

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT



M2—Critical Introduction to the New Testament

This course lays the foundation for in-depth study of the New Testament by surveying its contents and identifying pertinent issues in New Testament studies.

M 2

Critical Introduction to the New Testament

The New Testament in context

The course lays the foundation for in-depth study of the New Testament by surveying its contents, identifying pertinent issues in New Testament studies, and analyzing the relevance of the New Testament in a modern world. Emphasis is on original source material. The course is composed of three modules: (1) Biblical Studies, the Gospels and Acts, (2) The Epistles and The Apocalypse, and (3) Message, Response, and Interpretation. Required for the M.T.S. and M.Div. degrees. 3 semester hours of graduate credit.

Objectives

- Identify characters, issues, events, places, and themes noted in the New Testament
- Judge underlying assumptions in the critical study of the New Testament
- Analyze New Testament content for application to contemporary life

Credit for the course requires a score of 70% or greater on each of 3 multiple-choice examinations and two essays. Each element is valued at 20% of the final grade.

A sample exam problem is given below:

Which of the following has no bearing on the Synoptic Gospels problem? (A) Divergences between the Gospels (B) Non-canonical Gospels (C) Similarity of arrangement (D) Similarity of style and wording

Resources

A New Testament in any language is essential. The N.I.V. is recommended as exam problems draw from its vocabulary. The course syllabus serves as a guide. As a secondary source, the student will find a good introduction beneficial. An online book by Pheme Perkins, *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction* is available at no cost to the student. It may be accessed from the Special Electronic Collection.

Course Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, the student will be able to

1. Relate New Testament characters and sites.
2. Analyze the New Testament with a sense of continuity and integration.

3. Demonstrate through an essay a critical analysis of how the New Testament may function in today's world.

Expectations

Following is what you may expect in terms of academic engagement and preparation.

Academic Engagement

Engagement with online Internet articles (7 hours)
Viewing videos from Video Library and syllabus link (5 hours)
Individualized interaction with student advisor and academic personnel (2 hours)
Examinations (3) (3 hours)
Using the course syllabus as a guide to reading and study (20 hours)
Discussion forum (4 hours)
Note taking (2 hours)
Proctored comprehensive exam (2 hours)
Sub-total—45 hours

Preparation

Reading the New Testament 3 times (24 hours)
Reading Perkins or substitute (336 pages) (13 hours)
Preparing for exams (6 hours)
Research and writing two essays (40 hours)
Reflection activity (7 hours)
Sub-total—90 hours
Grand total—135 hours

A Letter from Your Professor

Dear Student,

You have embarked on a course that that will introduce you to the content of the New Testament. Furthermore, it will expose you to some of the issues that are raised in a scholarly pursuit of the New Testament. Although we shall examine books by groups, the result should be a unified understanding of the whole corpus.

The New Testament stands as a single collection of sacred writings. Yet, it rests upon the foundation of another sacred collection—the Old Testament. You supposedly have completed M 1 Critical Introduction to the Old Testament. This course will build upon that study. If you took the undergraduate counter-part, you should be in an improved position to take this graduate level introduction. But if not, do not worry. We will walk you through in an orderly manner. It may take more time to assimilate the material, but you will not miss anything.

The Bible—especially the New Testament—is the written foundation for the Christian faith. Were it not for the New Testament, we would know nothing of Jesus. We would not know how God's promises made to Abraham and Israel were fulfilled. The New Testament is critical to our faith. It deserves serious attention.

I urge you to be open-minded and to pursue truth, wherever it is found. Weigh the content of scripture in the light of the past and in the light of its consequences. Ask yourself repeatedly what the alternatives are

for non-belief. Ask also of the benefits of belief. Let this be an adventure. I trust your faith will grow as a result.

Your advisor is available for first line questions. When you need my assistance, the advisor can supply my e-mail address.

Your professor

Procedure

1. The syllabus has three modules. Review each module to see the layout of the course.
2. All the resources you need are online and are available without charge. The book by Perkins should be read along with the syllabus. It can be accessed from the Course Menu under the tab Special Electronic Collection. If you prefer to purchase a hard copy text, or desire more reading material, the Expanded Resources contains some recommendations.
3. Begin your work with Module 1. Read the syllabus carefully. As you proceed, more detailed procedural instructions will be given.
4. Throughout the course, you are invited to participate in the Discussion Forum.
5. As you come to the end of Module 1, you should review the material in preparation for a multiple-choice examination.
6. When you are ready for the exam over Module 1, you may open it from the Course Menu. Although you are allowed three attempts, please do not open the exam until you are best prepared as any grade of 70 or above will be permanently recorded as your grade for the exam. Exam problems and answers are scrambled on each attempt.
7. Once you have completed the exam over Module 1 with a score of 70% or above, move on to the other modules and repeat the process.
8. After you complete Module 3 exam, this would be a good time to watch the videos in the Video Library, found on the Course Menu. The videos are intended to frame your knowledge of the New Testament and point in the direction of further considerations and application.
9. Construct the two formal essays. Instructions may be found at the end of the syllabus and submitted from the Course Menu under Module 3. Each essay is valued at 20 percent of the final grade.
10. Following submission of the essays, complete the Course Evaluation, which may be found on the Course Menu under the Course Summary.
11. One more thing. Before proceeding to the next course, you should take a proctored comprehensive exam. The exam is the first of two qualifying exams required for formal admission into the M.T.S. and M.Div. programs. You may find instructions at the bottom of the Course Menu.

Things to Know

MODULE 1

Personalities

1. You should know the identity of the following Old Testament personalities who are noted in the Gospels: Abraham, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Jonah, and Moses. These are people who had a significant place in the story of the Gospels. You will find them referenced in the Gospel narratives.
2. Be acquainted with these personalities who appear in the story of the Gospels: Andrew, Anna and Simeon (associated with Jesus' birth), Annas, Barabbas, Bartholomew, Beelzebul, Caesar Augustus, Caiaphas, Elizabeth, Gabriel, the various kings named Herod, James and John the sons of Zebedee, Jesus, John the Baptist, Joseph the husband of Mary, Joseph of Arimathea, Judas Iscariot, Judas the son of James/Thaddaeus, James the son of Alphaeus, Jarius, Lazarus, the Magi, Mary of Magdala/Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary (the sisters of Lazarus), Mary the mother of Jesus, Matthew/Levi, Nathanael, Nicodemus, Philip, Pilate, Simon of Cyrene, Simon Peter, Simon the Zealot, Theophilus, Thomas, Zacchaeus, and Zechariah.
3. Know the identity of demons, Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes, as these play an important role in the Gospels.
4. You should know the identity of the following personalities who appear in Acts of Apostles: Ananias (of Damascus), Ananias and Sapphira, the apostles including Matthias, Aquila and Priscilla, Aristarchus, Artemis, Barnabas, Caesar, Candace, Cornelius, Demetrius, Dorcas/Tabitha, Felix, Festus, Gaius, John Mark, King Agrippa and Bernice, James the brother of Jesus, Lydia, Philip (the evangelist), Saul/Paul, Silas, Simon (the sorcerer), Stephen, Theophilus, and Timothy.

Geographical sites

1. You should be able to associate some event or person attached to these major geographical sites that appear in the Gospels: Bethany, Bethlehem, Bethsaida, Caesarea Philippi, Cana, Capernaum, Decapolis, Egypt, the region of the Gadarenes, Galilee, Gethsemane, Jericho, Jerusalem, Jordan River, Judea, Magdala, Nain, Nazareth, Ramah, Samaria, Sea of Galilee, Sidon, Sodom, Tyre, and Zion.
2. You should be able to associate some event or person attached to these major geographical sites in Acts: Antioch, Asia (Minor), Athens, Berea, Caesarea, Cilicia, Corinth, Crete, Cyprus, Damascus, Derbe, Ephesus, Gaza, Iconium, Jerusalem, Joppa, Judea, Lystra, Macedonia, Malta, Meletus, Philippi, Rome, Samaria, Syria, Tarsus, Thessalonica, and Troas.

Content

1. You should have a general acquaintance with the events and content of the first four books of the New Testament. Especially noteworthy are the birth narratives, Jesus' visit to Jerusalem at age 12, John the Baptist's inquiry of Jesus from prison, the apostles' reaction to Jesus' predictions of his impending death, and reactions to various healings like the man born blind.
2. Know the events associated with the synagogues at Capernaum and Nazareth and the Sanhedrin and temple at Jerusalem.
3. Know the events surrounding the Passover and the Sabbath.
4. Have a general acquaintance with the parables of Jesus, as they provide insight into the nature of the kingdom of God.

5. Become acquainted with the miracles of Jesus.
6. You should have a general acquaintance with the events and content of Acts of Apostles

MODULE 2

1. Know the identity of the following personalities: Antipas, Diotrefes, Euodia, Gaius, Onesimus, Philemon, Syntyche, Timothy, and Titus.
2. You should be able to associate these major geographical sites with appropriate epistles: Colosse, Corinth, Crete, Macedonia, Philippi, Rome, Thessalonica, Patmos and the seven churches of Asia-- Ephesus, Laodicea, Pergamum, Philadelphia, Sardis, Smyrna, and Thyatira.
3. Know the authors of each New Testament book where an author is associated with the text.
4. Know also the persons or churches to whom each epistle was addressed.
5. Be able to identify each epistle by major distinguishing features and content.

MODULE 3

1. You should have a general acquaintance with the role of Jesus Christ in providing redemption to humanity. Concentrate especially on the theological ideas related to sin, redemption, law and grace, and the person and work of Jesus.
2. You should have a general understanding of the expectant behavior of the Christian.
3. At the conclusion of the third module, you should comprehend the New Testament sufficiently to determine its universal application.

Special Electronic Collection

The student is expected to read the following book as he/she follows the syllabus. Chapters 1-7 should be read in conjunction with Module 1. Chapters 8-21 should be read in association with Module 2.

Perkins, Pleme. [Reading the New Testament: An Introduction](#). 3rd ed. Paulist Press, 2012.

Extended Resources

The following books are recommended for further reading. Extended Internet sources related to the content of the course are found within the syllabus.

Blomberg, Craig L. *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. IVP Academic, 2007. 416 pages. \$15.47
ISBN: 978-0830828074

_____. *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*. B&H Academic, 2016 816 pages. \$25.39
ISBN: 978-0805464375

Boring, M. Eugene. *An Introduction to the New Testament: History, Literary, Theology*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. \$33.75 ISBN: 978-0664255923

*Carson, D. A., Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Zondervan, 2005. 784 pages. \$26.99 ISBN: 978-0310238591

*deSilva, David A. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*. IVP Academics, 2004. 975 pages. \$33.27 ISBN: 978-0830827466

Kostenberger, Andreas J.; L. Scott Kellum; Charles Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*. B & H Academic, 2009. 976 pages. \$39.31 ISBN: 978-0805443653

Patzia, Arthur G. and Anthony J. Petrotta. *Pocket Dictionary of Biblical Studies*. IVP Academic, 2002. 128 pages. \$8.99 ISBN: 978-0830814671

Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. Baker Academic, 2009. 560 pages. \$23.68 ISBN: 978-0801028687

*Highly recommended

Select Library

The following sources contain valuable online collections of articles and books that can prove helpful in studying special topics related to an introduction to the New Testament.

[The Bible in multiple translations](#), Gateway

[Acts of the Apostles](#), BiblicalStudies.org.uk

[Biblica](#), Internet Archive Wayback Machine

[Criticism](#), BiblicalStudies.org.uk

[Discourse Criticism](#), BiblicalStudies.org.uk

[The Gospels](#), BiblicalStudies.org.uk

"[The Challenge of Canonical Criticism to Background Studies](#)" by Randy W. Nelson, *Journal of Biblical Studies* 6, 2 (June 2006): 10-34

[Journal of Biblical Studies](#)

[New Testament](#), BiblicalStudies.org.uk

[New Testament](#), religion-online.org

[New Testament Introduction](#), Open Library

[New Testament Introduction](#), Universal Library

[New Testament Introduction and Commentary](#), Eastern University

[New Testament Letters](#), BiblicalStudies.org.uk

[Methodology](#), Internet Archive Wayback Machine

[Revelation](#), BiblicalStudies.org

MODULE 1 Biblical Scripture, the Gospels, and Acts

The Christian Bible consists of two parts: (1) writings composed primarily in the Hebrew language, with a few sections in the wider Aramaic tongue and (2) writings composed in Koiné Greek, the common language of the Hellenistic world. The Greek Scriptures (commonly known among Christians as the New Testament) comprise part of the canon of writings, which Christians generally hold to be sacred and “inspired” by God. All of the writings belong to the 1st century C.E. and were composed by apostles (*i.e.*, men who were specially appointed by Jesus), or by men closely associated with the apostles.

Christians consider the *Greek* Scriptures a “continuation” of the *Hebrew* Scriptures, but with an important difference—a particular covenant that the different sets of scripture represents. The Jews hold to the covenant Yahweh formed with their ancestors through Moses at Sinai. Christians live under a new covenant that God established in Jesus Christ. Since Jews do not recognize the “New” Testament as scripture, they generally refer to the “Old” Testament as the Tanakh, the Holy Scriptures, or the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Hebrew Scriptures (referred to by Christians as the “Old” Testament) designate writings that belong to a period prior to the birth of Jesus. With the exception of the books of Genesis and Job, these writings pertain to people living under the Sinai covenant. For subscribers to the Jewish faith, the Hebrew Scriptures are complete as “written” scripture. Jews may also recognize an authoritative “oral” tradition alongside the written scriptures, but they definitely do not recognize the Greek Scriptures as carrying any authority for their faith. For Christians, on the other hand, the story of the Bible as written scripture is incomplete without the New Testament.

If one wonders why we sometimes refer to the New Testament as “The Greek Scriptures,” there are several reasons. One, we want to identify the collection in a manner that is both descriptive and reflective of the Christian tradition. Two, we wish to present the Old Testament in a positive light. It must not be relegated to an irrelevant past, but positioned for the proper Christian use. There exists an essential link between the two testaments, as New Testament writers used the Old Testament to unfold the New. Therefore, the link is essential to the climax to which the New Testament leads. Perceiving how this is done, how prophecy is interpreted, and the full implication of an Old Testament citing create a foundation for valid interpretation.

In the Greek Scriptures, we are reintroduced to names and events given in detail in the Hebrew Scriptures—and for good reason. In the Greek Scriptures we find God's promises to Israel were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Here one learns how God interceded into human history and provided a universal means of human redemption. The New Testament reveals the means to righteousness, a spiritual relationship with God, and a realistic hope amid the struggles of this life.

As in our study of M 1, we shall concentrate on people, places, and events. This may seem to be the lower level of modern learning categories, but it is necessary. What raises the level of learning is that in M 1 and M 2, you are learning how to work with original sources. In later courses, we will ask deeper theological questions and we will provide opportunity for additional analysis. For now, it is essential that we concentrate on the “fact.” Without this phase, you will be hopelessly lost in your quest to know and make use of the Bible.

Module 1 sets the stage by looking at the nature of biblical scripture and the content of the first five books of the New Testament. The Gospels and Acts span two-thirds of the 1st century. The Gospels cover the first third and Acts the second third. Many of the Epistles fit into the time period covered by Acts, making Acts the basic historical setting for all the New Testament. In this module, we shall examine the five documents with a view toward understanding core elements: characteristics, themes, literary structure, historical context, and contents.

The central figure in the Gospels and Acts is Jesus Christ. The validity of the entire gospel rests upon an accurate portrayal of the person and teachings of Jesus. The Gospels and Acts declare Jesus' divinity, messiahship, and resurrection as essential elements in human redemption from sin and reconciliation with God. One need not adopt the stance that Jesus was a product of his time to explain his person or his teachings. Yet, Jesus became a man in time. He, therefore, addressed people whose ideals, aspirations, and predispositions were forged on the anvil of accepted traditions.

The institutions mentioned in the Gospels and Acts--synagogue, temple, Sanhedrin--had a history. They were also living organisms, maintained by priests, scholars, scribes, and elders. Then, there was the political structure--both Jewish and Roman--floating in a sea mixed with both Hebraic and Hellenistic culture. Gymnasium, stadium, and theater were characteristic of Hellenistic--not Jewish--culture. The Jewish religious and governing system was divided between two parties--the Pharisees and Sadducees--Jewish sects with diverse theologies and functions.

Preparing for Module 1 Exam

1. Review the text of the syllabus under Module 1.
2. Read the first four books of the New Testament--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John--to become familiar with the material.
3. Read the Gospels again. This time, make notes on the major participants, institutions, place names, events, and teachings.
4. Read the four books again and again, stopping only when you need to make sure you have the content firmly in mind.
5. Continue to research the names, places, teachings, and events noted in this module.
6. Familiarize yourself with the critical issues noted in the syllabus and with the assumptions that underlie proposed solutions.
7. When you feel competent with the Gospels, move on to Acts. Read Acts to become familiar with the material--people, places, events, and message.
8. Read Acts again and again until the book becomes thoroughly familiar. As you read, look for examples of different literary genre, such as story, speech, and quotation. Let your knowledge of the setting and literary characteristics of the book help you interpret and understand its content.

The exam will present problems covering the items noted in the Things to Know block. You will not be expected to know which Gospels contain specific details about the same event or which Gospel contains a unique rendering. Rather, you should concentrate on learning the stories, dialogues, parables, and miracles by viewing the Gospels as a complete presentation of Jesus Christ.

Unit 1. Biblical Scripture

The "Greek Scriptures" are one and the same as the New Testament. The corpus is called the "Greek" Scriptures because the writings were composed in the Greek language. The idea of a "New" Testament distinguishes the collection from the "Old" Testament.

With the Jews, Christians acknowledged the authenticity and authority of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old

Testament). In addition to the Hebrew Scriptures, Christians recognized twenty-seven additional documents or "books" as authentically representing the mind of God. These works received the title "New" Testament (Covenant), because they described the new covenant God was inaugurating as the fulfillment of the Law of Moses and the Prophets of Israel. Hence, the "New" Testament made the former one the "Old" Testament. This new covenant, intended for Gentiles as well as for Jews, centered on Jesus.

The central message of the New Testament and of apostolic proclamation is anchored in both the teaching and the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus announced the good news about the kingdom of God, which he himself was now bringing to men. But Jesus was more than a teacher and prophet. He was also the long-awaited Messiah promised to Israel. He was both the bearer of the message of salvation and its essential content. The Gospels focus on Jesus, who simultaneously revealed the mind of God and became the instrument of human redemption. Acts of Apostles describes the spread of the good news. The Epistles elaborate on meaning and application. The Apocalypse declares Christ's victory over Satan.

The story of the Bible is that of immortal God and his creation. He made man in his own image. Being holy and righteous man lived in a wholesome relationship with God. Man, however, desiring to be more, sinned and ended the paradisaical relationship. All was not lost to man, though. God, moved by mercy, love, and a desire for his perfect glory, set out to bring redemption to mankind. Through the ages, he revealed himself and created a covenant with descendants of Abraham. Through these people, God would introduce his Son to the world. By glorifying the Father through his sacrificial love, Jesus reestablishes the redeemed man in keeping with the perfection that is the glory of God. This is the "good news" or "gospel" that the New Testament announces.

The gospel is concerned foremost with the glory of God. Achieving the glory of God is not about satisfying a self-centered despot, but the realization of the intention of God for man. Since man is of divine design, he fulfills his purpose when he lives in holiness and righteousness. The failure of man to do this leaves him helpless and groping in darkness. Only God can furnish the light of redemption and act in behalf of man's redemption.

The gospel contains both ethical and factual teaching related to Jesus Christ. It is the good news about God's effectual grace to humanity. The gospel embraces the "mystery" of God. This long-concealed mystery was purposed before the foundation of the world, promised through Abraham, foreshadowed by the Law of Moses, foretold by the prophets of Israel, prepared for by John the baptizer, fulfilled by Jesus the Christ, and revealed through Jesus' apostles.

The New Testament offers exciting reading as a dynamic composition. But when considered against its 1st century environment, it takes on a real life atmosphere. Just sensing the emotions, uncertainties, and general expectations brings it close to the reader. Stepping back into the 1st century environment gives an even greater ring of authenticity. To sit on the mountain slopes overlooking the Sea of Galilee, to walk the streets of Jerusalem, to gaze upon the landscape of Ephesus, to sit on Mars Hill in Athens, or to stand within the Roman Forum brings a feeling of awe. But as exciting as that may be, a 21st century presence cannot reproduce the full impact of the scenes described in the Bible two millennia ago. Since the New Testament reports actual events, as much of that real environment as is possible needs to be reconstructed in order to receive maximum benefit from reading the New Testament.

Hundreds of years have passed since the books of scripture were penned. Many would-be interpreters have arisen. Varying assumptions have been advanced regarding composition and background. As the study of the Bible becomes more personal for you, it will be important to review the evidence on which scholars and commentators reach their conclusions.

Each book of the New Testament was composed for a given purpose and a particular audience. Since the human writers belonged to the 1st century C.E., they wrote in a social, political, and religious environment. This is not to say that the authors merely mirrored their environment or accepted cultural perceptions. They often wrote against prevailing customs and practices. But they did use standard

conventions of language, literary forms, and vocabulary. They referenced events and ideas that were part of their culture.

The study of Jesus and the Gospels presents some interesting situations. For example, the birth narratives note that Jesus' birth coincided with a Roman-ordered census. King Herod attempted to kill Jesus. Traditional Jewish ideas and attitudes impacted how Jesus' message was received. Jewish institutions that had emerged during the Intertestamental Period were firmly in place. And Roman sovereignty influenced the outcome of Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

Two principles guide us in our approach to the New Testament. One, we assume the truthfulness and uniqueness of the biblical witness. Two, we will treat the biblical text as a document produced within a real historical environment. The Bible is taken at face value. It is not about perfect people, but about how God works in, among, and through imperfect people for his own purposes.

This unit looks at issues that pertain to the formation of the New Testament text, as well as composition and relevant background situations. First, we shall review the New Testament corpus in general and the four Gospels and Acts in particular. Second, we will consider approaches and methods to the study of the Gospels. Third, we shall entertain the subject of New Testament backgrounds.

a. The corpus, the four Gospels, and Acts of Apostles. What makes the New Testament special? Is its content unduplicated elsewhere in non-biblical literature? How did the books of the Bible come together to form "scripture"? We shall begin with the last question, which introduces the study of the biblical "canon" or list of scriptural books.

The corpus. When referring to the group of books that belong to the Bible, we often speak of the "canon." The term comes from a Greek word (*kanon*), which indicated a rod for measuring. Hence, when applied to the discussion of which books belong to the Bible, the word canon came to signify a rule for measuring the legitimacy of books that determine Christian faith and life. Then, the idea of a canon became synonymous with the list itself. Study of the canon is not an inquiry into *why certain books should be included in the Bible*, but *recognition of the books that were generally accepted by the users*. At stake is whether the New Testament is authentic, reliable, and authoritative. This is important because the primary sources of information concerning Jesus are the Four Gospels.

The idea of an official "canon" or "corpus" of scripture does not appear to have existed at the time of Jesus. However, those books which would have been recognized by the Jews would have embraced the books included in the Protestant Old Testament. By default, then, a canon or idea of authoritative scriptures did exist, although technically, the Jews appear to have settled the matter of the Hebrew Scriptures in 90 C.E. When New Testament personalities spoke of "the Scriptures" they were referring to the thirty-nine books of the "Old Testament" that appear in the Protestant Bible. Hence, Jewish and Gentile Christians recognized the Jewish canon, although they continued to review the list and expand it to include the New Testament. However, the Roman Catholic Church extended the debate over the Old Testament canon for hundreds of years and still accepts as canonical some Intertestamental works that neither Jews nor Protestants recognize. The complete canon of scripture for Christians also includes compositions by the apostles, who wrote under inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

As for the New Testament, the matter of a specified list of books considered as scripture was settled during the 4th century. Earlier, the Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians in 95 C.E. offers evidence that the writer was familiar with a number of the Pauline epistles, suggesting that perhaps all of the apostle Paul's letters had been collected into a single group before the end of the 1st century. Although multiple "Gospels" were produced, only four received wide acceptance as faithful representations.

Lists of canonical books were circulated fairly widely during the 2nd century. For those representing mainstream Christianity, the lists were very similar, with only a few titles being disputed. However, the rise of heretical teachings and advocates provoked discussion as to which compositions should be regarded

as authoritative. Other writings, as for example, The Gospel of Thomas, were fanciful and outrageous. Marcion advanced a skewed view of the gospel and so excluded the entire corpus of the Hebrew Scriptures and all of the New Testament, except the epistles of Paul and a revised edition of the Gospel of Luke.

While Marcion attempted to restrict the canon, other heretical proponents attempted to widen it. Each claimed, of course, that their lists were divinely inspired. The crisis presented to orthodox Christianity came down to a question of which books were indeed inspired and authoritative for defining and regulating the faith. Out of the discussion, orthodoxy appealed to a set of criteria for settling the question of the canon. These criteria included their apostolic origin, their orthodox content, and acceptance by the churches. The claim to apostolic origin was sustained by linking an apostle or his associate with each of the compositions. When all three criteria were applied, some heretical books were excluded and orthodox books were accepted. By the end of the 4th century, the present twenty-seven-book canon was generally accepted. The formation of the canon did not result from a specific action by a council, group of church fathers, or specific divine revelation. The process was one of gradual acceptance by mainstream Christianity. In other words, the accepted books had proven themselves as faithful witnesses to the person and work of Christ.

The 16th century Protestant Reformers accepted a thirty-nine-book Old Testament canon and the twenty-seven-book New Testament canon. However, Martin Luther downgraded some books to lesser status. He considered Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation inferior to a book like Romans. His judgment was unjustified and unwarranted by either biblical or traditional standards.

The question of the New Testament canon is vital when one asks about the authority of the New Testament for directing present-day life. One's understanding of the history of the New Testament canon conditions the application process. Among the questions which the student must resolve in his/her own mind are the following. Was the final list of canonical books decided by a council or did a council recognize the books that had already been approved through common use in the churches? Did the Holy Spirit guide the process of canonicity or did the canonical works prove themselves? Do the canonical books hold final authority over individuals and churches or do individuals and church bodies hold ultimate authority when interpreting the New Testament?

The Gospels. Perhaps no part of the Bible has undergone as intense review as the Gospels. Since they relate the most astonishing story ever told, they naturally attract attention. Furthermore, the events they report carry eternal consequences if they are true.

The Gospels are, first of all, literary compositions. In many ways, they conform to standard forms current in the 1st century, *i.e.*, vocabulary, grammar, general styles of writing. In other ways, they stand apart from other compositions; they are "Gospels." Each Gospel has a story to tell about a divine one who became flesh and who calls all sinners to God through himself. The Gospels are therefore novel and unique, but they are literature of the first rate.

The Four Gospels recount the story of Jesus--his life and teachings. The gospel is the good news about salvation that Jesus has made possible. Jesus is the central figure of the Gospels. The Gospels inform us of the content of the *kerygma* (proclamation) of Jesus and his kingdom. Many accounts of Jesus' activity were undoubtedly recorded. But only four Gospels are authentic and worthy of canonicity. They offer a distinctive literary form. The central message is likewise unique. If the message is to have credibility, then the Gospels themselves must be trustworthy.

The Gospels offer a distinctive literary form to the world. But just as distinctive is their central message. If the message is to have credibility, then the Gospels themselves must be trustworthy. The Four Gospels represent a single literary genre. Their content is similar, but their presentation of Jesus takes on a slightly different form. Each Gospel differs from the other. John is the most dissimilar of the four and the last one composed. The Fourth Gospel differs from the Synoptics in the author's distinctive purpose, selection of material, and interest in specific elements.

The Gospels are not biographies. Rather, they are presentations of a unique figure who entered the Jewish world during the early days of Roman rule. The ultimate question is not whether the Bible is inspired. It is not whether one believes in the authority of scripture. It is not whether we learn by direct command, apostolic example, and inference. The ultimate question is whether the New Testament functions as a legal code, with the Old Testament serving as a forerunner to the New Testament. And corollary to this is the question, Do the Scriptures (Old and New testaments) function as God's instructions for people who live under covenant with God? An implied question is whether the result of gospel proclamation is the creation of a believing community. If so, what does that community look like?

The student of the Gospels will raise many questions. These may include the evidence for authorship, date of composition, place of writing, outline, purpose, and characteristics. In addition, one will want to know about the various roles of Jesus: as the fulfillment of God's intention, as savior, as supreme authority, as teacher, preacher, and healer. Still further christological questions linger: the supernatural nature of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the ministry of Jesus as servant, the universality of the work of Jesus, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Some of these questions will be addressed in this course; others will need to await later studies.

Not all references to Jesus outside the Bible agree with the Gospel accounts. Take note of alleged contradictions and realize that the critic may rush to unwarranted conclusions based on impure motives or limited information. Further study often reveals that the seeming contradictions disappear when the biblical authors are understood or that one's assumptions about the circumstances lying beneath the texts are exposed.

Acts of Apostles. The Bible consists of a variety of literary genre, *i.e.*, types or forms of literature, such as poetry, drama, narrative. The book of Acts, for example, conforms to literary conventions, but in some ways, it is unique among the genre. Modern persons have tended to see in the work a "history" of the early church. Scholars tend to see it more as an extension of the Gospel of Luke. Indeed, the author of Luke also wrote Acts. As the opening verses of the two books reveal, Acts is the second of a two volume work addressed to Theophilus. While we may classify Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as "Gospels," rarely does one name Acts as the fifth Gospel.

Since the events recorded in Acts come after the ascension of Jesus, Acts does not fit the pattern of the Gospels. Rather, Acts continues the story of Jesus through the apostles. Only in this sense, Acts belongs to the Gospels. Nevertheless, its literary form places the book in a category of its own. It may be well to remember that Acts is not pure "history," for its intent is something else than recounting the movements of the apostles and early believers. Its purpose is, to build faith in Jesus as God and man.

As a piece of literature, Acts is considered an unique form. Acts was written by a physician named Luke, a traveling companion of Paul. The composition describes the birth, spread, and development of Christianity. Acts describes the joining together of Jew and Gentile into one body in the church. It is useful as a handbook for conversion. It is the only document available to us for knowing how the church began.

Major arguments against the authenticity of Acts are based on comparing it with writings of Paul. Some have alleged that Paul crafted Christianity by reworking the teachings of Jesus in keeping with his own thought. But the idea runs counter to the biblical text. Paul was not an early follower of Jesus; he certainly did not design the Christian message. Acts and the Epistles will bear out that he faithfully taught what had been revealed to him.

Date of composition. No one can say definitely when the Gospels and Acts were penned, as the authors did not disclose this information. The earliest date possible for the Four Gospels is after the ascension of Jesus--the last event recorded. Acts could not have been composed before the mid-60s, after Paul had been in Roman custody in Rome for two years--the last event described. Since Luke was a traveling companion of Paul, it is reasonable to think that the Gospel and Acts were written close to the same time. We would therefore venture both could have been penned by 65.

Scholars vary widely over dating. Some attempt to place the Gospels in a sequence, with Mark being the

first. They will look for some sign that the Gospels were written many years after Jesus' ascension as an interpretation of the events to a later generation of believers. While this has some validity, seeing the Gospels as application rather than a true account of Jesus' ministry tends to conceal the actual events described in the Gospels.

The Fourth Gospel is usually assigned to the late 80s or early 90s. There is no concrete evidence for the late date, although we know the author, John the apostle, was still living. Traditionally, John wrote last.

All in all, the time frame for all the Gospels must be placed between 30 and 100 C.E. Extra biblical testimony to their existence appears perhaps as early as the 1st century (if the Didache can be so dated) and certainly no later than the early 2nd century. If the traditional authorship be admitted to each, then the life span of their authors would certainly place the writings closer to the middle of the 1st century .

Additional Internet Sources

["Emergence of the Four Gospel Canon"](#)

Study these comparisons between Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

["The Synoptic Gospels: Structural Outlines and Unique Materials"](#) by Felix Just

["The Gospel of John: Structural Outlines of the Fourth Gospel"](#) by Felix Just
["Harmony of the Gospels"](#)

The first article on Acts, below, provides a general overview of Acts. Pay special attention to [Acts 1:8](#), the outline of the book and the definition of an apostle. "Acts of Apostles"

Article two is drawn from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* and gives more detail regarding authenticity. Explore the links provided in ["Acts of Apostles"](#)

The third reading opens the question of reliability of the biblical content. ["The Historical Reliability of the Acts of the Apostles"](#)

b. Approaching the study of the Gospels. Traditional approaches generally accept the Gospels as authentic, compatible, and reliable witnesses. In more recent times, however, interest in the Gospels has shifted from a desire to harmonize the accounts to an effort to dispute them. Since modern critical analysis of the Gospels tends to be built on a rather skeptical, humanistic foundation, little is taken for granted. One should be wise to determine the difference between skeptical and critical. "Skeptical" questions the text itself; "critical" analyzes it carefully. For sure, tradition is an inadequate foundation for truth, but the witness of scripture should not be discounted solely on the ground that it testifies to miracles, the incarnation, and resurrection. How one understands the intended meaning of the biblical text contributes to the hermeneutical procedures one will adopt.

Miracles. The Gospels contain accounts of miracles--primarily miracles performed by Jesus. On the one hand, one may question whether the miracles reported actually took place, whether they were accomplished by a slight of hand, or whether they were created by the Gospel writers to support their case. On the other hand, if the miracles actually happened, one may ask if they were unique to Jesus' witness. Additionally, the Gospels report the same events in different ways. Are the accounts contradictory, or do they simply show different sides of the same event? Or, perhaps similar events are not the same events.

Trustworthiness of the biblical text depends upon the accuracy of its witness. The Age of Enlightenment has placed more emphasis on natural processes and generally denies the existence of the supernatural, whether that be in the form of miracles, incarnation, resurrection, or inspiration.

When looking at the problems of credibility and identification of miracles, one should apply neither modern rationalistic presuppositions nor uncritical thought when looking at the record. Take them at face

value in view of the full story the Gospels have to tell. If the miracles did not happen as reported, then how can one believe in the resurrection of Jesus? They all hang together; they rise and fall on the same premise.

Differences among the Synoptics. That there are differences among the Synoptics, no one can question. If taken at face value, one may conclude that the differences are contradictory and, therefore, lead to doubt as to which account, if any, to accept as accurate. When examined in the larger context of authors' purposes, many of the difficulties can be harmonized. But just such disparagement has become the focus of attention; in a critical circumstance, the differences have led to skepticism.

Supposed contradictions are suggested with reference to composite speeches, apparent doublets, and variations in names and numbers. The approach one takes to the problem texts may prompt assumptions: the speeches were delivered on either one or more than one occasion; the authors are reporting precise or approximate information.

The modern search for Jesus. The idea of "searching for Jesus" may seem odd until one engages in critical study of the Gospels. The "search" for Jesus rests on a supposition that the authors of the Gospels had their own agenda. They took information about Jesus and molded it to their liking in order to tell their story. Consequently, it would follow that the "real" Jesus was lost in history and, with this reasoning, the Gospels become inaccurate witnesses to the identity of Jesus. The traditional search is a skeptical one, partly because it denies the source material at hand and partly because it has no better material to consult. The best known figure in the effort to produce a reliable account of Jesus is Albert Schweitzer, who authored *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* in 1906.

During the past decade, interest in the historicity of Jesus and the New Testament Scriptures has been renewed. The resurrection has received special attention as the truthfulness of the Christian witness is constantly called into question. The quest for historical verification is several centuries old, yet the new interest demonstrates a new skepticism on the one hand and a renewed inquiry on the other. The pursuit sharpens the question as to whether faith in Jesus necessitates an actual resurrection. Some would maintain that a personal faith in Jesus does not depend upon his being an historical figure who performed miracles and was raised from the dead. Others contend that belief in the literal, detailed witness of scripture is essential to a faith that offers redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Modern approaches to the Gospels. The Bible has been analyzed more than any other document in history. To some, the endeavor may prove a waste of time. To others, it shows its trustworthiness. In modern times the Gospels have been analyzed from every angle imaginable. Some critics have affirmed their integrity, while others have denied their credibility as true witnesses to Jesus Christ. Lying at a critical juncture is the question of whether the Gospels were written to report the life and teaching of Jesus or whether they were written to promote the agenda of early believers. The differences in the Gospel renditions of Jesus' movements and teaching have called for explanations that have spun more theories than answers.

From the earliest days of the church, the dominant approach to the question of gospel historicity centered on the task of harmonizing the testimony of various evangelists. For the past two centuries, scholarly study of Scripture focused more on the dissonance between its component parts than on harmony.

When dealing with Jewish materials, we encounter the word "midrash." As a genre, midrash is used to refer to types of exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures. Included in midrash are Jewish biblical commentaries, rewritten scriptures by Josephus and others, and targums. Targums are Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures.

As scholars explored various aspects of the Gospel texts, various critical methods took shape. *Source criticism* arose out of a quest to understand how the first three Gospels (the Synoptics) were written. While source criticism concerned itself with literary sources, form criticism developed in response to an effort to discover the original settings of the material that was later gathered into a coherent composition. *Form criticism* categorizes the stories in the Gospels about what Jesus said, assigns these to a context in

the life of the 1st-century church, and postulates a history of oral transmission to a specific period. The discipline that recognizes the evangelists as editors, who selected, arranged, and reworded their sources to highlight particular theological and stylistic emphases is known as *Redaction Criticism*. Out of redaction criticism, which focuses on the "compilers" of the Gospels, came a reader-response hermeneutic, which moves one beyond a 1st century orientation to subjective and uncontrolled interpretation. The idea that language determines thought gave rise to *structuralism*.

Most people have no idea about a "synoptic problem." Admittedly, the language is human, but it does speak of a longstanding tension which Bible readers have recognized. The "problem" is, How does one account for both the similarities and the differences between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke? According to the Two-Source Hypothesis, the first Gospel written was Mark. Mark became a source for Matthew and Luke. A "Q" document came to represent a hypothetical source that modern critics believe underlies the Gospels.

The proper procedure for evaluating the historicity of any portion of the Gospels is to assume that Gospel testimony is reliable and then to consider the weight of various objections. For example, the major concern regarding miracles, once the possibility of miracle is established, is to show the reasonableness of believing in miracles recorded in the Gospels.

Extra-biblical documents can be helpful, but they often have an agenda of their own. The Nag Hammadi documents, as an illustration, are predominantly Gnostic in nature and make no pretense of overlapping with the gospel traditions of Jesus' early life.

Modern scholarly research is assisted by findings of archaeology, linguistic studies, technology, and the tools of other disciplines. The curious seek to supplement what is said of Jesus in the Gospels and to confirm what the Gospels say about him. Those who are skeptical about the trustworthiness of the Gospels look for evidence to confirm their position. Some of these simply want to continue in disbelief; others seek for a way to continue belief within a non-miraculous or non-divine-intervention context.

The two opposing sides in the debate are those who seek to separate the actual words and deeds of Jesus from mythological, legendary, and traditional beliefs. The other side is represented by those who are committed to an accurate portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels. For the latter, the Gospels are inspired of God, so they cannot contain misrepresentations or errors. Consequently, there are no myths or legends to separate out. The text stands as it is written. It should seem obvious that those holding to the first position would welcome all efforts of critical thinking and those holding to the second position would tend to treat critical methodology with skepticism, if not all-out hostility.

Between the two pole positions, there may be some mediating ground. The historical Jesus should be able to stand the tests of historical inquiry. The critical process should not begin with the assumption that the Bible is wrong on all points unless external verification can be found. Neither should one who believes in the Bible have any fear that sound logical thinking is capable of discrediting the Scriptures. Faith rests upon a foundation of evidence, as Paul argued in 1 Corinthians 15. So, there is something to be gained by accepting the biblical witness at face value and by an openness to external voices. If the external voices are valid, they should be heard. If the biblical witness is confirmed, that is all the more assurance of the truth of Christianity.

Other considerations meet us along the way. To affirm that the Gospels took shape over a period of time and reflects church traditions opens the possibility that those traditions could be inadequate, incomplete, or inaccurate. Some form of divine inspiration is important for establishing the essential components of the gospel story. The New Testament affirms the early believers--especially the apostles--were guided by the Holy Spirit. This cardinal feature is affirmed by the biblical text. To extend that guidance into the present day would violate, at least to some degree, the principle that the gospel was complete during the 1st century. If newer revelations beyond canonical scripture are admitted, then it follows that the New Testament is incomplete. And if it is incomplete, what essential doctrines have been altered? Belief in further revelations casts suspicion on the authority of scripture and makes an authority of each person who claims personal revelation.

Granted, times have changed. Culture has changed. We face new questions such as medical life-support. So, do we need a body of tradition or new laws or new revelations to speak to these new issues? Have we progressed to the point that the role of women is no longer regulated by scripture? Is divorce now acceptable because so many people do not want to honor their vows? At what point is scripture antiquated? At what point is it scientifically pushed into the arena of legend and myth? The question of the reliability and authority of scripture is critical, not only for establishing "initial" faith in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, but in establishing authority for Christian behavior.

Finally, when looking at the Gospels as literary compositions, they appear to be human products. They are literary compositions that make use of both oral and written materials from the past. Since this course is not one in apologetics, the divine hand is *assumed* to be present with those human writers. So, when they present Jesus as the divine Messiah, we take their message seriously. But one of the reasons for analyzing the Gospels is to make sure that we are not gullible. Faith rests on good evidence and solid testimony. If the sources are unreliable, so are the conclusions.

Additional Internet Sources

["An Orthodox Perspective on Inspiration"](#)

["The Gospels as Historical Sources for Jesus, the Founder of Christianity"](#) by R. T. France

["Q-The Hypothetical Gospel"](#) by Elaine H. Pagels and ["More about Q and the Gospel of Thomas"](#) by Marilyn Mellowes

["A Synoptic Gospel Primer"](#) by Mahlon H. Smith.

["The Synoptic Problem"](#)

["The Two Source Hypothesis"](#)

["External Evidence: Augustine"](#)

["The Synoptic Problem Home Page"](#)

["The Synoptic Problem FAQ"](#) by Stephen C. Carlson

c. Backgrounds to the New Testament. Events described in the New Testament occurred in a real world. They happened, not in a world of fancy and imagination, but in a tough, challenging, historical environment. The government of Rome brought both peace and offered many guarantees of justice. But it also supported the worship of many gods. The world of Jesus was complex, not just from the point of view of the social climate, but from the assortment of competing forces found in that world.

The Middle East in the days of Jesus. Following a four-century absence of divine revelation following the closure of the Hebrew Scriptures, God broke into history through revelations to people like Zachariah, Mary, John the Baptist, and, later, the apostles. He also revealed himself in dramatic fashion in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

During the previous four centuries, the historical, social, and religious scene in Palestine had changed significantly. Politically, the land passed from the hands of the Persians to the Hellenists. This was followed by a century of independence, then another period of subjection--this time to the Romans. Socially, Hellenism had spread its Greek language and European culture across the area. Religiously, a new form of Judaism emerged, along with new institutions and groups.

By the time of Jesus, Rome had established itself as the controlling power throughout the Mediterranean world. From 63 B.C.E., Palestine was taxed heavily, but the area enjoyed a measure of peace and stability. The Romans ruled through regional leaders, who were in sympathy with the policies of the Roman government. The Roman peace and Roman rule allowed people to travel and communicate throughout the empire. The ease of communication was facilitated by the Greek language, which the Romans allowed to prevail. Greek played a leading role in the spread of the gospel. All New Testament compositions were written in Greek, the common language of commerce.

Religiously, Christianity emerged within a Jewish environment. Its roots sprang out of the Jewish encounter with God. Although politically, Palestine was governed by Roman-appointed officials, some of

the officials were Jews.

Jewish sects. Several distinct groups existed in 1st century Palestine. They all had peculiar functions.

Essenes. Though not specifically mentioned in the New Testament, the Essenes were known to exist in 1st century Palestine. They advocated and practiced isolation from the corruption of the world by ascetic lifestyles. The Essenes were the most apocalyptic group among the Jews and lived away from Jerusalem. The people most often associated with the Dead Sea community and the Dead Sea Scrolls, a major find in the 1940s, are the Essenes.

Herodians. The Herodians were the party of the Herods and supported Roman rule in Palestine. Their particular aim was to insure the power of the Herod family.

Pharisees. Perhaps the most pronounced and largest of the religious groups functioning during the days of Jesus were the Pharisees. Believing God had communicated an oral Torah along with the written Torah, the group emerged in the 2nd century B.C.E. Pharisees were purists who separated themselves from others through their allegiance to an oral interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Advocating a legalistic interpretation of the Torah, the Pharisees insisted on strict adherence to the specifics of the oral law. They believed in angels, resurrection and life after death, and divine providence. They opposed Hellenistic influences. The Pharisees conducted synagogue services.

Sadducees. The party of the priests, the Sadducees originated in reaction to the Pharisees. They advocated the authority of the Torah but rejected other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures and oral tradition. In contrast to the Pharisees, these more affluent Jews embraced Hellenistic culture. They believed in the free will of man but denied the existence of angels, personal resurrection, and immortality.

Zealots. A group of Jewish patriots who favored the overthrow of Roman authority and presence in Palestine, the Zealots sought to undermine the Romans through subversive activities.

Judaism. We may think of "Judaism" in three forms, all belonging to three different periods of Israel's history. First, there is the Judaism of the Old Testament. It is the expression of faith that may be found within the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. This is commonly known as Hebraic Judaism. Second, during the Intertestamental Period, there developed a second form of Judaism. This form was distinguished with belief in an oral Torah. As suggested by the name, the "oral Torah" supposedly set forth rules for applying the Law of Moses and was revealed when the Torah was given to Moses at Sinai. Judaism in this period is called variously Second Commonwealth Judaism, Intertestamental Judaism, or Second Temple Judaism. Then, there is a third form, which came after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. This is traditionally called Rabbinic Judaism and reflects Jewish religion after sacrifices and temple services ended. Both Second Temple Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism recognized the need to work out the tensions that resulted from Hellenism and Roman rule. Hence, they became active in the political, social, and religious life of the Jews.

The type of Judaism in effect during the days of Jesus was that which belonged to the Intertestamental Period or the Second Commonwealth. Our knowledge of this form comes from the New Testament, the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, archaeological finds, and Jewish religious texts.

Three major events contributed to the formation of Intertestamental Judaism. The first of these was the destruction of Jerusalem. Following the demise of the Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E. at the hands of the Assyrians, the kingdom of Judah came to an end in 586 B.C.E. The temple was destroyed, many of the Jewish leaders were exiled, and foreign domination commenced. The conquest not only brought an end to a kingdom, it brought an end to temple services and institutions. The Jews now faced a theological crisis that threatened their whole style of life and the way they would relate to Yahweh. They were more directly connected to a counter-spiritual culture and pagan faith.

A second crisis met the Jews after the exile, following the advance of Alexander the Great. With Alexander and his successors came a tidal rush toward Hellenization. The new wave challenged Jewish values and worship. Hellenism demanded that the Jews bring themselves in line with Greek culture. The tide of Hellenism reached its crest with the efforts of the Syrian-based ruler Antiochus the Great, who forcibly attempted to enforce pagan worship upon the Jews.

The third crisis for the Jews came when the Romans took control of Palestine. The Romans continued Hellenization policies and the Jews found increasing dissatisfactions with Roman rule. The culmination of Jewish resistance led to a second destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. This was the point at which the temple was destroyed and temple services permanently discontinued.

The three aforementioned events sparked different reactions among the people and their leaders. Jewish institutions, including the temple, maintained a connection with the past, but they underwent realignment. Emphasis began to move more toward the ethical demands of the law than the ceremonial. Different views as to how the Torah should be interpreted led to the rise of separate parties. Now that the prophetic voice was no longer heard in Israel, contenders for truth pursued different tracks with respect to an oral tradition. As an alternative to the oral tradition came the apocalyptists. The apocalyptic figures evoked the authority of past figures, who had spoken with authority and attempted to voice their own agenda through written compositions. Still others simply caused confusion and violence.

An item to keep in mind when dealing with Intertestamental Judaism is that its emphasis was on behavior and not on agreement in doctrinal belief. Diversity in thought regarding culture, the social order, personal convictions, and religious practice was characteristic of the period. There were many sects and many of these were sub-divided. As for the majority of the people in Jesus' day, however, they did not appear to belong to groups. They were the common people, "the people of the land." Most of Jesus' conflict came from men representing the leading sects.

An apocalyptic movement did have some effect on popular thinking. Also, eschatological ideas (*i.e.*, speculations over the end-time) were sprinkled through the thoughts being advanced. Groups differed over eschatological or end-times expectations. There is little indication that the masses favored any one position over another, but everyone held some view as to future happenings in Israel. Eschatology became apparent in both religious and political climates.

With respect to eschatology, questions arose as to the time of the arrival of the Final Age. Would there be a Messiah to intervene? Would God personally have a hand in the events? If there were to be a messiah, would he be a person, a group, or an idealized figure? Would his role be political, social, or spiritual? What would be his focus--Jewish concerns or Gentile concerns? What role would the Torah and temple play? The common people appear to have held to a hope that some kind of military leader would emerge who could reestablish the Jewish state. When Jesus appeared on the scene, even the disciples of Jesus could not grasp fully what Christ intended. They saw him as the messiah who came to establish his kingdom, but beyond this, they were unclear as to the nature of that kingdom and the nature of the messiah's reign.

The history of events in Palestine certainly impacted Jewish life in the days of Jesus. Both external and internal forces sculptured the civil, social, and religious scene of the world into which Jesus was born. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament focused more on the spiritual realm than any other. Nevertheless, the spiritual message of Jesus and the New Testament authors addressed man in his total environment.

Judaism and its institutions. Inasmuch as many of the principals in Acts are Jews and the surroundings are Jewish, it will also be helpful to become familiar with some of the Jewish institutions and customs. Much of what we know of the period comes from Josephus, a Jewish historian who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and who wrote for the benefit of the Romans.

The spiritual life of the Jews revolved around worship at the temple, which was in the process of being refurbished and expanded during the 1st century. Herod the Great, a half-Jew king of the area under the

Romans, instigated the construction, perhaps to endear himself to the Jews. The temple had been the center of Jewish worship since the days of Solomon, with the exception of the period between its destruction in 586 and its rebuilding in 515 B.C.E. Locally, Jews worshipped and executed social affairs through synagogues, which served as gathering places for teaching and prayer.

In Jerusalem, temple worship was under the control of the Sadducees. While it would be wrong to say Judaism was at peace with itself in the 1st century, temple worship was important to all the different groups residing in Judea. Doing the commandments included sabbath keeping, circumcision, and dietary laws. However, temple worship was not equal to synagogue worship, and it did not serve Samaritans.

The political/social setting: the Roman world. Augustus became the first emperor of Rome and established forty years of relative peace and prosperity. Socially, wearing purple was restricted to the upper classes of Roman society. Farmers and craftsmen of Rome were known as plebes. Slavery was common but not necessarily permanent.

The Romans permitted the Jews in Palestine to maintain internal politics and decide judicial matters relating to their religious code through their supreme council, the Sanhedrin. The Jewish religious and governing system was divided between the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The major concerns of Rome for the provinces were peace and taxes. Among Roman families, sons could not own property as long as their father lived, yet the father was not the absolute ruler of the family. Children could be sold into slavery. Perhaps 50 percent of babies died before age 1. Family life was a primary concern; personal rights came second. Adultery was not against the law for husbands. In case of divorce, a woman's dowry was to be returned.

The religious setting within the Roman Empire was as critical to the progress of the gospel as was the political setting. During the days of the New Testament, the Roman State was only rarely concerned by the advance of Christianity and its perceived challenge to the unity of the Empire. Roman law often protected Christians from those who brought charges against them. Only as Christianity was perceived as a threat to the emperor and the health of the empire, did the government interfere with Christian activity.

The New Testament was produced against a background of religious faith systems that included both the monotheism of Judaism and the idolatry of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the claims of Christians that Jesus was divine and that he arose from the dead denied basic tenets of popular pagan religion. Proclaiming the exclusiveness of one God in the heavens and the kingdom of his incarnate son on earth threatened the Roman social and political system.

Polytheistic gods and rituals were similar in Greek and Roman culture. Although coming into greater importance, emperor worship was not the dominant form of Roman religion in the 1st century. Greek philosophy had already reached its maximum influence before then. Public practice was more important in ancient Greek and Roman religion than correct belief or private devotion. The dominant factor in Roman religion that affected its responses to religious practices in the provinces was syncretism.

Additional Internet Sources

["Palestine in the First Century"](#)

["The World of Jesus' Time"](#)

["Romans, Greeks, and Jews: the World of Jesus and the Disciples"](#) by Sidnie White Crawford

["Perspectives on the World of Jesus."](#)

["First Century Context of Palestine \(Israel\)"](#)

["Context: Social/Cultural World of Jesus"](#)

["Life in Roman Times"](#)

["Judaism's First Century Diversity"](#)

In the book of Acts, many events are associated with features of the Roman culture. The following articles introduce you to the world in which the book of Acts was produced. An understanding of this world is

important in comprehending numerous situations--travel, prisons, political officials, to name a few.

["Roman Politics in the First Century"](#)

["The Roman Empire in the First Century"](#)

["Greek and Roman Religion"](#)

Unit 2. The Gospels

The Gospels constitute the first four books of the New Testament. The four are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They have been placed at the beginning of the New Testament because they introduce Jesus. Jesus, who appears in the Gospels as the "messenger" of God, becomes the "message" of the rest of the New Testament.

The Gospels have one central purpose--to introduce Jesus as the Messiah (from the Hebrew word, meaning "the anointed one") or the Christ (from the Greek). In each of the four documents, Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of God's promise to provide man with an escape from sin. First stated in the call of Abraham, the promise was nurtured by the Hebrew prophets. God had chosen descendants of Abraham to declare his glory and to be the people through whom he would bring the Messiah, his anointed, into the world.

Why are there four Gospels? The most obvious answer is that four separate compositions written to unique audiences for slightly different reasons circulated widely and represented accurately events surrounding the ministry of Jesus. Since the authors selected material that served their interests and arranged it to fit their objectives, it is reasonable to conclude that they addressed four distinct audiences. The vocabulary of Matthew is more Jewish than the others. Mark emphasizes power and quickness of movement, as though to address an audience more Roman in orientation. The Gospel of Luke is actually the first of two volumes (with Acts of Apostles) that sets forth a record of the story of Jesus in a more universal context. In Acts, Luke traces the progress of the gospel over the thirty years beyond Jesus' ascension. John, the designated Fourth Gospel, details those events in the ministry of Jesus that culminated in the final weeks of his work. This Fourth Gospel is distinguished from the other three preceding "Synoptic" (seen together, parallel) Gospels, because it contains material not included in the others and omits much of what the others contain. John specifically states that he chose his material with the intent to confirm faith in Jesus. He did so with a unique collection of data and method of presentation.

The "four" accounts of the gospel of Jesus Christ make it clear that the Christ of the Gospels is for all mankind and the Good News has universal application. God's revelation thus becomes personalized and universal. In this regard, notice that the Gospels do not bear the marks of divine dictation. They stand as verified testimony to the person and teachings of Jesus. Hence, the New Testament is very different from the Qur'an, which is claimed to be the result of direct dictation from an angel to one man. The reported events surrounding Jesus are confirmed not only by the four authors, for their testimony was verified by other witnesses as well. Consequently, their audiences knew the surety of what they read. Hence, the four Gospel accounts strengthen the case for truth.

This concludes your special preview of *Critical Introduction to the New Testament*.

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