

# THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

REBECCA I. DENOVA



WILEY Blackwell

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# PREFACE

The phrase “the Quest for the Historical Jesus” has become popular through hundreds of new books. If you subscribe to cable you will find documentaries on History, Discovery, Smithsonian, and National Geographic Channels. New archaeological discoveries often make headlines (especially those in the Galilee), and “deconstructionist histories” are often designed to shock.

For many lay Christians, a new fascination with the study of Jesus is confusing. We have the gospels, the letters of Paul, and the rest of the New Testament that told the story. And these stories are re-enacted in the liturgy at Christmas and Easter. Priests and ministers are trained in Seminaries to elucidate the “meaning” of the texts, updating them for modern Christians. Why does any of this need “revision?” And what is meant by “the *historical Jesus*?” Is he different from the Jesus of the New Testament?

The simple answer is “yes,” if we mean that the Jesus who was an apocalyptic prophet in the first century is different from the “Christ” of the churches (divine) and eventually the second member of “The Trinity,” co-equal with God (325 CE). Centuries of later Christian Theology and traditions are constantly read back into the gospels, where they are historically out of place. For example, Jesus was not the founder of Christianity; all our evidence demonstrates that he and his early followers were not interested in starting a new religion. Jesus was not “the first Christian.”

This surprises most people. In the first century, there was no such thing as “Christianity” as a separate religious system. It was only formulated in the second century when Christian leaders known as the Church Fathers argued for a different system from Judaism. The term “Christian” (a follower of Christ) only appears a few times in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, written toward the end of the first century. It is not his preferred term. He most often refers to believers as “followers of the way,” or “brothers” (as does Paul in his letters). Scholars of the New Testament refer to these people as “Christians” to distinguish them from other Jewish groups at the time (and it is simply convenient).

The other surprising aspect of the gospels is that they all present four different portraits of Jesus and what he was doing. We combine Matthew and Luke together under the Christmas tree although the two nativity stories are vastly different. The great Hollywood productions of the 1950s and 1960s of “Jesus” movies did the same by picking and choosing various parts of the gospels and presenting one huge epic. Most Hollywood productions preferred Luke’s Jesus, but often added John’s speeches.

As we will see, each of the four gospels has a defined historical context. As events and issues in the communities of his followers changed over time, their “story” of Jesus changed as well.

## Jesus the Jew

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There is probably no other element that motivates newer approaches to the study of Jesus more than the rediscovery of “Jesus the Jew” that occurred in the past 100 years or so. We say “rediscovery,” because everyone in the first century knew this. The ethnic and religious background of Jesus became buried in the centuries of Christian tradition and teaching. The rediscovery has resulted in a newfound importance for understanding Jews and Judaism in the time of Jesus. This period was known for the emergence of various sects of Jews. What kind of Jew was Jesus?

At the same time, “Jesus the Jew” remains the focus of post-Holocaust studies. A central tenet of Christianity is found in Mark’s story of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. The origins of centuries of Christian anti-Semitism began with this story (blaming the Jews for the crucifixion), and it still resonates in the modern world.

## Origins

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The purpose of this book is to introduce lay readers (whether Christians or participants in other religious and nonreligious systems) to the origins of the movement that became Christianity. It can also serve as a secondary text for academic courses in the origins of Christianity. The study of “origins” is crucially important, not only to study the past, but to understand what gave rise to concepts and beliefs that remain a major aspect of our modern heritage. Many Christians learn the ritual formulas, but without the historical background of what gave rise to those formulas.

Although some Christians believe that Christianity was simply “revealed,” it did not arise in a vacuum. The immediate historical context is Second Temple Judaism (c. 450 BCE – 70 CE) in the province of Judea in the Roman Empire with its cultural inclusion of Greco-Roman society. *An exploration of the people and societies at that time elucidates the contribution of both in the origins of the movement.*

The analysis of the ancient world relies on primary documents when available – the literature that was produced at the time. In the study of the origins of Christianity, the primary documents are what became the New Testament. The final version of the New Testament contains four gospels (Mark, Matthew,

Luke, John), a history of the missions (the Acts of the Apostles), fourteen letters assigned to Paul, seven letters assigned to others, and one apocalyptic text known as the Book of Revelation.

Scholars debate the dates of some of the texts (some in the second century), but they all demonstrate teachings of various communities in the first century. Learning to read these texts in relation to the people and the societies that produced them is the goal of this book.

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## The Academic Discipline of Religious Studies

Religious Studies is a relatively new discipline in the academy (in the past seventy years). It is important to recognize the differences between Theology (the study of God) and Religious Studies. Theology involves the study of the nature of God and the way in which God and humans interact. Theologians address such issues from a preconceived faith conviction. There are thousands of books and articles on the theological study of Jesus and the New Testament.

Religious Studies (often referred to as “the academic study of religion”) focuses on the origins of religious authority (institutions), beliefs, rituals, sacred texts, and ethics. Absent value judgments of which religions are “right” or “wrong,” Religious Studies analyzes the people and societies who created religious traditions and the way in which they function.

Religious Studies utilizes a “multidisciplinary” approach and methodology that incorporates all the liberal arts and social sciences: classics, history, literature, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, philosophy, and psychology. In addition, the study of religion analyzes economics, politics, ethnic studies, ritual, gender studies, the arts, global studies, and cross-cultural approaches. Religious Studies explores the human experience of religion in specific cultures over time, as a “system of meaning.” This is the approach that is utilized in the following chapters. Working in tandem, a Religious Studies approach also sheds light on theological issues.

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## Features of this Textbook

Chapter I summarizes the post-Enlightenment approach to the study of the Bible and the three phases of “The Quest for the Historical Jesus” in the last century. The chapter also includes shared terminology and methodology in the study of ancient religions. Modern criteria for uncovering the “historical Jesus” are outlined in the first chapter.

Chapter II, “The History of Israel,” is a short history of Jews and Judaism, as revealed in the Jewish Scriptures. This history is crucial for positioning Jesus as a Jew in the first century. The gospels consistently call upon this history to frame the teachings of Jesus. Israel underwent a major paradigm shift after the conquests of Alexander the Great (330 BCE). The cultural changes in this period are collectively known as “Hellenism” (after Hellas, the eponymous founder of Greece). These cultural elements are also incorporated into the New Testament.

The earliest texts of the New Testament are Paul’s letters, which were written in the 50s and 60s of the first century. Chronologically they should be placed prior to the gospels. However, most readers prefer to cover the story of Jesus in the gospels first; Paul provides very little information about the ministry. The second reason to examine Paul’s letters after the gospels is that he laid the groundwork for the later letters in the New Testament and what eventually became Christian dogma by the end of the first century.

After reviewing the history of Judaism up to the first century, Chapter III examines the first gospel in “The Gospel of Mark” (“The Apocalyptic Jesus”). We examine the way in which Mark structured his story in alignment with the Scriptures and the events of the Jewish Revolt (66–73 CE).

“The Gospel of Matthew” (The “New Moses”), Chapter IV, is perhaps the best-known of the gospels (particularly through the translation of the King James Bible in 1601). This chapter includes an exposition on the “nativity stories” of both Matthew and Luke (to avoid repetition later). Matthew also has the most “kingdom parables,” and we will examine these as they relate to Matthew’s portrait of Jesus.

Chapter V, “The Gospel of Luke” (“The Compassionate Jesus”), introduces the background of a two-volume work that is the longest document in the New Testament. It is also familiar for Luke’s unique parables (“The Good Samaritan” and “The Prodigal Son”). We explore the rationale for this opus and the unique ways in which Luke structured his story.

Chapter VI, “The Acts of the Apostles,” continues Luke’s story with this sequel to his gospel. Acts relates the progress of Christian missions as the message of Jesus was conveyed to the cities of the Eastern Roman Empire after his death.

The Stranger from Heaven, Chapter VII, differs significantly from the others in both style and structure. John’s preface is one of the most famous in the New Testament, coalescing the deification of Jesus that began shortly after his death. John’s gospel is the origin of the concept of “the Incarnation” of Jesus.

Chapter VIII, “Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles,” examines the way in which Paul contributed to Christian dogma with his arguments on how Christian believers could participate in “the Law of Moses,” and yet have a new identity. Often referred to as “the true founder of Christianity,” there are probably more books on Paul now than Jesus. One of the most complicated characters in the New Testament, Paul’s attitude toward Judaism continues to undergo modern analysis.

The details of Paul's communities in Chapter IX ("Paul and the First Christians") shed light on the first generation of Christians. We can appreciate some of the confusion of the first followers, as they were to live "like angels" until the return of Christ.

The other letters in the New Testament are examined briefly in Chapter X ("Other New Testament Documents"). They reveal changes in the communities from the middle to the end of the first century. These letters include a group known as "The Pastorals," as they outline the initial hierarchy and structure (the election of bishops) and what became the institutional Catholic Church of the Roman Empire.

We end where the New Testament ends, with "John of Patmos and the Book of Revelation" in Chapter XI. One of the most famous (and infamous) books, the book still dominates Christian concepts of the return of Jesus (the "second coming") and events that are to happen in "the final days." The chapter provides a way in which to "decode" this strange book and the way in which to understand its symbols in historical context.

Each of the chapters places the documents within their historical context and highlights changes to the material over time.

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## Boxes

Understanding the background and nuances of ancient texts requires years of study and analysis. Rather than burden the reader with the details of scholarly expositions and debates, Boxes are provided in the chapters that summarize issues or add detail to the background; for example, "Hell and Heaven" and "Jewish Sects in the Second Temple Period".

Figures and Timelines appear within the chapters and highlight maps, schematics, and some of the archaeological sites associated with the New Testament. I have traveled to and explored all these sites. When appropriate I add a few details to each place.

Understanding both the world of ancient Christianity as well as scholarly methods of analysis often requires a vocabulary not familiar to the lay reader. Throughout the text, words and concepts will appear in **bold print** and are then defined in a convenient **Glossary** at the end.

Each chapter contains "Suggestions for Further Reading" for those who wish to explore the material in depth. The Suggestions include both traditional studies and more recent articles and books.

I have taught a course on the "Origins of Christianity and the New Testament" for over twenty-five years. Some students enter the course with more background than others, usually from Bible Study programs in their churches. In the beginning there is often some anxiety over the fear that a historical approach to

Jesus will uncover something that will challenge their faith. “Faith” by its very nature is not subject to verification or scientific analysis. This text is not designed to challenge anyone’s faith – it is to provide an understanding of how that “faith” originated in the first century.

Like trying to “prove” that God created the world in six days, similar attempts to “prove” that Jesus is the savior of the world fail on equal terms. Rather, what this text attempts to do is explore why Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John *believed* he was the savior of the world (and what that meant to them). Theirs is our only historical evidence. Some facts will surprise readers; contrary to Renaissance and modern art, Jesus did not have blond hair and blues eyes. However, there is nothing in the text that will diminish the overall message and traditional teachings of Jesus.

# STUDYING THE HISTORICAL JESUS



**Who was Jesus of Nazareth?**

**Concepts and Terminology**

**Religion**

**Polytheism and Monotheism**

**Myth**

**Acts of Worship/Rituals**

**Cult**

**Gentiles and Pagans  
(Problematic Terms)**

**Conversion**

**Old Testament/Jewish  
Scriptures**

**The Problem of Anachronism**

**Creative Writing**

**The First Quests for the  
Historical Jesus**

**Albert Schweitzer  
(1875–1965)**

**Second Quest**

**The Third Quest**

**E. P. Sanders**

**A Fourth Quest?**

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Appreciate concepts and terminology in the study of ancient religions.
- Identify the different phases in the “Quest for the Historical Jesus.”
- Distinguish the modern analytical tools applied to the origins of Christianity and the New Testament.

## Who was Jesus of Nazareth?

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There is an old hymn that used to be taught to children, “Yes, Jesus loves me, for the Bible tells me so.” This sufficed for centuries, but beginning with the Enlightenment, people began to question what is written in the Bible, and the age-old conviction that it was “the word of God.” In the past 200 years, scholars, historians, and, yes, theologians have explored new approaches to uncovering the history of the Bible and how it came into existence.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the hundreds of books in the past seventy years exploring what is termed “the quest for the historical Jesus.” At the center of this quest is the (belated) scholarly discovery of “Jesus the Jew.” Centuries of Christian theology presented him as the first “Christian” and the founder of a new religion. If we strip away this later theology, we can discover the story before there was the “church.” Jesus was a Jewish apocalyptic prophet who lived and preached in the Roman Imperial province of Judea in the first century CE.

This book is about the ways in which modern scholars go about illuminating “the historical Jesus” and the various ways in which his followers proclaimed his teaching in the cities of the Roman Empire. Our sources for the story are in the New Testament. The New Testament was not officially “validated” until a few centuries later, but it contains our primary information for the origins of what eventually became the religion of Christianity.

Surveys on the history of early Christianity number in the hundreds. Most of them, however, spend an inordinate amount of time in scholarly debate, utilizing jargon invented by academics. A goal of this textbook is twofold: (i) to provide the basic understanding of the historical context of the ministry of Jesus; and (ii) to provide a guide for both interested lay readers and undergraduates studying the history of Christianity. Understanding the “origins” of the past elucidates continuing modern concepts and beliefs and their continuing viability in a changing world.

## Concepts and Terminology

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Before we begin, there are several concepts and terms that are utilized throughout the book. Listing them at the beginning helps to avoid repetition in each chapter.

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## Religion

In the modern world, identity is often categorized by a specific religion (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc.). What we mean by these terms is a “system of belief” that includes concepts, rituals, and social codes. But in the ancient world, the concept of “religion” as a “system” did not exist in the sense that we understand it today. In fact, there was no word for “religion” in ancient Greek or Hebrew. The modern term, which came into use in the seventeenth century, derived from the Latin root *religio*, sometimes translated as those things “that tie or bind one to the gods.”

All ancient peoples believed in the total integration of the **divine** (the gods, the powers in the heavens and under the earth), with humans and everyday life. If you stopped someone on the street and asked them what “religion” they practiced, they would have no idea what you were talking about. Instead, the question should be “What customs do you live by?” The typical response would be “The customs of our ancestors.” These customs were what identified people as **ethnic groups**, with a common ancestor, history, homeland, language, rituals, and mythology. All these elements were handed down by the gods and provided the basis for the governing authorities, the social construction of gender roles, and appropriate codes of behavior.

All ethnic groups shared common ideas and rituals concerning the divine, but there was no one “authority” to turn to; a concept such as the Vatican did not exist. If you had questions, you could consult a member of the **priesthood** (specialized experts), and you may receive different answers from different individuals. “**Sacred Scriptures**” varied from group to group and region to region. The closest concept such as our Bible was found in the works of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Everyone in the Mediterranean Basin knew these stories, which included stories of constant interaction with the gods.

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## Polytheism and Monotheism

**Polytheism** (the belief in multiple deities), or sometimes **pantheism** (the belief in all powers), is always juxtaposed to **monotheism** (the belief in one god), understood as its polar opposite. However, the terms are problematic because they are modern. No one in the ancient world would identify with being a “polytheist.” More importantly, there was no such concept as “ancient monotheism.” *All ancient people were polytheists, including the Jews.*

In Western culture, monotheism specifically refers to the God of the Bible – the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This is demonstrated by the fact that this God is always written with a capital “G.” It designates the God of Israel above all other “gods,” and assumes an element of faith. In the first century, however, the God of Israel was simply one among the many thousands of deities that populated the universe.

Cultures viewed the universe on three levels: the heavens (the abode of the gods); the earth (the abode of humans); and the underworld, often referred to as “the land of the dead.” Gods could “transcend,” or travel around all three. Many groups had the concept of a “high god,” or a “king of the gods,” who ruled over diverse gradients of “powers.” Lower divinities were called *daemons*, but eventually were seen as evil, and hence the popular word “demon.” Gods as well as demons could “possess” people. In the latter case, this was an ancient explanation of mental health issues and physical disabilities.

Like their neighbors, ancient Jews conceived of a hierarchy of powers in heaven: “sons of God” (Genesis 6), angels, archangels (the messengers from God who communicate God’s will to humans), cherubim, and seraphim. Jews also recognized the existence of demons, with many examples in the ministry of Jesus in the gospels of his role as an exorcist.

The foundational story for the idea that Jews were monotheistic is when Moses received the commandments of God on Mt. Sinai: “I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me.” The Hebrew should be translated as “no other gods *beside* me.” This does not indicate that other gods do not exist; it is a commandment that the Jews were not to worship any other gods. *Worship in the ancient world always meant sacrifices.* Jews could pray to angels and other powers in heaven, but they were only to offer sacrifices to the God of Israel.

*This command only to offer sacrifices to the God of Israel is one of the major differences between Jews and all other traditional ethnic cults.*

The Jewish texts consistently refer to the existence of the gods of the nations (ethnic groups): Deuteronomy 6:14 “do not follow other gods”; 29:18 “to serve the gods of those nations”; 32:43 “Praise O heavens, his people, worship him all you gods!”; Isaiah 36:20 “who among all of the gods of these nations have saved their nations?”; and Psalm 82 “God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the gods.” In the story of the Jews’ Exodus from Egypt, God battles against the gods of Egypt to demonstrate who controls nature. This makes little sense if their existence was not recognized: “...I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt” (Exodus 12:12).

While Jews only offered sacrifices to the God of Israel, they shared a common conviction that all the gods should be respected; it was perilous to anger the other gods. Exodus 22:28 ordered the Jews never to revile the gods of the other nations. Early Christians accepted these levels of powers in heaven (and hell), and the Apostle Paul often referred to the existence of the gods of other nations in his letters. He berated them for interfering with his missions.

Throughout this text, we will continue to utilize the capital “G” to distinguish the God of Israel from the other deities throughout the Roman Empire.

## Myth

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We often use the word “**myth**” to automatically designate “something false.” In the study of religion, myths are ways in which people understand experiences with the divine, through stories, images, and metaphors. By their very nature, myths are not subject to verification. Myths are multivalent, meaning they are subject to many different interpretations. Myths help to create a worldview to

explain origins (where did we come from?), but more importantly they help to validate the social order of the contemporary world. Myths function to explain the ideals and institutions of society, gender roles, and law codes.

All religions have “origin myths,” set in primordial time that explain the beginning of the cosmos, gods, human beings, and sacred sites. The first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are often described as “myth” in the sense that they explain origins. Myths utilize **etiologies** or explanations (e.g. the beginning of agriculture). Many of the towns and cities in the Mediterranean Basin had “foundation myths,” claiming a god or hero as their original ancestor.

Myths can be understood literally or as **allegory**, applied most often by the schools of philosophy and educated writers. They read myth as containing symbols that went beyond the basics to promote ideals or universals. Stories in the Bible were allegorically interpreted over the centuries by both Jewish and Christian writers.

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## Acts of Worship/Rituals

**Temples** were the homes of the gods on earth and were deemed “**sacred space**.” Unlike our modern places of worship, almost all the activity took place out of doors. This is where the **altar** was located, and people congregated around it. Because this was “sacred space,” one had to be in a state of “**ritual purity**” to enter and participate. “Ritual purity” is a state of being. Most rituals involved “washings,” but the concept is not necessarily related to hygiene.

Overseeing all aspects of worship were **priests** and **priestesses**. Their function was to ensure that worship was done correctly (according to the ancestral traditions). Some communities had a priest elevated above others, the **high-priest**. Unlike modern clergy, the priesthoods were not charged with caring for the souls of the congregation. Their first loyalty was caring for the god/goddess. A major difference with the priesthoods in the ancient world is that with few exceptions, they were part-time jobs. Priests and priestesses served in rotation (sometimes a week, sometimes a month). When they were finished with their term of service, they went back to their normal jobs or businesses.

Priests and priestesses oversaw the **rituals** (from the Latin *ritus*, “doing things”) that included **sacrifices**, **prayers**, and **hymns** (prayers sung to music). The most important element of these rituals was that of “sacrifices.” Sacrifices were crucial to maintaining the balance between gods and humans. These were communal events directed to the welfare and prosperity of the group. Sacrifices had to be something of value, which in the ancient world was often meat. Priests sacrificed sheep, goats, pigs, oxen, fowl, and wheat cakes if you could not afford an animal. Thousands of Temples had daily sacrifices. A portion of the animal was divided among the priests, and then the rest was distributed to the people. This is likely the only time that the poor were able to eat meat.

Another element of rituals was specific to marking heightened stages in life: birth, puberty, marriage, death. The modern term for these occasions, which were all celebrated through religious rituals, is “**rites of passage**” (some of which became the later Catholic “**sacraments**”).

## Cult

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We typically apply the term “**cult**” negatively to religious ideas that differ radically from the majority. In the ancient world, *cultus* (from the Latin *colere*, “care or cultivate”) was a broad term for everything that was involved in the care and maintenance of the gods. It did not indicate theology or spiritual differences. In this text, we use “native” or “ethnic cults” as a category. Then as now criticism of someone else’s “cult” occurred often. We encounter this specifically in New Testament criticisms of the cult of the Temple in Jerusalem.

## Gentiles and Pagans (Problematic Terms)

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Thousands of native cults and religious associations dotted the landscape. One word cannot represent them all. What we have in the Bible is the Jewish point of view that identified themselves over and against all others.

Translations of Bibles in English are somewhat tricky. In the Jewish Scriptures, all non-Jews are collectively identified as “the (other) nations,” from the Hebrew, *goy* or *goyim* (plural). Depending upon the context of the passage, this term is sometimes translated as “stranger” or “foreigner.”

In the New Testament, the word for “nations” is *ethnos*, referring to different “ethnic” communities. Through late Middle English (and through the King James Bible), the common translation became “Gentile” from the Latin *gens*, family or clan, for both *goy* and *ethnos*. “Gentile” simply means someone who is not Jewish.

However, a more popular term came into being when Christians began to dominate and rule the Roman Empire. In the late fourth century, “**pagan**” became the term for anyone who was not Christian or Jewish. From the Latin *paganus*, it was a derogatory term for people in the hinterlands who had not converted to Christianity (equivalent to “hillbillies”). Many of the native cults focused on nature and fertility rituals. In the second century, the Church Fathers demonized these people, applying scathing reviews of their lifestyle and behavior that are still conjured up when we see the word “pagan.” This includes sexual orgies, drinking, and sometimes Satan worship. In this text, “native” or “ethnic” cult is the term of choice, although you will find “pagan” in many of the Suggested Readings.

The inheritance of Biblical texts in Western culture provided the raw material for criticism of the native cults, beginning with the books of the Prophets. These writers continually railed against the worship of other gods as **idolatry** (the worship of icons, or images). Christians utilized these texts in their literature, which contributed to the overall view that such practices created anxiety: too many gods, too many myths, too many empty rituals, and an absence of spirituality for individual salvation. It is important to note that there is no historical

evidence for such “anxiety” in the ancient world. Nevertheless, there are dozens of new books that continue to explain the rise and “triumph” of Christianity in the Roman Empire based upon this theory.

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## Conversion

Conversion means moving from one religious system to another. This word often appears in histories of ancient Judaism and early Christianity. People who participated in ethnic cults had the freedom to belong to several religious associations. They did not “convert” to another group by doing so. Ancient religion was in the blood; you were born into it as part of your clan or tribe. “Conversion” in the ancient world meant a change in lifestyle (one’s daily “customs”). Greeks and Romans who wanted to become a Jew fully “converted” in this sense.

The most famous “convert” in history is the Apostle Paul, and his “conversion on the road to Damascus.” However, this is a misnomer; at the time there was no Christian religious system to convert to. Paul himself described it as a “call” in the manner of the Prophets of Israel who were called by God for a specific mission.

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## Old Testament/Jewish Scriptures

### Canon

You will often see the texts of the Bible referred to as the “**canon**” of Jewish texts and the gospels as the “**canonical gospels**.” In Greek, “canon” was a system of measurement. Applied in this sense “canon” refers to those books that were “measured” in later decisions taken to determine which books would be listed as “Sacred Scriptures.” The Jewish books (the first half of the Bible) were canonized c. 200 CE under the auspices of a Rabbi known as Judah the Prince. The documents that became the New Testament, the gospels, and the letters of Paul took several centuries to reach agreement on the “canon,” and only began to be considered in a formal list under Constantine (c. 325 CE).

The designation “Old Testament” is a familiar one for the Jewish books. However, it is a Christian invention that is derogatory in nature. “Testament” is a later word for the older term of “**covenant**.” “Covenant” simply meant a “contract” between you and your people and your god(s). Christians in the second century began claiming that the older “covenant” with Israel was no longer valid and was replaced by the “new covenant” through Jesus. This idea is known today as “supersessionism” (“superseded” by Christianity, and still resonates as an element of modern anti-Semitism).

Naming the older books the “Old Testament” implies a judgment call. For Jews, these texts are not “old” in the sense that they are no longer valid. They remain at the center of Jewish belief and life. This textbook will use the term, “**Jewish Scriptures**” or “the Scriptures,” when referring to the various books of this collection. Some texts refer to the New Testament as the “Christian Scriptures,” but “New Testament” is the earlier descriptor. In the first century when Christian texts referred to “the Scriptures,” it was the Jewish Scriptures that they had in mind.

Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are consistently designated the “**canonical gospels**.” This is out of place, as there was no concept of “canon” for these gospels in the first century. Between the first and third centuries there were dozens of other gospels that narrated different details and different interpretations of the teachings of Jesus. In the second century, the Church Fathers began a process of declaring which of these gospels contained “correct belief” (**orthodoxy**) and which were “**heretical**” (from the Greek *haíresis*, “a school of thought”). The term “canonical gospels” is relative to the later decision that included only these four gospels in the New Testament.

## The Synoptics

From the Greek, “seen together” Mark, Matthew, and Luke are referred to as the “**Synoptic Gospels**.” If you laid them out side by side, these three have the same narrative structure: a ministry in the Galilee followed by one trip to Jerusalem. They also share similar teachings, parables, exorcisms, and miracle stories. By contrast, John is not only different structurally (at least three trips to Jerusalem during the ministry), but John’s Jesus is totally different from the other three (no parables, no exorcisms, “signs” stories instead of miracles).

## Faith vs. Rituals

Any text that examines the Bible, and especially the New Testament, will encounter the English word “**faith**” in translation. However, it was only in the eighteenth century that “faith” was used to describe “belief” in a religious system, particularly in teachings on individual salvation. At the same time, the word “faith” also came to mean “belief” in something despite evidence to the contrary. But the ancients did not often articulate their ideas as “belief” or “faith” as we understand it. “Faith” (derived from the Greek word *pistis*) originally meant “loyalty,” in this case loyalty to a set of shared concepts and rituals involved in worship of a god or gods.

The great concern in the ancient world was to carry out rituals involved in the various native cults correctly. The correct rituals were understood to be handed down “by the ancestors.” In ancient Rome, if a priest or augur stumbled over the words, he had to begin again. Several books in the Jewish Scriptures

describe the correct way in which to perform the rituals of the Temple cult in Jerusalem.

Beginning with the New Testament, this focus on the rituals of non-Christians became a negative, derogatory way in which to attack both Jews and the native cults; hence the modern concept that the Jews were “legalistic” and were only concerned with “the letter of the Law.” The idea that native cults lacked “spirituality” (Christians had faith, pagans had rituals) still finds its biased way into many books on the early history of Christianity.

## Church

In the New Testament, and particularly in the letters of Paul, you will often see the word “**church**.” It is translated from the Greek *ecclesia*, which means “assembly.” The first missionaries apparently modeled their communities on the administrative structure of older Greek city-states and Roman towns, where the term referred to the “assembly” of free citizens who made up local government. In relation to the new groups of the followers of Jesus, a better translation would be “community.” Translating this as “church” conjures up images of church buildings and institutional hierarchy. Both were part of later Christian evolution. In the earlier communities there were no “churches;” people met in each other’s houses. In each of the chapters, I will highlight other translation issues that are problematic as they arise.

## “Spirit”

Often mentioned in association with “churches,” “**spirit**” is understood to be “the spirit of God” or “the spirit of Christ” (in Paul’s letters) and not the third element of the later concept of “The Trinity” (fourth century CE). This is the spirit of God that breathed life into Adam and “possessed” the Prophets of Israel. This is the “spirit” that comes upon Jesus in the gospels at his baptism (the symbol of the dove) so that he was enabled to perform miracles. English Bibles, reading back later trinitarian concepts, always translate this with capitals, “Holy Spirit.”

## Polemic/Rhetoric

**Polemic** is a verbal or written attack against an opponent, either real or imagined; **rhetoric** is the art of persuasion, often calling upon figures of speech and stereotypes, and designed to convince an audience of one’s arguments or point of view. (We are familiar with these terms in relation to contemporary politics and charges of “fake news” from both sides.)

Polemic and rhetoric are literary devices applied by all writers in the ancient world. In polemical writings, opponents may be named or constructed in what

is known as “a straw man.” “Straw man” is the idea that the opponent’s arguments (as reported by the writer) are always shown to be wrong and thus defeated. *Polemic is not “evidence.”*

Throughout the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament, we have numerous examples of these literary devices. It was a favorite device of Jewish Prophets against idolatry and the gospels’ portraits of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and anyone who opposed Jesus.

## The Problem of Anachronism

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What is **anachronism**? It is placing something out of its own time and place, usually to a later time or place. The best way to understand this is the example of what are known as “gaffes” in Hollywood movies. It is like watching a movie that takes place in the 1970s where people are using cellphones.

Anachronism is the bane of all historians. This is because we are modern humans. It is difficult to set aside our own experiences and knowledge so that we can be entirely objective. We expect objectivity from historians, but it is virtually impossible. All historians must decide what they think is important, and so you have immediate subjectivity in the selection. Knowing the “end” always influences understanding the past. For example, it is very difficult to write a history of World War II and ignore how it ended.

New Testament scholars and historians do not escape this problem. Reading the books of the New Testament within the frame of their original historical context is quite a challenge. *We know that these texts became the basis of a new, independent religion, Christianity. But the writers at the time did not know this.* Complicating our reconstructions is the fact that historians and theologians have 2000 years of Christian theology that is so often “read back” into the texts.

As a historian of ancient religions (I also research the religions of Egypt, Greece, and Rome), I face the same struggles as other historians. I will attempt in every chapter to try and avoid such pitfalls where I can. I will often insert a modern analogy, simply to help with the reading and the reconstruction of early Christianity. You will be able to distinguish an analogy from anachronism.

## Creative Writing

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Modern analyses of Biblical literature are sometimes offensive to readers in their descriptions of ancient texts. Many historians conclude that a story was “made up,” but this is the way in which ancient writers went about their craft. Historians such as Herodotus, Polybius, and Livy, for example, had access to “manuals” that provided the rules. You were expected to “make up speeches.” In a speech by a general before the troops were sent into battle, no one “took notes.”

Instead, the writer created a speech that highlighted the known characteristics of the general. He was then judged on how well the speech fit the occasion. Both the writers/editors of the Jewish Scriptures as well as the New Testament utilized this device. This is especially so in the hundreds of speeches in Luke's Acts of the Apostles.

Perhaps a better way in which to explain this type of writing is found in the modern category known as "creative nonfiction." Creative nonfiction portrays real people and events, but with material added for dramatic effect. Creative nonfiction is employed by poets, playwrights, and screenwriters. In film "biographies," speeches are added to highlight the meaning behind an event or to indicate what the person was "thinking." We have the same process in ancient literature.

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## The First Quests for the Historical Jesus

Ever since the Renaissance, Europeans had been enthralled with the rediscovery of the literature and art of ancient Greece and Rome. When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he brought engineers and surveyors to record the monuments. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone decoded the lost art of hieroglyphs and "Egyptomania" became all the rage in Europe.

In the 1850s, Darwin's work on the theory of evolution motivated men and women to begin digging up the Middle East (sometimes in the hope of proving him wrong). Europe learned of the great civilizations of Mesopotamia, Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon. The rise of the social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Sociology, and Psychology) provided new criteria for the study of humans and human civilization.

What is deemed the "first quest" saw the production of popular books under the category of the *Lives of Jesus*, applying the new historical methods in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The writers freely filled in details (e.g. his life as a carpenter), harmonized the differences among the gospels, and psychoanalyzed Jesus ("What was he thinking at various times?"). New literary approaches to understanding "myth" in the ancient world led a few writers to totally dismiss the miracle stories and supernatural elements of Jesus as "myth." Each writer began with an overall portrait of Jesus (as a reformer, as a revolutionary) and anything that did not fit into this portrait was eliminated.

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## Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)

Albert Schweitzer was a German theologian and doctor (the latter part of his life was spent as a missionary in Gabon, Africa). In 1906 he published *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, largely a critique against *Lives of Jesus*, but he also provided new tools for the "quest" through the rest of the century.

A significant omission in the *Lives* according to Schweitzer was the “**apocalyptic** Jesus.” In the gospels, Jesus had proclaimed the imminence of God’s “kingdom” on earth. This was the Prophetic claim that God would intervene in history one more time in “the final days.” But the “kingdom” did not arrive. Was Jesus wrong?

Over the centuries, the delay of the kingdom was rationalized as time passed; Christians still awaited the kingdom, but in the interim, the church became idealized as a form of the kingdom on earth until Jesus returned. The problem of Jesus as a failed prophet became buried as somewhat embarrassing. The focus was more on elucidating Christian dogma. Schweitzer claimed that analysis of the “apocalyptic Jesus” should be the starting point for historical exploration, in the context of various views of apocalyptic thinking by Jews in the first century. This portrait of Jesus became a template for research in the rest of the nineteenth century. The importance of understanding apocalyptic thinking by Jews in the first century is now a fundamental element of research for New Testament scholars.

## Second Quest

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Ernest Kasemann (1906–1998) is credited with arguing that it was possible to uncover the historical Jesus through the application of new analytical tools, which became known as the period of the “second quest.” By the 1950s, scholars began to recognize that the first gospel, Mark, was written approximately forty years after the death of Jesus. The others followed Mark, often adapting and editing the first gospel as well as adding new material (Figure I.1). How do we distinguish the “sayings” of Jesus from those of Mark and the others?

Jesus, as far as we know, never wrote anything down. Nor, contrary to popular belief, did his disciples write anything down. *The gospels were not written by*

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BCE	
Matthew’s nativity	6 BCE
Death of Herod the Great	4 BCE
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Luke’s nativity	6 CE
The ministry of Jesus; the reign of Pontius Pilate	26–36
The letters of Paul	50s–60s
The Jewish revolt against Rome	66–73
Mark’s gospel; the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple	69/70
Matthew’s gospel	85?
Luke’s gospel; Acts of the Apostles	95?
John’s gospel	100?

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**Figure I.1** Timeline for events and the writing of the gospels.

*anyone in Jesus's immediate circle.* When Jesus “called” these were mostly Galilean fishermen. What were the odds that they could write Greek? (We examine speculation on the writer of each gospel in the individual chapters.)

*In relation to the historical events concerning the ministry and death of Jesus, we have no contemporary eyewitness evidence for those events.* There are no Jewish records or Roman records. This is incredibly significant. And it takes a while to think about. Because the events in the life of Jesus are so central to Christianity, most moderns assume that “the whole world was watching.” This is particularly true when it comes to the crucifixion of Jesus. But there is no reason why this crucifixion would be noted, as Rome crucified thousands of Jews. This crucifixion was devastating to his immediate circle, but most other Jews would see him as just one more victim of Roman oppression.

The earliest historical “evidence” that we have concerning a movement centered on the teachings of Jesus is found in the letters of Paul, written between 50 and 60 CE. Again, it is difficult to rely on this material for details of the ministry because Paul himself was not a witness to events. He never met Jesus of Nazareth. Paul began his missions twenty to twenty-five years after the death of Jesus, but, as we will see, Paul was not interested in the “historical Jesus.” Paul’s central focus was on “the resurrected Christ” (*Christos* in Greek for the Hebrew term, “*messiah*”).

The gospels of the New Testament have no internal dates. There are no clues (such as definite events or known individuals) for us to precisely date them to the time of their writing. The complication is that they are all writing a story that occurred between roughly 26 and 36 CE, *but from their point of view decades later.*

To uncover the “*logia*” (the “words” of Jesus) and events reported in Mark, Kasemann’s work evolved into a series of “tests” that could be applied to the material:

1. **Language** The four gospels are written in Greek (the common language for government, education, and trade in the Eastern Empire). However, the tradition was that Jesus spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language from Syria that arose in the sixth century BCE. It was adopted by Jews in the region of the Galilee and parts of Judea after the period known as “the Exile.” It shares many loan words with Hebrew and was also written in a form of Hebrew script.

To determine if a saying of Jesus was original, scholars translated the Greek text of Mark into Aramaic. If it “worked,” meaning not just a word-for-word translation, but grammatically, syntax, etc., it did not prove that Jesus said it, but went into a pile as “perhaps.” On the other hand, if it could not be translated correctly, it was thrown out.

Some scholars have now challenged this criterion as archaeology continues to provide more information on the region. Towns and cities in the first century were “mixed,” meaning that Jews and Gentiles lived side by side and shared many cultural elements, such as theaters and baths. Shared cultural elements indicates more than one language. In other words, as