EARLY
CHRISTIAN
READER
EARLY
CHRISTIAN
READER

Christian texts from the first and second centuries in contemporary English translations, including the New Revised Standard Version of the New Testament

WITH INTRODUCTIONS AND ANNOTATIONS BY STEVE MASON AND TOM ROBINSON

Society of Biblical Literature
Atlanta
# Contents

Preface to the Society of Biblical Literature Edition ........................................ viii

**Earliest Christianity in Historical Context**
   Introduction ................................................................. 3

**The Letters of Paul**
   Introduction ........................................................................ 23
   To the Assembly of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians)
      Introduction ................................................................. 33
      Translation and Notes ..................................................... 39
   To the Assembly in Corinth (1 Corinthians)
      Introduction ................................................................. 44
      Translation and Notes ..................................................... 52
   To the Holy Ones in Philippi (Philippians)
      Introduction ................................................................. 73
      Translation and Notes ..................................................... 78
   To Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and Their Assembly (Philemon)
      Introduction ................................................................. 83
      Translation and Notes ..................................................... 87
   Further to the Assembly in Corinth (2 Corinthians)
      Introduction ................................................................. 89
      Translation and Notes ..................................................... 94
   To the Assemblies of Galatia (Galatians)
      Introduction ................................................................. 106
      Translation and Notes ................................................... 111
   To the Beloved of God in Rome (Romans)
      Introduction ................................................................. 120
      Translation and Notes ................................................... 128

**Letters Attributed to Paul**
   Introduction ........................................................................ 151
   To the Holy and Faithful in Christ at Colossae (Colossians)
      Introduction ................................................................. 156
      Translation and Notes ..................................................... 162
   To the Holy and Faithful in Christ Jesus (Ephesians)
      Introduction ................................................................. 167
      Translation and Notes ..................................................... 172
   Further to the Assembly of the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians)
      Introduction ................................................................. 178
## CONTENTS

Translation and Notes ......................................................... 182

The Pastoral Letters (Titus, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy)
- Introduction ........................................................................ 185
- Titus: Translation and Notes ............................................. 195
- 1 Timothy: Translation and Notes ...................................... 198
- 2 Timothy: Translation and Notes ...................................... 205

Letters Associated with Peter
- Introduction ......................................................................... 211
- To the Chosen Ones Dispersed in Asia Minor (1 Peter)
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 214
  - Translation and Notes .................................................... 221
- To Those Beloved and Called (Jude)
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 227
  - Translation and Notes .................................................... 231
- To Those Who Have Received a Precious Faith (2 Peter)
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 233
  - Translation and Notes .................................................... 237

Biography, Anecdote, and History
- Introduction ......................................................................... 243
- The Origin of the Gospel (Mark)
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 283
  - Translation and Notes .................................................... 293
- The Book of the Genesis of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew)
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 327
  - Translation and Notes .................................................... 343
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 397
  - Luke: Translation and Notes ............................................ 418
  - Acts: Translation and Notes ............................................. 463
- The Secret Sayings of Jesus from Judas the Twin (Gospel of Thomas)
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 512
  - Translation and Notes .................................................... 519

Writings Attributed to John
- Introduction ......................................................................... 533
- The Exposition of God by the Word Made Flesh (John)
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 538
  - Translation and Notes .................................................... 549
- The Johannine Letters (1 John, 2 John, 3 John)
  - Introduction ...................................................................... 584
  - 1 John: Translation and Notes .......................................... 589
  - 2 John: Translation and Notes .......................................... 594
  - 3 John: Translation and Notes .......................................... 595
CONTENTS

The Disclosure of Jesus Christ to John (Revelation)
  Introduction .......................................................... 596
  Translation and Notes ........................................... 603

Other Early Writings
  Introduction .......................................................... 625
To the Twelve Tribes of the Diaspora (James)
  Introduction .......................................................... 629
  Translation and Notes ........................................... 636
Paths to Follow and Paths to Avoid (Didache)
  Introduction .......................................................... 642
  Translation and Notes ........................................... 648
On the Interpretation of Scripture and the Two Ways (Barnabas)
  Introduction .......................................................... 655
  Translation and Notes ........................................... 658
On the Superiority of the Son of God (Hebrews)
  Introduction .......................................................... 672
  Translation and Notes ........................................... 677
A Letter from the Romans to the Corinthians (1 Clement)
  Introduction .......................................................... 690
  Translation and Notes ........................................... 697
The Letters of Ignatius
  Introduction .......................................................... 717
  Romans: Translation and Notes ................................ 731
  Ephesians: Translation and Notes ............................. 735
  Magnesians: Translation and Notes .......................... 741
  Trallians: Translation and Notes .............................. 745
  Philadelphians: Translation and Notes ....................... 748
  Smyrnaeans: Translation and Notes .......................... 751
  Polycarp: Translation and Notes .............................. 755

Appendixes
A. Coins and Money .................................................. 761
B. Major Figures in the Herodian Family ....................... 762
C. The Jewish Civil Year ........................................... 763
D. Early Christian Use of the Jewish Bible ..................... 764
E. The Lost Sayings Source: "Q" .................................. 770
F. Dating the Early Christian Texts .............................. 772
G. The Literary Context of the Early Christians ............... 774

Maps
  Judea in Context .................................................. 777
  The Eastern Roman Empire ..................................... 778
  Jerusalem in the First Century c.e. .......................... 779
  Jerusalem: Herod's Temple Mount ............................. 780
Preface to the Society of Biblical Literature Edition

As the church’s foundational text, the New Testament will always have its largest reach in church circles. We have no desire to challenge that situation. But the earliest Christian texts, which are found within the New Testament, are also indispensable for anyone who wants to study the beginnings of Christianity historically, with or without any particular faith, as a crucial moment in the Western past. Many public universities and colleges offer courses from such a perspective. For them, the New Testament is not an ideal sourcebook.

After first working together as graduate teaching assistants (McMaster University) and then teaching Christian origins in different universities for some years, we decided to prepare a combined sourcebook and textbook that would be better suited to the questions and methods of our own courses and others like them. It would arrange the texts in a roughly historical order, include valuable early writings not found in the NT, and supply all the texts with historically oriented introductions and notes. Bearing in mind the many ways in which such courses could be structured, we also wanted to keep the format flexible.

The book before you is the result. Hendrickson Publishers brought it out in 2004, and we are grateful to the Society of Biblical Literature for taking it over. We also thank Bob Kraft, Jay Treat, and Stephen Patterson for allowing us to carry over their special contributions to this new edition.

The first Reader included reading lists after each introduction. We have left those intact because they are mentioned in the introductions. Much scholarship has been published since then, however, and we happily direct the reader to the regularly updated bibliographies on Mark Goodacre’s gateway site: http://www.ntgateway.com/tools-and-resources/bibliography.

The first edition credited the authors of the special contributions but did not identify which of us wrote the other parts. We thought it might be a useful exercise in literary criticism for students to figure out which sections belonged together. That probably did not happen, so now we come clean. Tom Robinson prepared the sections connected with Peter and John, the Pastoral Letters, and most of Other Early Writings. Steve Mason prepared the general introduction, Paul and Paul-ish texts except the Pastorals, the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, and Hebrews.

We dedicate this book to students in their exciting first encounters with the early Christian texts from a historical point of view. The experience can be life-changing and relevant to the way we think about everything else. In our unbiased view, these are the most important courses on campus. If this edition helps more students open the doors to new ways of seeing, we will be pleased.

Steve Mason, University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom
Tom Robinson, University of Lethbridge, Canada
EARLY CHRISTIAN READER

Introduction

The Letters of Paul
Letters Attributed to Paul
Letters Associated with Peter
Biography, Anecdote, and History
Writings Attributed to John
Other Early Writings
Appendixes
EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

Context is critical to interpretation. This may seem an obvious truth. After all, even visual perception is affected by context. Two lines of equal length will appear to be of different lengths if one has an arrow head at each end and the other has reversed arrow heads (the Müller-Lyer illusion). Such optical illusions demonstrate an important principle: even when we know that the reality is different from what we perceive, our perception is still skewed.

The same principle holds when we read the earliest Christian writings. Most of us have at least a vague notion that these are ancient texts, that they were not written in English, and that they come from a world very different from our own. Most of us would agree in principle, then, with the need to read these texts in their historical context—to try to put ourselves in the shoes of the first readers and hear the documents as they heard them. But instead we read them in an ahistorical context that has come to seem so natural and intuitive that it does not occur to us to question it.

What do we mean by an ahistorical context? We mean the context that is provided by the New Testament—the decisive part of the Christian Bible and the primary statement to faith and practice in the church. For nearly two thousand years, the NT context has predisposed readers to examine the earliest Christian writings for consistent ideas about Christian life in this world and the next. Rather than trying to understand the distinctive situation and context of each real-life author, Christians have usually devoted their energies to uncovering the timeless divine revelation in the NT. Their task was, in large measure, to arrange by subject what the NT had somewhat inconveniently filed under author. So they culled passages from Matthew, John, Romans, Hebrews, and Revelation as if from a single work. What the NT taught about such topics as anthropology (the human plight), soteriology (salvation), ecclesiology (the church), and eschatology (final things) became the stuff of systematic theology.

Perhaps many readers of this present book who know the early Christian texts mainly from their experience in church and devotional reading recognize this context well. But another kind of reading has developed over the last two centuries. This other approach recognizes that, in addition to the obvious value that the NT
has for the church, it also contains within it the most important evidence about the origins of Christianity, the new faith that would decisively alter the direction of Western civilization after its adoption by the Emperor Constantine and his successors in the fourth century. In the public arena, therefore, the earliest Christian writings are understood as the property not only of the church but also of the culture as a whole. And they are considered susceptible of historical investigation.

Historical investigation differs in essential ways from religious or devotional (ahistorical) reading. Whereas the latter springs from an attitude of trust or faith, historians (no matter what the time and place of their interest) must assume a posture of suspicion, relentlessly asking questions and cross-examining their witnesses. They want to know the limitations, perspectives, and possible agendas of their sources. For example, it is not only Paul’s thought that interests them, but also the views of Paul’s opponents in various locales. So they must read between the lines as well as reading what is on the lines. Historians try to be alive to the differences, even small nuances, as well as the agreements in their material. They look for “unintentional evidence” that appears to run counter to an author’s presentation of things. From this kind of material they hope to reconstruct plausible slices of real human life in early Christianity and to understand the aims of some key players.

Historical and faith-based approaches to the early Christian writings need not be mutually exclusive. Since the historical mode of reading was initiated in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, aspects of it have been adopted by all serious scholars, whether they work in universities, seminaries, or Bible colleges. Each one will differ in his or her precise account of the ways in which faith and history interact, but every academic in the field must deal with their encounter. As we have said, almost every reader recognizes at some level that the early Christian writings are ancient texts and so require historical interpretation. But this historical interpretation is enormously difficult to carry through with the English Bible or NT, because the tool itself constantly reinforces the ahistorical context that we are trying to get around. That shortfall between message and medium is, in a nutshell, the reason for this Reader.

Let us try to clarify this point by discussing six issues, and these are only examples, that need to be unraveled for historical reading but that are rendered obscure by the context of the Christian Bible or NT.

**Ancient Mediterranean Social Conditions**

The eastern Mediterranean world of Jesus’ and Paul’s time had seen a succession of empires, from the neo-Babylonians and Persians (sixth to fourth centuries B.C.E.) to the Hellenistic kingdoms (fourth to first centuries B.C.E.) and now the Romans. Greek, however, had endured as the common language of communication and business. Judea was no longer governed by Jewish kings, but had recently fallen under the direct rule of a Roman prefect (from 6 C.E.). At the same
time, until 39 C.E. Galilee remained under a prince of the old (quasi-) Jewish family of the Herods.

Although we rightly recognize the people of NT times as humans like us, facing many of the same fundamental issues of human existence, including the problem of finding happiness, we ought not to minimize the differences. They lived in a world that is difficult for us to imagine. To begin with, try to forget everything you know about such matters as health and wellness—for example, bacteria and personal hygiene; plumbing and sanitation; housing; basic principles of biology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy; the solar system and the universe; upward social mobility; equality of women and men; women’s presence in public; justice for all; privacy and personal space; democratic representation in government; inalienable human rights; respect for individuals; intellectual growth; emotional well-being; diet, ways of eating, and exercise; mass production of goods; personal choice; financial credit and banks; the postal service; care of children; reading, writing, and public speaking; logic; public and private education; responsive police, ambulance, and fire services; free markets; weekends; easy travel and communication. If you can! (Of course, we cannot.)

Now try to imagine a world that you and most of your contemporaries understand as more or less flat: heaven above is the home of the gods; the underworld beneath is the home of departed spirits and destructive forces; the earth in the middle is the battleground between these arbitrary forces. Life is nasty and short: fifty is fairly old; health at forty is enviable. Infant mortality is extremely high: as many as one in three dies in birth or infancy. Sickness and suffering abound. In every small town or city you visit, you see the sick, the maimed, and the demon-possessed loitering in public places, often begging for food. You hope that this never happens to you. If you get sick, perhaps a magician, prophet, or exorcist will pass through your village, or you might visit a temple of the god Asclepius. But life seems cheap, as the judicial crucifixions by the dirt roads outside of town constantly remind you. Corpses covered in sheets, being carried to burial, are a common sight.

The bulk of the population have few civil rights because they are not Roman citizens, and slaves have none whatsoever. You can be arbitrarily arrested and executed by the governor on the mere suspicion of causing trouble. If you happen to live near a base of Roman or auxiliary soldiers, you are subject to the whims and outrages of the occupying armies. So, although you are still in your twenties, you have joined a club whose main purpose is to provide for the burial of its members.

The vast majority of the world’s population are peasants working land that does not belong to them. Some are small landholders: whatever they produce beyond their family’s immediate needs for survival goes to someone else. Sometimes you dream of living in a city, but you know that they have big problems too: poor sanitation, shoddily constructed buildings always susceptible to fire or collapse, crime-filled streets, ruthless and seemingly all-powerful bosses and landlords. In the city and in the countryside, slavery abounds: in Italy, the center of the world, one
person in every four, in the eastern provinces perhaps one in every ten persons you 
encounter, belongs (literally and completely) to another human being.

You cannot read or write very well, though you can communicate adequately 
when you need to, and you can write a few numbers or words on a piece of broken 
pottery as a bill or receipt. Even those who can read and write well hardly ever 
do so; communication is mainly by speech. So what you say is extremely impor-
tant and may commit you to an obligation every bit as binding as a written con-
tract today.

A few powerful people control each city and region of the empire. They have all 
the land, all the money, and all the power. You never see these families, but only 
their agents, who come to collect rent or other dues from you. All you can do is at-
tach yourself to someone on the next rung of the ladder, your “patron,” and hope 
that your loyalty will pay off with some measure of security from life’s worst out-
rages. Who knows, if you have a skill of some kind, perhaps you will be able to 
climb a bit yourself, maybe even buy Roman citizenship before you die. And at least 
you have your good name, your most treasured possession among your small circle 
of friends. Public shame, for any reason, would be infinitely worse than your un-
avoidable economic and social plight.

This was, in very broad strokes, the kind of world in which Christianity was 
born. It is fairly easy for modern Western readers to say that we acknowledge the 
strangeness of it, but quite another thing for us actually to admit that strangeness 
in our reading. Inevitably, we still want to pull the texts out of their world and into 
ours. In our sanitized churches, universities, seminaries, and Bible colleges, we tend 
to make the NT transparent for us today. So completely have we domesticated these 
texts, we seldom notice that they everywhere presuppose the “three-storey uni-
verse” described above (1 Thess. 4:17; Phil. 2:10; Acts 1:9–11), a cosmology that 
none of us would embrace in our ordinary lives. We hardly ever ponder who those 
“demon-possessed” people were, who seem to fill the hamlets of Galilee and the 
pages of the gospels. We do not care to understand what it meant to be “poor” or 
“mourning” or “sick” in this world. We gloss over the “Zealot” tag on one of Jesus’ 
disciples’ names as if it were merely a nickname like any other. Even such sharp and 
bloody images as crosses and sacrifices are somehow blended into happy Sunday 
school songs and university lectures. We dismiss references to the Pharisees or 
Herod Antipas or Pontius Pilate as mere set furniture behind the story.

Above all, we modern readers tend to privilege everything that Jesus or Paul said 
as if it were unique, simply because we have no easy way of knowing what else was 
being said and done in their world. Because Paul said that he had learned to be con-
tent with his lot in life (Phil. 4:12) and Jesus advised people not to be anxious (Matt. 
6:25–34), many Christians remember these principles as “scriptural teaching.” But 
Jesus and Paul probably did not mean to be particularly original here, since these 
were old principles of the Stoics, whose ideas had been popular for centuries. In 
these cases Jesus and Paul probably intended, rather, to say things that would reso-
nate as obviously true with their audiences—much as if someone today should
write another book advocating self-realization, exercise, and mental relaxation. It is successful not because the idea is original but, on the contrary, because it taps a vein (albeit in a new and interesting way) that already runs deep in our collective mind.

The earliest Christians wrote many different kinds or genres of writing: letters, life-stories or biographies, histories, argumentative essays, manuals of instruction, and apocalypses. Each of these writings has parallels of some kind in the Jewish, Greek, and Roman literature of the period. Paul’s letters, for example, can be compared to other letters of the time, so we need to try to understand how letters were typically mailed, received, and read. The gospels and Acts, for their part, have affinities to ancient biographies, novels, and other kinds of historical writing. It is most useful to examine these parallel texts for their typical rhetorical features and for the light they shed on the early Christians’ outlooks.

Ancient Mediterranean Languages and Modern Translations

A second kind of historical unraveling has to do with the language of our texts. The early Christians wrote in Greek.¹ Their Greek was the common language of the eastern Mediterranean at the time, with some special Christian vocabulary thrown in. This Greek was also influenced by Semitic (Hebrew and Aramaic) ways of speaking, such as the tendency to join clauses with “and,” to use only simple verb tenses, and to speak in short (often parallel) sentences. The traditional Hebrew language of Judea was still known there, but after the Judean leadership was released from captivity in Babylon (beginning in the 530s B.C.E.), they naturally began to adopt the common Near Eastern language, Aramaic. Aramaic was a relative of Hebrew, in roughly the same way as English is a cousin to French. With the arrival of the Hellenistic kingdoms after Alexander the Great (late fourth century B.C.E.), Greek also began to play an important role in the area, and Greek cities were established both along the Palestinian coast and in the interior. So by the first century, even people living in rural Galilee spoke Aramaic, some elementary Greek, and possibly some Hebrew.

But the early Christians wrote in Greek. This presents a problem because, as anyone who has ever translated anything knows, every translation is an interpretation. The Greek word logos, for example, can mean everything from “single word” or “thing” to “message,” “discourse,” “teaching,” “doctrine,” and even “generative principle of the cosmos”! When a Greek author makes a deliberate play on words, the translator’s task becomes impossible. The Greek word genesis in Matt. 1:1 can mean “origin,” “beginning,” “genealogy” (the NRSV choice there), “pedigree,” or “birth” (the NRSV choice for the same word at Matt. 1:18). What is the “right” English translation? There is none. It is a matter of choice for the translator, which is why translations of ancient texts can read quite differently.

¹Even though the full Gospel of Thomas exists only in fourth-century Coptic, enough of it is paralleled in second-century Greek fragments that we can establish an earlier Greek version.
Translators of the NT tend not to be as individualistic as they might be with other texts, however, for a reason peculiar to the context in which the NT is used. Because translators of the NT normally do their work with one eye on the church’s use of these texts, they tend to preserve traditional translations where purely historical considerations might suggest something else. Let us mention a few. The word *euangelion*, signifying a “special announcement,” was not common in first-century literature, but it did turn up in inscriptions praising the reforms brought by the Emperor Augustus (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.). As far as we know, Paul was the first Christian to adopt this term as the watchword of his mission. He had a special announcement about Jesus’ death, resurrection, and imminent return. It was an odd-sounding word, made into a kind of technical term by Paul. When we translate it as “gospel,” a word that is safe and familiar to us from church preaching and even music, we rob it of the impact that it had on Paul’s hearers. We intensify this problem when we apply the word to the first four documents of the NT, which do not claim to be “gospels.” Similarly, when Paul took over the old Greek word for a political *assembly* (ekklēsia) for the little house groups of his followers, he had no idea that it would become ossified in English as “church,” with all the connotations of organizations and stone buildings that word has for us. Why not recover the authors’ original sense with a word such as “assembly”?

Other obvious cases of traditional language being preserved by translators are “baptism,” “Lord,” “disciple,” “faith,” and “Jew.” Although the first rule of translation is to avoid simple transliteration (representing the letters of the foreign word in English) where possible, baptism is merely a transliteration of the Greek *baptismos*. But *baptismos* had a long history in Greek before Christianity was born, so when the first Christians used this word for their practice of “dipping” or “immersing” converts, it did not have the holy aura that “baptism” has for us. John was simply “the Dipper”—a bit of an odd-sounding expression then, as it would be now if we translated it this way.

The Greek *kyrios* had many applications in everyday life, but always for someone above oneself in the social pyramid: a husband, master, respected man, or patron. When we translate it as “Lord,” once again we create a particularly religious aura that it did not have in antiquity.

Another English word with a big aura is “disciple,” though it translates a Greek word (*mathētēs*) that simply meant “learner” or “student.” That the early Christian writers would call Jesus’ followers “students” is possibly significant for understanding how Jesus’ group appeared to others, but we obscure all of this by using an unfamiliar or archaic word like *disciple*.

Likewise, the simple Greek words *pistis* and *pisteuō* (“trust” as noun and verb, respectively) have been permanently reconfigured in church English as “faith” and “believe,” which again might evoke all sorts of images from our experience that were foreign to the first Christians.

And the Greek term *Ioudaios* was an ethnogeographical label, meaning “someone from *Ioudaia* (Judea),” a form precisely matching “Babylonian,” “Egyptian,” or
“Syrian.” When we render it as “Jew” we obscure the ancient connotations of recent immigrant from the extreme East of the empire, member of a small subject nation made famous by the great King Herod, follower of the lawgiver Moses.

The NRSV translation, which we have chosen to use for the Reader, though it is excellent in many respects, and the product of international experts, preserves all these traditional but misleading translations. We nevertheless chose the NRSV for two main reasons. First, we did not want to make a new translation, both because of the excessive time required and because we did not want discussion of the translation to detract from the main idea of the book. Better to use a standard version, and the NRSV is as close as one comes to a new standard. Second, since this is a book principally designed to introduce the writings of early Christianity, we wanted it to be usable alongside the other main tools, such as gospel synopses and concordances, that exist for the NRSV but not for the more adventurous (though perhaps more literal) translations.

Even while the NRSV preserves customary translations of some key terms, it also makes a few innovations—also motivated by contemporary church use—that are equally problematic from a historical perspective. The world of the first Christians was pervasively patriarchal: adult males controlled almost everything. Ancient texts reflect this patriarchy, with their tendency to default to masculine words such as “man/men” and “brothers,” masculine word endings (in languages in which all words are gendered), and masculine pronouns. This is the case even in the earliest Christian writings, though Paul (at least) gives some indications that women were welcomed on a more equal footing in his assemblies than in the world at large (see 1 Cor. 1:11; 7:10–16; 11:12; Gal. 3:28; Rom. 16:1).

What to do, then, when early Christian authors address their hearers as “brothers”? The NRSV translators have responded by removing most of the NT’s traditional masculine language. The argument for doing this is that, since Paul (for example) clearly included women in his assemblies with full status, he cannot have intended to address men only. So the NRSV usually renders the Greek adelphoi (“brothers”) as “brothers and sisters,” sometimes as “believers” (1 Cor. 6:5–8). Where Paul speaks of Christians as “sons” (Gk huioi) of God, the NRSV gives “children” (Rom. 8:14). As laudable as this translation practice may be in a church context, it creates problems when we set the texts in historical context. The Greek language was entirely capable of saying “sister” or “daughter” when that was intended, and therefore it is important that Paul still reflects his patriarchal environment in his language. When he speaks of “sons” of God in Romans 8, it is with intent, since (rightly or wrongly) the son was the heir in antiquity. An interesting case is 1 Cor. 7:15, where Paul actually uses both “brother” and “sister,” but since the NRSV has been routinely translating “brother” alone as “brother and sister,” it cannot signal Paul’s change of language.

Any translation is open to criticism because it is inevitably one interpretation. The comments above are not meant to heap blame on the NRSV translation that we have chosen to use: it is as good as any and better than most. Our purpose is merely to remind the reader that he or she is never seeing simply what the first Christians
wrote but an interpretation of it, one that is necessarily conditioned by the translators’ purposes.

**What the First Christians Wrote and What We Read**

An even more basic reason why what we read is not what the first Christians wrote is simply that what they wrote *no longer exists*. They wrote on papyrus rolls wrapped around sticks (“scrolls”). Papyrus was fairly durable, better than many kinds of paper today, but still it succumbed to humidity and eventually deteriorated. All the rolls on which the first Christians wrote their letters, essays, histories, and biographies have disappeared. Fortunately, some Christians took it upon themselves to copy those texts, and then at least from the time that Christianity became a state-sponsored religion in the fourth century it had large copy houses, known as *scriptoria*, at its disposal. In these rooms, one could achieve a kind of mass production by having someone read from a master copy while scribes seated in the room copied down what they heard. Predictably, this copying led to numerous errors, whether from the reader’s oversight (missing or duplicating lines, or misreading an abbreviation) or from the copyists’ misunderstanding (through lost concentration or in cases of sound-alikes). Also, some scribes took it upon themselves to “correct” what they took to be errors in the copies they saw.

The result of this long process is that, although we no longer possess the original texts of what the early Christians wrote, we have some 5,400 manuscripts (i.e., “handmade writings”) that represent copies, dating from the second to the fifteenth centuries of this era. The very earliest known manuscript is a fragment of a few lines of *John* 18 (Q52), dating 125–150 C.E., and a few larger fragments exist from the late second and third centuries. But our earliest complete copies of the *NT* writings are on parchment (animal skin) and in book form, from the time at which Christianity began to enjoy governmental support (ca. 350 C.E.).

From the middle of the fifteenth century, when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, it was possible to make exact copies. But our 5,400 manuscripts from before that time are by no means identical; they include about 300,000 variations or “variant readings.” The vast majority of these are of little significance, but some raise extremely significant questions. For example, the famous story of the woman caught in adultery (*John* 7:53–8:11) probably does not belong in *John* at all, since the best manuscripts either omit it or place it in *Luke*.

One might hope that the earliest manuscripts have the best chance of representing the originals, and that principle has some merit. The problem is that because our earliest complete manuscripts come only from the middle of the fourth century, we must still reckon with 250–300 years between the time of writing and our earliest copies. This is more than enough time for small changes to have crept in to

---

2Codex Sinaiticus (N), dating from about 350, has the entire *NT*. Codex Vaticanus (B), dating from the same time, has all the main texts but is missing *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Revelation*, and part of *Hebrews*. 
even our “best” manuscripts. Sometimes a chronologically later manuscript might contain a less corrupted reading. Sometimes the original reading may be beyond our grasp altogether.

Therefore, although one often hears appeals to “the original Greek,” this is quite a misleading expression. The Greek text used by all modern translations (NRSV, JB, NIV) is the creation of literary detectives who sift through the various manuscript readings and decide what was most likely in the original. Often they are unsure. But almost every reader of the NT, whether in church or elsewhere and whether reading in English, another modern language, or ancient Greek, is inescapably dependent upon the judgments of these historians. The “Greek NT” does not exist apart from their efforts.

So, what we read in English is but one interpretation of a Greek text that has itself been hypothetically reconstructed from thousands of manuscript variants. This observation should be a constant reminder as to just how far removed we are from the world of the first Christians. It should also prevent us from putting too much interpretative weight upon a single word or phrase until we verify the Greek text.

Scripture in Earliest Christianity

A fourth way in which use of the Christian Bible or NT dulls historical sensitivity is that it invites us to treat the writings of Paul or biographers of Jesus as scripture. Here are Paul’s letters placed between the same covers as Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah! Of course, these early Christian writings are now scripture for the church, and they have been for many centuries. But they were not scripture when they were written, not for their first readers. If our goal is to think historically about these texts, to put ourselves in the sandals of the first readers, then we too should abandon the designation “scripture” when reading them. But the use of the NT tends to entrench that hallowed designation.

Let us elaborate. When Paul and his contemporary Christians cited “scripture” or “what stands written,” they invariably referred to the old and sacred writings of the Judeans. Their Bible was roughly equivalent to what Christians now call the Old Testament (OT). But it was not widely titled the Old Testament, of course, until there was a body of writing called the New Testament (NT), and that did not happen until Tertullian’s time (ca. 200 C.E.). We say “roughly equivalent” because the early Christian authors show a marked preference for Greek translations of the Bible, though the Bible was originally written in Hebrew (with brief Aramaic sections). Moreover, it is not clear that the arrangement of the Greek Bibles known to the Christians were the same as the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible, if there was a single standard at all in the first century. And specialists are not yet in complete agreement as to whether all the books now in the Christian OT were recognized as scripture, or indeed whether more books might have been accepted as scripture by some significant Jewish groups. These are all thorny issues.
Nevertheless, it is clear that Jewish scripture served as scripture also for the first Christians. This does not mean that they all wished to observe the Torah brought down by Moses from Mount Sinai (see Exodus 20–40). Some did; some did not. But most Christians saw in Jesus, and so in their faith, the “fulfillment” of some age-old biblical hopes for restoration or the “reign of God.” So they read this Bible through the lens, as it were, of Jesus—always looking for passages in it that might be applied to Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection, or exaltation to heaven. Since the number of such passages cited by the first Christian authors is relatively small, and a few tend to be repeated often, it may be that most Christians did not consult the scriptures firsthand—physically difficult in any case, since they would have to manage numerous scrolls with no chapter, verse, or word divisions!—but rather cited from lists of favorite “proof texts.” (See APPENDIX D.)

Whereas Jewish scripture was clearly authoritative for the first Christians, Paul’s letters reveal that his letters did not hold the status of scripture when they were first read. Paul often struggles to convince his readers of a point, even to remain committed to his “announcement,” and he expresses real fear that they will not do so (Gal. 1:6; 4:11). Sometimes Paul’s readers have forthrightly challenged or even ridiculed him (1 Cor. 4:3–5, 18; 2 Cor. 2:5; 7:12; 10:10). Not infrequently he expresses sharp anger, denouncing other Christian leaders (2 Cor. 11:4–5, 13; Gal. 1:8; 2:11). Although he perhaps tries his best to interpret God’s will, he plainly admits that he is sometimes giving his opinion (1 Cor. 7:12, 25). Some other Christians even dismissed his right to call himself an apostle (1 Cor. 9:2). All this means that neither Paul nor his first readers understood his letters as immediate divine revelation.3

As we shall see in the introduction to BIOGRAPHY, ANECDOTE, AND HISTORY, none of those texts enjoyed any special recognition at their time of writing either. The author of Luke (1:1–4) explicitly sets out to improve on the other accounts in circulation, which he knows and uses. Even though he does not say it, the author of Matthew plainly does the same thing. How, then, did the earliest Christian texts achieve the status of sacred scripture for the church? That question brings us to our fifth major issue for historically minded readers.

3Thus, when the author of 2 Timothy talks about the sacred writings that Timothy has known from childhood, which are valuable for instruction (3:1–16), he too means the Jewish scripture, as the context makes clear (“from childhood you have known” and the example in 3:8). Second Peter 3:16 presents a different case, for it includes Paul’s writings among the “scriptures.” Note first that the word rendered “scriptures” in English is an ordinary Gk word for “writings”; there is nothing explicit here about sacred or holy writings. The point may simply be that written statements by noted authorities are capable of being twisted, which is why many Christians did not like appeals to writings but preferred “living” oral traditions. (See Ignatius, Philadelphians 8; Papias in Eusebius, Eccl. hist. 3.39; Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies 1, in Eusebius, Eccl. hist. 5.11.1.) Second, most scholars consider 2 Peter a late document, not written by Peter. It assumes that Paul’s letters already exist in a well-known collection and are used by various groups for their own purposes. This presumably dates the work well after Paul’s death in the 60s. The discussion of the long delay of Jesus’ return in 3:1–10, which assumes that the apostles belong to a bygone age, also points to a rather late, perhaps second-century, date.
The Scope of Early Christian Literature and Formation of the Canon

The writings of the NT collection do not reflect the complete range of early Christian viewpoints. Remember that documents from antiquity have survived only if someone had the interest and resources to copy them at appropriate junc-
tures in history (i.e., before existing copies deteriorated too badly) or if they were hidden away in a very dry place (such as the Dead Sea coast or in parts of Egypt), where they might be discovered in our time. This means that the vast majority of ancient texts in general, and of Christian writings as a subset of those, have dis-
appeared. If even some of Paul’s own correspondence has been lost (see 1 Cor.
5:9; 2 Cor. 2:3; 7:8), we can understand how the writings of his opponents and of those who lost important debates in the following generations would have been neglected.

We know that there were such debates because, as we shall see in the introduc-
tion to THE LETTERS OF PAUL, his letters represent only one side of a conversation. And what he says makes it clear that he sharply disagreed with some other Chris-
tian leaders, perhaps on several fronts, about the significance of Jesus and what it meant to follow him properly. Since historians must attempt to create a picture of the way it was, not simply of the viewpoint that they might prefer, they must follow up on these differences of perspective. The clues within Paul’s letters, from the first Christian generation, make it easier for us to discern differences of perspective in the second and later generations, even in the major gospels.

It is a fascinating historical exercise to try to reconstruct a full-bodied three-
dimensional picture of Jesus’ followers in the first three or four generations—a kind of virtual reality. Fortunately, in addition to the NT there happen to be a few early texts that survived intact because they were widely read in at least some Chris-
tian circles, but did not make it into the NT. Of these, 1 Clement is the most obvious, since it is almost universally dated to the same period as some NT writings (the 90s); the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, written fifteen to twenty years later, are probably also contemporary with the latest NT writings. More controversial are the Didache, Gospel of Thomas, and Epistle of Barnabas, which come from later periods in their current forms but may well preserve Christian perspectives from the earli-
est period. Whether a secure case for early dating can be made or not, the historian is obligated to consider these and perhaps other texts in the effort to develop a re-
sponsible, complete picture of earliest Christian life and thought. And finally, we have numerous comments in the “church fathers,” Christian leaders of the second to fifth centuries C.E., which allude to varieties of early Christianity that did not survive.

If the writings now found in the NT were not considered scripture from the first moment, and were only a few of the many Christian documents in circulation, why did they survive while most of the others perished? And how did they come to be considered scripture? To make a long story short, three things happened.

First, it was natural that over time some writings would receive more recog-
nition, more citation, more use than others. These more widely used writings,
especially those that were thought to originate in the first generation or two (from an apostle’s authority), were gradually acquiring special status by about the middle of the second century.

Second, as some texts were naturally gaining relative prominence in this way, the churches were forced to begin to agree upon the precise nature of Christian teaching. Given the diversity of belief and practice among those who expressed allegiance to Jesus, what was essential, real “Christianity”? Christians faced bad press through much of the second and third centuries, especially with governments who considered their nighttime meetings of men and women a threat to social stability and perhaps morals. Wild stories about their behavior circulated, including claims that they practiced cannibalism and adultery—the same charges that had been made against the notorious secret cults of Dionysus long before. It did not help matters, perhaps, that some Christian groups appeared to take radical positions on the roles of women in church and relations between men and women. Questions of leadership, order, and belief were all wrapped up together: If Christians could agree in submitting to a kind of ordained leadership (in the bishops), then Christianity could hope to present a unified and respectable face to the world, some argued. The same tendencies that produced a hierarchical church leadership worked to identify some writings and not others as acceptable guides.

Third, while all of this was going on, a Christian leader named Marcion, from Pontus (northern Turkey), forced the issue whether the Christians should, after all, continue to use Jewish scripture. For Marcion this was a particular problem because he understood the religion of Jesus in a wholly non-Jewish way—as entirely spiritual, loving, and universal in contrast to what he perceived (lacking close knowledge) as an ethnic, vindictive, and material biblical religion. He went so far as to imagine that the creator God of the Jewish Bible was not the true God and father of Jesus, as Christianity elsewhere claimed. His passionate rejection of Jewish scripture as unsuited to Christianity provided the motive for him to assemble a purely Christian scripture. This consisted of Paul’s letters and Luke, because he thought that these authors alone understood the non-Jewish character of Christianity, though he edited even these texts to remove what he saw as judaizing corruptions.

Marcion’s writings have not survived except in snippets, sections quoted by his opponents for the purposes of rebuttal. That is because his radical disjunction between the God of the Bible and the father of Jesus was not widely shared. Most Christians considered the Jewish scripture indispensable, not because Gentile Christians actually observed its requirements (so far Marcion was right) but because it was thought to provide the ancient grounding for the appearance of Jesus; Christians understood it to point toward Jesus everywhere. This link with an ancient tradition was important in deflecting the criticism that Christianity was a “new superstition,” as outsiders often remarked. Nevertheless, Marcion’s challenge was an important catalyst in the definition of a new and Christian scripture. Although other Christians would add more to Marcion’s meager list of authoritative texts in controversy with him, he was the one who forced the issue.
From the late second to the late fourth centuries, then, these three motives (and, no doubt, others) coalesced to produce a body of recognized “New Testament” writings. As some Christian texts were proving popular in many locations, and Christians were needing to decide which documents best reflected what they believed, they responded to Marcion’s proposals by suggesting their own lists of authoritative books. It required two hundred years or more, however, for most Christians to agree on which texts were authoritative. We have a number of lists from the intervening period, but the first one that matches our NT comes in the Thirty-ninth Easter letter of Bishop Athanasius in 367 C.E.

To return to our original question: Much literature from the period of Christian origins has not survived to the present because it did not find a place in the “canon” (Gk kanôn: “rule” or “guide”). Here as elsewhere, the winners wrote history. This may be fine and understandable for the purposes of Christian tradition, but historians must try to reconstruct the full diversity of Christian perspectives as well as possible. They do this mainly by looking for small clues about other Christian groups and viewpoints. In addition, they turn to the small number of early texts that have survived from sheer popularity or chance discovery, even though they did not make it into the canon. All of this material together becomes evidence for a more realistic, three-dimensional historical picture.

The Historical Sequence of the Early Christian Texts

The final example of a historical issue that faces all NT readers is simply this: the NT’s arrangement of books is not based on historical criteria. When we read the NT, it seems to present a logical order, for the biographies of Jesus (the gospels) come before the story of the first-generation church (Acts) and the major writings of the first Christian generation (Paul’s and other apostolic letters). Every scholar in the field understands, however, that whereas Paul’s letters come from the generation immediately following Jesus’ life, the gospels and Acts were written in the second and possibly third generations. The evidence for this is in the documents themselves: Paul seems to have died during Nero’s reign (54–68 C.E.), and the time periods he specifies in his letters make him active as a Christian missionary from the 30s. The gospels, by contrast, are anonymous texts that show many signs of later composition. (See the introductions to THE LETTERS OF PAUL and BIOGRAPHY, ANECDOTE, AND HISTORY, for details.)

Even within these major blocks of material, the historical sequence is different from that of the NT. The NT arranges Paul’s letters from the longest to the shortest of those written to groups (Romans to 2 Thessalonians) and then from the longest to shortest of those written to individuals (1 Timothy to Philemon). As we might expect, this scheme does not correspond to the events. Internal evidence shows that 1 Thessalonians was (one of) the earliest and Romans (one of) the latest of his compositions. Although it might seem unimportant where one places the letters, as long as they are all included, the sequence has mattered a great deal in the past. The
elaborate and sophisticated Romans, partly because it stands at the head of Paul’s letter collection, has typically served as the gateway to understanding Paul; his other letters have been fit in around this “mature” statement. But Romans gives an unusual impression of the apostle, one that would not be obvious at all if one started with any other letter. Why not start with the earliest glimpse of Paul, 1 Thessalonians, and build a historical picture from there?

With respect to the gospels and Acts, the NT also presents an ahistorical picture. Today the vast majority of scholars, whether conservative or liberal, agree that Mark was probably the first gospel written, though the NT puts Matthew first, and that Luke and Acts were composed by a single second-generation author. The NT’s separation of Luke from Acts has its own logic (stories about Jesus come before stories about the church, and Luke belongs with Matthew and Mark, whereas John is different) but for historical purposes it is preferable by far to group texts by the same author and place them in proper sequence.

Making What Is Old and Familiar New Again

Here, then, is the problem in a nutshell. Everyone in the field of NT studies knows that treating these texts as scripture tends to obscure their historical significance. The NT is the church’s sacred book, originally formulated and still used for guidance within specific Christian religious contexts. This was not a collection made for historical study of Christian origins. From that historical point of view, the NT collection is somewhat arbitrary and anachronistic. Its very familiarity to students, from the church context, actually makes historical study of Christian origins more difficult. Strangely—since everyone knows this, and instructors must spend several weeks of a course explaining the principles described above in order to help students reimagine the NT world—strangely, we still ask students to bring a Christian Bible or a NT to classes on Christian origins. Here is an example of the medium’s contradicting the message.

To be sure, many such courses use one of the fine study Bibles available today. These study Bibles contain contributions from outstanding scholars, and they incorporate some historical information in their introductions and annotations. They also mention the most important textual variations—a function of the translations themselves. To the extent that they deal with the first three issues mentioned above, study Bibles go some distance toward helping students encounter these texts from a historical mindset. The problem is that, with respect to the latter three issues, the study Bibles actually undercut that significant accomplishment. They reinforce the anachronistic treatment of early Christian texts as scripture; they also anachronistically limit their scope to the canon; and they preserve the arbitrary canonical sequence of the included texts. It is difficult to see why these limitations need to be observed in textbooks designed for historical study in the public arena, at universities and colleges.
We prepared the *Early Christian Reader* because we found these restrictions unnecessary. Why not try to recover the range of early Christian viewpoints available by the early second century (the third Christian generation)? Why not include all the known texts from the period, ignoring the walls around the later canon, and put them in a plausible historical order? In making this innovation, we hope that we have taken over the best traditions of the study Bibles: adopting the translators’ notes on manuscript variants; discussing translation issues from time to time; and providing some significant links to the cultural context of early Christianity. But if there is truth in the cliché that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” then it simply makes good sense for those who study early Christian texts historically to use a sourcebook that is adequate to the task. Our primary aim has been to help such students read these documents in a new, historical light—to “taste them again for the first time.”

In addition to this theoretical aim, we admit to a practical one. We have tried to include enough of an orientation to the texts that the *Reader* might serve as an introductory textbook as well as a sourcebook. It is a perennial difficulty for those who teach Christian origins to find the right textbook—not because we lack such books, but rather because each instructor’s approach is so distinctive that existing books rarely seem to offer a close fit. Textbook authors must choose their own method around which to arrange their material, and this “angle” seldom matches the instructor’s precisely.

Of course, we have our angles too, not to mention those of our special contributors Michael Holmes, Robert Kraft, Stephen Patterson, and Jay Treat. Because our main purpose in the *Reader* is to provide the texts themselves, however, we do not need to present a strong overall interpretation of early Christianity. Our format might conceivably fit any number of course designs. To make the book potentially useful as a course text, we have included extensive introductions not only to the individual documents but also to the major sections (e.g., Paul’s letters, the gospels and *Acts*, Pauline tradition), so that students might gain a sense of the major scholarly developments in these areas.

Although the aims of the introductory essays should be self-evident, it might help if we clarify some issues pertaining to our notes. First, our goal has been minimalist: to facilitate historical reading of the texts. This has meant, first, explaining unfamiliar terms where we were able to do that. Second, we wanted to flag passages that have given rise to significant problems for interpreters. Third, even though we have made an effort to integrate the earliest Christian texts into their social environment, we obviously could not go far in this direction. Many excellent books introducing life in the Roman empire, the position of Jews and Christians within that world, and specific aspects of the environment (e.g., religious, philosophical, literary) already exist. We mention a few in the suggested reading below. Far from being comprehensive or even perfectly balanced, our notes are meant only to suggest a few important links. We hope that, in tracing them, curious readers will begin to discover the riches of the ancient world’s legacy, which is not limited to the Christian texts.
A special problem was created by the early Christians’ frequent citation of scripture. As all specialists know, these citations do not often match the Hebrew text that serves as the main basis for the Christian Old Testament. Although the texts in that collection were composed long before the birth of Christianity, and we now have extensive fragments of them among the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran (second century B.C.E. to first century C.E.), the text of the Hebrew Bible was formalized only in the ninth century C.E., in what is known as the Masoretic Text (MT). Since the early Christians lived in a Greek-speaking world, they preferred Greek translations of the Bible, which regularly differ from the Hebrew tradition that ended up in the MT. But their citations also disagree often with the “Septuagint” (abbreviated LXX), which is the classic form of the Greek Bible known to us from fourth-century C.E. manuscripts. Indeed, sometimes we cannot find a good parallel to the Christian citation in any known version of the Jewish Bible, whether the MT, the LXX, or other biblical traditions. Did the Christians deliberately change texts to make a point, or did they use texts (or oral traditions) that we do not know?

To complicate matters further, the Greek Bible (LXX) frequently uses a citation system (chapter and verse) that differs from the Hebrew Bible’s (MT), and sometimes also from the Christian OT’s, which is a hybrid.

Rather than comment on all these complexities in each case—an area of study all by itself—we have taken the following route. Where the Christian citation closely matches both MT and LXX, we simply give a reference to the passage in question. Where only the numbering system differs, we give both MT and LXX references. Where the Christian quotation matches the LXX, but not the MT, we give the reference(s) and also quote the pertinent section of the divergent MT. To help convey some sense of the original Hebrew idiom to the English-speaking student, we have used, with permission, the excellent translations of the Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. Where the Christian citation differs from both MT and LXX, we quote the MT according to the JPS translation and also quote the LXX. In quoting the LXX, it made sense to follow the translation we used for the Christian author (usually NRSV) as long as the Greek matched; we used different English words only to highlight differences in Greek between the Christian citation and the LXX.

Our hope is that the Early Christian Reader will provide substantial help to all readers of early Christian literature who wish to think themselves back into the real circumstances of the authors and first readers.

For Further Reading

INTRODUCTION