

Lecture Four

Birth of the Christian Bible

Scope: One Jewish sect of the 1st century, which quickly became a Gentile rather than a Jewish movement, also read the Jewish Bible in its Greek form (the Septuagint), from a perspective established by the death and resurrection of Jesus, whose followers called him Christ and Lord. Christian writers engaged the Jewish Scripture in their effort to communicate and understand the meaning of their own experiences and are legitimately regarded as a form of sectarian Jewish interpretation. The 4 Gospels, 21 Letters, and 1 apocalyptic composition that comprise the earliest Christian literature all seek to place Jesus and their experience of him within the longer story of Israel, but do so in a manner that marks them as distinctive and the start of an unanticipated sequel to that story. Indeed, the virtually simultaneous birth of Christianity and the birth of the codex will also give distinctive shape to the Christian form of the Bible.

Outline

- I. The process by which the New Testament came into being is best understood by being placed within the context of a divided 1st-century Judaism.
 - A. This literature is produced in circumstances different than those that generated Torah.
 1. In contrast to centuries of community life in ancient Israel, Christianity produced its formative literature within roughly 70 years.
 2. In contrast to a literature formed out of the cult and court of a nation, the New Testament arose out of the religious claims of a Jewish sect.
 3. In contrast to working in the Hebrew language, the New Testament was written entirely in Greek and interpreted the Greek Scriptures (LXX).
 4. In contrast to Torah, which remained and remains the text of the Jewish people, the New Testament everywhere reflects the inclusion of Gentiles.

- B.** There are also some points of similarity to the development of Torah.
1. The writings undoubtedly emerged from community experience, but there is even less confirming archaeological evidence for earliest Christianity than for ancient Israel.
 2. Both oral and scribal activities were involved in the process of composition, but it is not always possible to distinguish them.
 3. The dating of compositions and the relationships among them are a matter of scholarly guesswork, with few external controls to provide certainty.
 4. The rapid and prolific production of a body of literature suggests certain social dynamics in earliest Christianity, but even more, its place within a highly literary Jewish and Gentile world.

C. Four factors in particular account for the overall shape of the New Testament compositions:

1. The fundamental starting point for the religion and for its reflection is the conviction that Jesus is Lord, not only resurrected from the dead but exalted to the status of God.
2. The fundamental issue that the first Christians needed to resolve was the manner of Jesus' death: Crucifixion created a cognitive dissonance with both Jewish and Greco-Roman ideas of how God works.
3. Not only the experience of the resurrection but the continuing experiences—both positive and negative—of believers within communities needed to be addressed and interpreted.
4. The framework for the interpretation of Jesus and of the “New Creation” and “New Covenant” was the text of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of Torah.

II. In various ways and in diverse literary genres, the first Christian writings sought to interpret the story of Jesus in the past, in the present (in the lives of believers), and in the future (in God's final triumph).

A. The earliest datable Christian compositions took the form of letters written by leaders of the movement to communities (*ekklesia* = “church”).

1. Thirteen letters are ascribed to the Apostle Paul, who began as a Jew, persecuted the movement, and then became a missionary to Gentiles. Seven letters (Romans, Galatians, 1

and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon) are certainly by Paul, while three (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians) are disputed, and three others (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus) are rejected by many scholars as pseudonymous.

2. Eight other letters were ascribed to known leaders (1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; James; Jude) or were anonymous (Letter to the Hebrews). Some of these may well be very early (James, Hebrews); others are almost certainly late (2 Peter).
 3. Characteristic of these letters is a practical focus on the moral life of specific communities, an appreciation both for the death and resurrection of Jesus and his continuing presence, and—in most—an intense engagement with the symbolic world of the Septuagint.
- B.** During the time when the earliest letters were being addressed to communities, the memory of Jesus was handed on in communities and, sometime around 70 C.E., began to be literarily shaped in the form of Gospels (*euangelion* = “good news”).
1. The earliest Gospel is attributed to Mark; within 15 years, it was used as a source (together with another collection of sayings, called Q, and other materials) by Matthew and Luke in the composition of their respective narratives. The close literary relationship among Mark, Matthew, and Luke is expressed by the term *Synoptic Gospels*.
 2. The author of the Gospel of Luke extended his version of the good news into a second volume, which has come to be called the Acts of the Apostles: It provides a selective and theologically weighted account of Christian beginnings with a particular focus on Peter and Paul.
 3. Characteristic of the Gospels is the presentation of Jesus’ ministry of teaching and wonder-working, his conflicts with religious authorities, and his death and resurrection. Implicit in the depiction of Jesus and his disciples (*mathetai* = “students”), however, is moral instruction of the readers. The Gospel of John (also called the Fourth Gospel) provides a distinctive account of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection, not dependent literarily on the other Gospels but using some of the same traditions.

- C. The Book of Revelation, like its literary prototype, the Book of Daniel, is a mixed genre of letters to the churches of Asia Minor (chapters 1–3) and heavenly visions by John the Seer (chapters 4–21), which assure readers that God’s ultimate triumph in history is grounded in the exaltation of Jesus to God’s throne.
- D. The writings of the “New Testament” are the earliest known Christian compositions, although there is no “New Testament” as such in the earliest period.
 - 1. There may well have been many more things written in the first generations that have been lost.
 - 2. There were certainly a great many things written in the first half of the 2nd century.
 - 3. Some of these writings (the Apostolic Fathers) clearly acknowledge a secondary position with regard to earlier compositions.
 - 4. Others of these writings (New Testament Apocrypha) seem rather to continue or even compete with earlier compositions.

III. In the first of many technological changes that affect the story of the Bible, the New Testament compositions were predominantly written on the codex rather than the scroll.

- A. Ancient “books,” including those of the Jewish Scriptures, were written on scrolls, made up of papyrus or parchment and stitched together in rolls; writing could be on only one side, and texts were limited by the length of the scroll. Specific passages, furthermore, could be found only by “unscrolling.”
- B. The *codex* is a compilation of “pages” (usually of papyrus), folded and stitched together in quires to form a “book” in the proper sense. The codex was cheaper, more mobile, could contain more text, and allowed easier access to specific passages in a composition.
- C. The codex appears for the first time in the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E. and, from the first, is associated with Christian literature.

Essential Reading:

Gospel of Luke, Acts of the Apostles, Romans.

Supplementary Reading:

L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare and contrast the literary production of the first Christians and of the Essenes at Qumran: What did the “Bible” look like for each group, and from what perspective was it interpreted?
2. How might the codex form of earliest Christian writings have aided in the spread of this movement and in maintaining communication among communities?