaniah
		Haggai
		Zechariah
		Malachi

Note: The Hebrew Bible and Protestant Old Testament are identical in content but differ in arrangement.
Italics indicate additional writings included in the Catholic Old Testament.

the arrangement of biblical books found in the Septuagint; but whereas the Catholic Old Testament included the additional writings found in the Septuagint, the Protestant Old Testament excluded these writings, instead opting to match the content of the Hebrew Bible.

New Testament canon. Most of the writings of the New Testament originated in the first century CE, and a few originated in the early second century, but the canon of the New Testament may not have been finalized until the fifth or sixth century. Instead, small clusters or collections of New Testament texts provided the developmental bridge from individual scriptural writings to an official New Testament canon. In other words, in different times and places Christians began assembling their writings into collections. Paul's letters came first. As noted earlier, by the beginning of the second century Paul's letters were being circulated and used in a collected form as Scripture. Our earliest evidence of this collection was a ten-letter collection that included 1–2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, 1–2 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Eventually in the second century, the Pauline collection grew to a thirteen- or fourteen-letter collection to include 1–2 Timothy and Titus, along with Hebrews for those who thought Paul wrote Hebrews.

Next, the four-**Gospel** collection provided another building block for what eventually became the New Testament canon. The four-Gospel collection included Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This collection came into existence no later than the latter half of the second century and quickly gained wide acceptance as authoritative.

The third collection became known as the "Catholic Letters." It included James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude. The term *catholic* is a transliteration of the Greek word *katholikos*, which simply means "universal" or "general." The earliest reference to the catholic collection comes from a Christian writer named Eusebius in the early fourth century CE. Only 1 Peter and James were known widely before the formation of this collection.

The earliest canon lists most likely emerged in the third century CE. These canon lists derive from different regions and represent various attempts to identify which Christian writings were authoritative. Though the differences are certainly of interest, the consistencies are especially telling. The four-Gospel collection and the Pauline Letters (with or without Hebrews) consistently formed a kind of core canon. Acts, 1 Peter, and 1 John frequently appeared on canon lists as well. Revelation was favored in Western Christianity but was more controversial in the East. More variety of opinion existed with James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Epistle of Barnabas, Apocalypse of Peter, and Shepherd of Hermas. The latter three writings were eventually excluded from the increasingly stable New Testament canon. Jude, 2 Peter, and 2–3 John

were likely adopted in part because of their inclusion in a collection with 1 John and 1 Peter.

Early Christians relied on various criteria while attempting to discern the parameters of the New Testament canon. They highly valued texts with apostolic connections—meaning either written by an **apostle** (one closely associated with Jesus), written in the time of the apostles, or simply in agreement with apostolic teaching. Early Christians also placed great value on writings that were universally relevant and adaptable to all Christian churches in all places and in all times. Finally, writings that had early and widespread

SAMPLING OF NT CANON LISTS

Muratorian Canon (3rd/4th c.)	Claromontanus Catalog (4th c.)	Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (367)[a]
[Matthew][b]	**Four Gospels**	**Four Gospels**
[Mark]	Matthew	Matthew
Luke	John	Mark
John	Mark	Luke
Acts of the Apostles	Luke	John
Pauline Letters	**Pauline Letters**	Acts of the Apostles
1–2 Corinthians	Romans	**Catholic Letters**
Ephesians	1–2 Corinthians	James
Philippians	Galatians	1–2 Peter
Colossians	Ephesians	1–3 John
Galatians	(Philippians and 1–2 Thessalonians	Jude
1–2 Thessalonians	were accidentally omitted, and	**Pauline Letters**
Romans	probably Hebrews as well)	Romans
Philemon	1–2 Timothy	1–2 Corinthians
Titus	Titus	Galatians
1–2 Timothy	Colossians	Ephesians
Jude	Philemon	Philippians
1–2 John	1–2 Peter	Colossians
Wisdom of Solomon	James	1–2 Thessalonians
Revelation	1–3 John	Hebrews
Apocalypse of Peter	Jude	1–2 Timothy
	Epistle of Barnabas	Titus
	Revelation	Philemon
	Acts of the Apostles	Revelation
	Shepherd of Hermas	
	Acts of Paul	
	Apocalypse of Peter	

Note: Writings in italics were eventually excluded from the New Testament canon.

[a] The canon of Athanasius is the earliest known canon list that corresponds to the New Testament canon as we have it today, though the arrangement is different.

[b] The brackets indicate the manuscript is fragmented, but the missing section most certainly included Matthew and Mark.

use and had consistently proved to be beneficial either in communal worship settings or in matters of faith and practice were perceived to have an intrinsic authority. Not all the writings of the New Testament have all these qualities, but in general Christians affirmed the authority of the New Testament because of its **apostolicity**, universality, and traditional use.

Textual Traditions of the Bible

Modern Bibles are based on the study and comparison of thousands of ancient **manuscripts**. The original texts of the Bible—referred to as "**autographs**"—have long since disappeared. The manuscripts that are in existence are copies of copies of copies exponentially. Prior to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, scribes copied and produced these manuscripts by hand (the term *manuscript* literally means handwritten). Given the human element of this process, it should come as no surprise that these manuscripts differ from one another; in fact, no two manuscripts agree exactly. The majority of the variations involve minor differences in spelling or grammar, but some discrepancies represent significant differences. So the situation needs repeating: there are no original manuscripts; instead we have thousands of copies of copies that differ from one another.

Textual criticism. When scholars study the manuscript traditions of the Bible, they engage in a discipline called *textual criticism*. The traditional purpose of textual criticism is to reconstruct the earliest form of the text—ideally the original form—by analyzing and comparing diverse manuscripts. The methods of this textual analysis can be quite technical and detailed. A basic overview of textual criticism follows.

Discrepancies among manuscripts are called *variant readings*. Differences among copies of the same literary work came about because of both unintentional errors on the part of scribes while copying (e.g., accidental omissions or repetitions) and intentional changes created by scribes (e.g., harmonizing divergent elements or clarifying ambiguous aspects).

When faced with variant readings among manuscripts of a given book of the Bible, scholars consider both external evidence and internal evidence to discern which of the variant readings best represents the earliest form of the text. External evidence pertains to the historical traits of the manuscripts themselves. For example, what is the date of the manuscript? Earlier manuscripts are usually given preference. Does the manuscript exhibit a particular text type? Manuscripts that share common textual and scribal characteristics are identified as text types. Text types, in turn, can be dated and analyzed for distinguishing textual and theological characteristics. Can any scribal

tendencies be identified within the manuscript? Sometimes variant readings resulted from a scribe's idiosyncrasies or theological preferences.

In terms of internal evidence, scholars have developed some general principles or guidelines to assist them in discerning the earliest reading. First, scholars tend to identify the shortest reading as the earliest version of the text, because scribes had a tendency to conflate the different readings into one harmonized passage, which usually results in a longer reading. Second, the more difficult reading is most likely the earliest version, because scribes frequently smoothed out problematic readings—both grammatical and theological difficulties. Finally, the reading that best explains how the other variant readings originated is to be preferred. This principle is like "checking your work" in mathematics. After identifying the earliest form of the text, scholars must explain how the other variations of the text entered the manuscript tradition. If an explanation is lacking, then perhaps the decision should be reconsidered.

Knowledge of these scribal practices allows scholars to resolve most variant readings and to establish the earliest form of the text with a high degree of certainty. Based on the manuscript evidence available today, we affirm that modern translations represent a close approximation to the earliest forms of the biblical text, especially now that most modern translations provide notes when significant variant readings are present. These notes represent transparency in the work of text-critical scholars and translators, and they provide readers with more information about the textual traditions of the Bible (see the text box "Notations about Variant Readings" on p. 11).

Old Testament textual criticism. The practices of textual criticism for the Old Testament and for the New Testament differ in their basic approach. Textual criticism for the Old Testament begins with a "base text" to which all other manuscripts are compared. This base text is called the **Masoretic Text** (MT). The Masoretic Text is named for generations of scribes—known as Masoretes—who worked between 500 and 1000 CE to standardize and preserve the Hebrew text. The text type of the Masoretic Text, however, can be traced back to the third century BCE. The primary representatives of the Masoretic Text are the manuscripts **Codex** Leningradensis (1008 CE) and the Aleppo Codex (930 CE). These manuscripts were the oldest Hebrew manuscripts available until the discovery of the **Dead Sea Scrolls** in the mid-twentieth century. The Dead Sea Scrolls include Hebrew biblical manuscripts dating from the mid-third century BCE to the first century CE, which now represent the oldest known Hebrew manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. These Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts represent a variety of text types: some reflect a precursor of the Masoretic Text; some reflect similarities to the **Samaritan** (Hebrew) Pentateuch; and some reflect a text type found in the Greek translations (Septuagint). So the Masoretic Text serves as a base text

NOTATIONS ABOUT VARIANT READINGS

Modern translations of the Bible provide notes on significant textual variants. To become an informed reader of the Bible, it is necessary to know how to read these notes. The following examples come from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Old Testament Example: Genesis 36:2

Esau took his wives from the Canaanites: Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah daughter of Anah son[d] of Zibeon the Hivite.

[d] Sam Gk Syr: Heb *daughter*

The superscript *d* after the word *son* points to a corresponding note. The note indicates that the word *son* is found in three manuscript traditions: Sam (= Samaritan Pentateuch [Hebrew]), Gk (= ancient Greek translation of the OT, Septuagint), and Syr (= ancient Syriac translation of the OT, Peshitta). Heb (= Hebrew, the Masoretic Text), however, reads "daughter." (The abbreviations for these notes are found in the front of Bibles under "Abbreviations.") So the translators of the NRSV simply indicate that at Genesis 36:2 they chose to print the word *son*, which is found in other manuscript traditions, rather than the Hebrew (MT) manuscript tradition of *daughter*. The reading "daughter" most likely came about by a scribe's unintentional error of repetition: accidentally repeating the term *daughter* from the series of previous daughters ("Adah *daughter* of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah *daughter* of Anah . . .").

New Testament Example: Ephesians 3:14–15

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,[a] from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

[a] Other ancient authorities add *of our Lord Jesus Christ*

The superscript *a* after the word *Father* points to a corresponding note. The note indicates that some ancient Greek manuscripts ("authorities") add the phrase "of our Lord Jesus Christ" after the word *Father* whereas others do not. Based on text-critical methods, the translators of the NRSV decided that the shorter reading best represents the earliest or original text of Ephesians. The longer reading probably originated from a scribe's attempt to harmonize 3:14 with 1:3 and other places (1:2, 17; 5:20), where God "the Father" is usually connected with "Lord Jesus Christ."

with which scholars compare other Hebrew manuscripts and ancient transla-
tions. The other Hebrew manuscripts include primarily the texts of the Dead
Sea Scrolls and the Samaritan Pentateuch. The ancient translations include
the ancient Greek translations (Septuagint), the ancient Syriac translation
(Peshitta), and the ancient Latin translation (Vulgate). Where there is a vari-
ance between the Masoretic Text and any of these other manuscript traditions,
scholars weigh external and internal evidence to decide which reading best
represents the earliest form of the text. All this information—the Masoretic
Text with comparisons—is made available for scholars and translators in a
printed critical edition called the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

New Testament textual criticism. The textual tradition of the New Tes-
tament consists of more than five thousand Greek manuscripts in addition to
quotations from early Christian writers and ancient translations of the New
Testament (Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Armenian, and Georgian). Traditionally,
in order to make this quantity of manuscripts more manageable, scholars
grouped New Testament manuscripts according to text types. The idea was
that when a variant reading appears in more than one text type, there is a
higher probability that it represents the earliest reading. More recently, tex-
tual scholars have used computer-generated models that take into account
all the manuscript evidence (eliminating the need for identifying text types),
resulting in a more detailed representation of the relationship and history of
the New Testament texts and their variant readings.

New Testament textual critics rely most heavily on two kinds of Greek
manuscripts. First, there are the fourth- and fifth-century codices (plural of
codex, which is an ancient book form). These important manuscripts are
the earliest mostly complete copies of the New Testament and include the
following:

- Codex Sinaiticus (fourth c.)—all of the New Testament; also contains
  the Greek OT
- Codex Vaticanus (fourth c.)—most of the New Testament, missing
  the latter half of Hebrews and the books of 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Phi-
  lemon, and Revelation; also contains the Greek OT
- Codex Bezae (fifth c.)—most of the Gospels and Acts with a small
  Latin fragment of 3 John
- Codex Alexandrinus (fifth c.)—all of the New Testament, missing
  most of Matthew as well as portions of John and 2 Corinthians; also
  contains the Greek OT

Second, the **papyri** are the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament and
date back to the second and third centuries. Only coming to light in the last

hundred years, they reveal a notable fluidity of the New Testament text in the earliest centuries. These manuscripts, written on paper-like material made from papyrus plants, are very important witnesses to the earliest forms of the New Testament, but they are now fragmentary and incomplete because of natural decomposition. For an extreme example, Papyrus 101 (third century CE) is a scrap containing only Matthew 3:10–12 on one side and 3:16–4:3 on the reverse side. Similarly, the oldest manuscript of the New Testament is Papyrus 52 (mid-second century CE), but it measures only two and a half by three and a half inches and preserves portions of John 18:31–33, 37–38. The most significant papyri include the following ($\mathfrak{P}$ = papyrus):

- $\mathfrak{P}$45 (third c.)—Gospels and Acts; only two fragmentary pages for each of Matthew and John survive; only six pages of Mark, seven of Luke, and thirteen of Acts
- $\mathfrak{P}$46 (ca. 200)—Pauline Letters and Hebrews, though 1–2 Timothy and Titus were never included; portions of Romans and 1 Thessalonians are missing, and all of 2 Thessalonians is missing
- $\mathfrak{P}$47 (third c.)—Revelation; only 9:10–17:2 survives
- $\mathfrak{P}$66 (ca. 200)—Gospel of John; portions are missing; chapters 14–21 are quite fragmentary
- $\mathfrak{P}$72 (third c.)—Jude and 1–2 Peter (along with other, noncanonical texts)
- $\mathfrak{P}$75 (early third c.)—Luke and John; portions are missing from both Gospels, including the last seven chapters of John

New Testament textual criticism does not use a base text like Old Testament textual criticism but collates and compares all the manuscripts. Where variant readings occur in this comparison, each variant is considered individually based on both external and
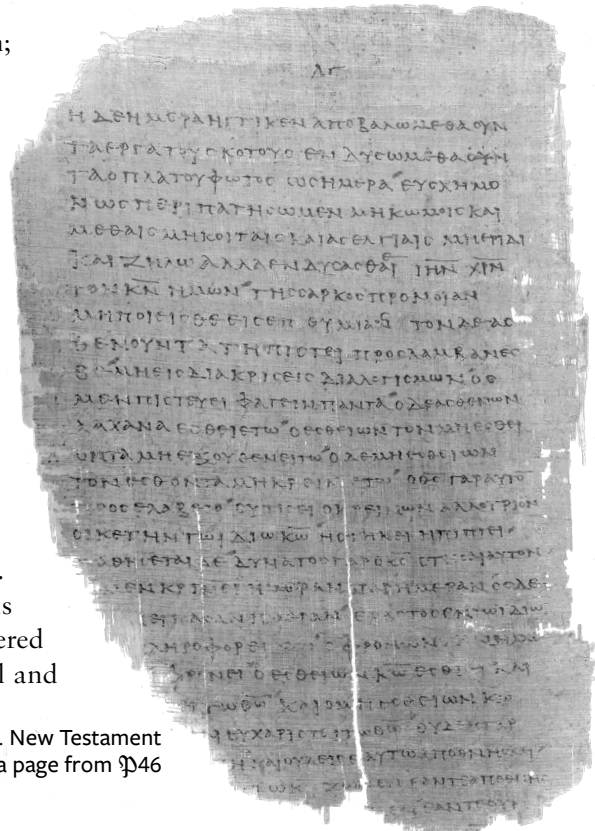

Figure 1.1. **New Testament papyrus,** a page from $\mathfrak{P}$46

internal evidence. The result of this "eclectic" approach is a reconstructed text that is not actually represented by any single extant manuscript. This reconstructed text with the manuscript evidence is made available for scholars and translators in the printed critical edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th revised edition, and the United Bible Society's *The Greek New Testament*, 5th edition.

Translations of the Bible

The original language of the Old Testament was Hebrew (with some portions in Aramaic), and the original language of the New Testament was Greek. We have already mentioned several ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament and the New Testament. In the late fourth century, the Christian theologian Jerome began translating the Old Testament and New Testament into Latin. The resulting translation became known as the Latin **Vulgate**, which served as the Bible for Western Christianity for nearly a thousand years. The term *vulgate* means "common," and so the title Latin Vulgate refers to the common version of the Latin Bible that came to be used in the Western church. At the Council of Trent (1545–63), the Roman Catholic Church designated the Latin Vulgate as its official canon of the Bible.

With the invention of the printing press (fifteenth century) and the Protestant Reformation (sixteenth century), the history of Bible translations changed significantly and flourished. The Protestant Reformers believed the Bible should be in the language of the people. Thus **Martin Luther** translated the Bible into German, publishing the New Testament in 1522 and the entire Bible in 1534. Because of the printing press, Luther's German Bible was widely disseminated and became greatly influential in German literature and theology.

In the same way, the English Bible originated out of a spirit of reform and benefited from the printing press. **John Wycliffe**, with the help of some associates, translated the Latin Vulgate into English and produced the first English translation of the Bible in manuscript form (1384). Using a printing press, **William Tyndale** produced the first *printed* English Bible, known as the Tyndale Bible, when he published the New Testament in 1526 and the Pentateuch in 1530. Tyndale never finished his translation of the Bible, because he was burned at the stake for his translating activities. Notably, Tyndale translated from Greek and Hebrew rather than Latin, and his New Testament translation became the basis for a number of subsequent English Bibles. The King James Bible, however, became the most enduring and influential of all English translations. It was also known as the **Authorized Version**. Produced by a committee of translators from Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster, the **King James**

Version was translated from Hebrew and Greek and first appeared in 1611. It exerted tremendous influence on both British and American cultures, shaping language, literature, and Protestant theology. Yet after almost three centuries, the King James Version was in need of revision. The discovery of earlier and better Greek manuscripts meant that the New Testament of the King James Version was based on what are now known to be inferior manuscripts. Moreover, advances in Hebrew philology clarified meanings in the Hebrew text about which the King James translators were forced to guess. And finally, the Shakespeare-like English of the King James Version was becoming archaic. Multiple revisions appeared both in England and America. The New Revised Standard Version (1989) and the English Standard Version (2001) are two recent translations that trace their revision history back to the King James Version. Unlike the singular prominence that their predecessor once held, however, the New Revised Standard Version and the English Standard Version are simply two translations among a multiplicity of modern translations.

The most reliable modern translations of the Bible are produced by translation committees, which provide proper vetting of the translations and guard against an independent translator's idiosyncrasies. At the beginning of the translation process, translation committees decide which translation principle will guide their work: **formal correspondence** or **dynamic equivalence**. Formal correspondence takes a more literal approach to translation—a "word for word" translation. This approach to translation seeks to stay as close as possible to the *form* of the original language both in its grammar and word order. So if the source language contains a noun, it will be translated as a noun in the target language; a prepositional phrase, as a prepositional phrase; an infinitive, as an infinitive; and so on. Also, biblical idioms are usually translated literally. On the other hand, dynamic equivalence focuses on the *function* of the original language and attempts to "re-create" that reading experience in the target language. Usually described as a "meaning for meaning" translation, dynamic equivalence is concerned with faithfully expressing the message of the original language in the words and structure of the target language. Instead of alternative options, these translation principles often serve as poles of a spectrum. So, for example, the committee that translated the New Revised Standard Version adopted the maxim "As literal as possible, as free as necessary," which intends to be primarily a formal correspondence translation but with some openness in making the translation understandable in modern English.

Modern translations are not produced in a vacuum with only these principles at work. Translations are often guided by other considerations as well, like theology, literacy, and the evolution of the English language. Protestant evangelicals published the very popular New International Version (NIV)

in the 1970s as an alternative to the Revised Standard Version (1952), which was perceived as theologically liberal. Translation committees also take into account the reading level of the general public, which can considerably affect a translation's final form. In the case of the United States, the general public on average reads at a fifth- to seventh-grade level. Finally, gender-inclusive

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FORMAL CORRESPONDENCE AND DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

The following examples of translations begin with formal correspondence and move along a spectrum toward dynamic equivalence. The first example is called an interlinear translation, in which English words are given underneath the Greek words. The progression from formal correspondence to dynamic equivalence can be seen in the more stilted "And Jesus said unto them" (KJV) to simply "Jesus answered" (NIV) or "Jesus replied" (NLT). Also, notice how the idiom "children of the bridechamber" (KJV) is rendered more comprehensively with "guests of the bridegroom" (NIV) or "wedding guests" (NRSV, NLT). And finally, notice the inclusion of the terms "celebrating" (NLT) and "wedding party" (GNT), which are attempts to convey the meaning or sense of the text even if the literal, corresponding words are absent. *Mark 2:19a*

καὶ	εἶπεν	αὐτοῖς	ὁ	Ἰησοῦς·	μὴ	δύνανται	οἱ	υἱοὶ	τοῦ
and	said	to-them	the	Jesus	not	are-able	the	sons	of-the

νυμφῶνος	ἐν	ᾧ	ὁ	νυμφίος	μετ'	αὐτῶν	ἐστιν	νηστεύειν
bridechamber	in	which	the	groom	with	them	is	to-fast?

King James Version (KJV)—"And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?"

New American Standard Bible (NASB)—"And Jesus said to them, 'While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they?'"

New Revised Standard Bible (NRSV)—"Jesus said to them, 'The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they?'"

New International Version (NIV)—"Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?'"

New Living Translation (NLT)—"Jesus replied, 'Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not.'"

Good News Translation (GNT)—"Jesus answered, 'Do you expect the guests at a wedding party to go without food? Or course not!'"

language has also become an issue for Bible translations. Though some criticize the use of inclusive language as succumbing to political correctness, others advocate that gender-inclusive language provides a more accurate translation while also recognizing the evolution of the English language. For example, based on substantial research on the current state of the English language, translators of the 2011 updated edition of the New International Version (NIV) decided to use gender-inclusive language. Translators of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) employed gender-inclusive language, but they also sought to preserve the historical, patriarchal situation often embedded in the texts. The NRSV translators often found these dual goals in tension with one another. Ultimately, all translations are an act of interpretation. Therefore, a good method of Bible study includes a comparison of several modern translations.

How Shall We Read the Bible?

The Bible is likely the most read of all sacred books. One of the important tasks for students is to think about how to become better, more informed readers of this text; only then will readers perceive its greatest impact. What are the tools that can help students delve even more deeply into the Bible? One approach to this task begins by acknowledging gratefully that faithful readers have interpreted the Bible for centuries. That history of interpretation is a remarkable gift, and we can learn much from it. The earliest interpreters of the Bible were those scribes who shaped the canon of Scripture. Job 7 and Hebrews 2, for example, both allude to Psalm 8 and read the psalm from a particular perspective as part of their proclamation. The writers of the New Testament often interpret the Old Testament from the perspective of their Christian faith. Matthew and Mark, for example, use Psalm 22 as a text to narrate the suffering of Jesus in the crucifixion with the question "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The tradition of interpreting the Scriptures has continued throughout the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Early Christian Interpretation

In the early history of the Christian church and in the medieval era, those who wrote about the Bible spent a great deal of time working on the language of the Bible and finding ways to communicate the message of the Bible to their communities. Some of these interpreters understood the text to have hidden meanings and thus great symbolic value for readers. That approach we label

allegory. For example, the character of Aslan functions as an allegory for Jesus Christ in C. S. Lewis's book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and in the larger series the Chronicles of Narnia. Another example that is more historical is that of Jonah and the great fish. Many medieval interpreters read this narrative as an allegory of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection. Others took a more literal approach to the biblical text, and that approach, focusing on the more plain sense of the text, continues to influence readers today.

Post-Reformation Interpretation

With the coming of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, readers of the Bible in the Western world began to pay special attention to the cultures of the ancient world. With the rise of the Enlightenment, interpreters began to apply methods of historical analysis to the Bible, as they had to other texts. These interpreters saw history and culture as the key elements of interpretation, and so the emphasis was on how the Bible originated. Two questions were at the heart of the interpretive task: What *did* the Bible mean, and what *does* the Bible mean? This process of interpretation has come to be known as **hermeneutics** (the art of interpretation), and these questions suggest a hermeneutic focusing on historical matters related to the origin of the text. So interpreters began with the issue of the historical meaning of the text and, based on that, asked about the significance of the text for contemporary readers. Scholars have developed a number of tools or methods of interpretation to seek this historical meaning. A number of these methods use the term *criticism* in their title. For many readers that term carries a negative connotation, but in the context of biblical scholarship, the term is borrowed from the wider world of literary studies and means the serious, analytical study of a text.

New Trends in Interpretation

In recent decades, many interpreters have suggested that scholars have given too much attention to questions of the origin of the text and should balance those concerns with attention to literary qualities in the text itself. Reading the text closely with attention to matters of plot and portrayal of characters or with careful attention to the poetic imagery or the repetition of terms or synonyms can be helpful in crafting an account of a biblical text. These interpretations focus on how the text itself communicates via language. Other recent interpreters have focused on how ancient and contemporary readers might receive the biblical text. How would readers in the Greco-Roman world respond to literary patterns in the Gospels or to particular topics in

the Pauline Epistles? What do contemporary readers bring with them when they read the book of Job and its dialogue between approaches to wisdom? How does the scientific mindset of today's readers influence the reading of ancient texts from a very different culture?

In summary, when we consider the question of how to read the Bible, many approaches have been used in the past, and we can learn from them. We might think of this history of hermeneutics in terms of the readings prior to the Enlightenment (premodern) and then readings focusing on history (modern) and then recent interpretations that begin with the text and pay attention to readers ancient and contemporary (postmodern). Today's biblical scholarship grew out of the concerns of modernity, and thus a great deal of scholarship focuses on the history and origins of texts. Recent attention to a literary and theological approach has provided some helpful ways forward.

The task of this volume is to help you journey toward becoming more informed readers of the Bible or practitioners of hermeneutics (the art of interpretation). The question is how careful and imaginative we will be in this practice. One way to proceed is to think of the questions we might ask when seeking to understand the Bible faithfully. Three categories come to the fore.

1. Questions of origin. The Bible originated in the **ancient Near East** and the ancient Mediterranean world. If we are to grasp the full sense of these texts, it will be enormously helpful to explore the cultural codes of the world in which the text originated (the world behind the text). **Archaeology** is one of the essential tools to help interpreters. It reveals the material culture and life of those whose experience the text portrays. Geography also comes into play. It had an impact on ancient Israel's move from groups with no central authority, such as the ones we see in the period of the **judges**, toward central monarchy in Jerusalem, and it also had an impact on the life of the early church. Awareness of cultural customs can be helpful to us as readers of these ancient texts. For example, Genesis 15 narrates Abram and **YHWH** (the divine name, often represented in Bible translations as "Lord"; see the text box "The Divine Name" on p. 52) taking part in a **covenant** ceremony with animals cut in two and "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch." What can historical studies tell us about the significance of such a ceremony? A central act in Ruth 4 is the giving of a sandal. Why is that important to the story? Ancient hospitality is in the background of Acts 10. How can that custom inform our interpretation? In addition to questions about cultural codes, exploration of how biblical texts came to be is also important—questions of authorship and sources and redaction. Careful readers of the **book of Isaiah** will notice that beginning with chapter 40, the text relates to a different era

CRITICAL TOOLS

Source Criticism. The analysis of a biblical text to determine what sources (usually written) were used in its composition. Identifying a text's sources (along with their possible "authors" and dates) allows interpreters to reconstruct the text's compilation history and/or analyze the intent of the biblical author(s). For examples of source criticism, see "The Composition of the Pentateuch" on p. 45 and "The Literary Tradition of the Gospels" on p. 162.

Form Criticism. The analysis and classification of literary types according to their form—such as hymns, laments, sagas, parables, and miracle stories. These literary types are studied for their rhetorical functions within a text. Older form-critical approaches attempted to reconstruct the history of a literary form within various settings of Israel's institutions or the various activities of early Christianity. See "Form Criticism and the Psalms" on p. 114 for an example of this approach.

Tradition History. The study of the development and reconfiguration of key events, institutions, and ideas in the Old and New Testaments. For example, How has the tradition of the **exodus event** been reappropriated in Isaiah 40–55? or, How did the hope of a Davidic king develop in **postexilic** Judaism, and do the Gospels reflect this tradition or not?

Redaction Criticism. The analysis of how a text's sources have been adapted and edited, so that an author's literary and theological emphases can be detected. For example, a study of how the author of the Gospel of Luke edited his source (the Gospel of Mark) reveals an emphasis on prayer in Luke's portrayal of Jesus (cf. Luke 3:21 // Mark 1:9–10 and Luke 9:28–29 // Mark 9:2–3).

Narrative Criticism. An analysis that pays close attention to the way narrative features such as character and characterization, narration, plot development, point of view, and literary techniques (e.g., irony and hyperbole) shape meaning in the text.

in ancient Israel's history. How does that affect our reading? There are four Gospels in the New Testament. Careful readers will notice that each Gospel portrays the story of Jesus from its particular perspective. How can asking questions of the origin of the Gospels help us in understanding the distinctive characteristics of each Gospel?

2. Questions of literature. Faithful readers of texts pay attention to literary forms. Genesis 1, for example, has a distinctive literary structure (seven days of creation) that is important in the message it communicates. The hymns of praise in the book of Psalms take a typical form; awareness of the form will enliven the reading of those texts. The epistles in the New Testament interact

Rhetorical Criticism. An analysis of how a text persuades or affects its readers. Attention is given to rhetorical features such as structural patterns, repetition, wordplays, forms of argumentation, and type scenes.

Canonical Criticism. A variety of approaches that emphasize the final form of a biblical book and how that book has been received and interpreted as authoritative (or "canonical") by the believing community (Jewish or Christian). A text's historical process of canonization and its location in the canon are also contexts for interpretation. For Christian interpreters, a canonical approach may also include how the Old and New Testaments are read as a unified text.

Reader-Response Criticism. An approach that emphasizes the construction of meaning by the reader as opposed to the text itself or its historical circumstances. Attention is given to a reader's social location, gender, and ideology. For example, a peasant farmer in Colombia will read the parables of Jesus differently than a corporate accountant in the United States.

Feminist Criticism. An approach to the text that emphasizes the perspectives and experiences of women. Feminist readings detect forms of patriarchy in the text and in the history of interpretation, but they also highlight positive portrayals of the feminine in the text that have often been ignored or even deliberately suppressed in the history of interpretation.

Postcolonial Criticism. An approach that pays attention to issues of imperial power and domination both in the text and in the history of interpretation. The texts of the Old and New Testaments were compiled or produced in times and circumstances of imperial domination (Babylonian, Persian, Greek, or Roman). Postcolonial criticism looks at how these texts reflect the various ways a people negotiate the reality of their oppression and their religious identity, and even appropriate and mimic images and language of imperial power for their own message and theology. It also investigates how contemporary postcolonial populations interpret these texts differently from their colonial masters who used these texts to promote their domination.

with the standard form of ancient letters in crafting their message. Much of the primary history in the Old Testament and the Gospels in the New Testament take the form of narratives. Accounting for the plot of these stories and the portrayal of characters in the stories will provide much raw material for us as we seek to understand the significance of the stories. A large portion of the Old Testament is poetic in form, especially the Psalms, the **Wisdom literature**, and the Prophets. How does that poetry communicate its message? The use of repetition and of poetic imagery is important in these texts. Some interpreters would use the term *rhetoric* to describe these questions—how a text persuasively communicates its message.

3. Questions of reception. How would readers, ancient and contemporary, receive these texts? What was the cultural context in which ancient readers/hearers would have encountered these texts? What do readers today bring to the text? How does that have an impact on interpretation?

The task of this volume is to give us enough information and context to begin the process of forming us as careful and creative interpreters. The tools of interpretation begin with questions to ask as readers:

- *Historical questions* of cultural backgrounds and the origin of texts
- *Literary questions* of genre and use of language
- *Theological questions* of how the text speaks to the divine-human relationship and to the life of faith, ancient and contemporary

Reading the biblical text carefully with these questions in mind, reviewing a good study Bible and several translations, studying an introductory volume like this one, consulting Bible dictionaries and commentaries, and learning about how others have read the Bible—all these things and others can help us become better readers of the text. Along with the hermeneutical work we have been discussing, it is important for readers to think about biblical texts in light of the whole story the canon narrates. That overarching narrative provides a full context in which readers can consider the significance of texts.

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SUGGESTED READING

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