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THINKING ABOUT THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

People have been reading and studying the New Testament for as long as its documents have been in existence. Even before all twenty-seven canonical New Testament books were written, some found the interpretation of the available documents more than a little challenging (see the comment of 2 Pet. 3:15–16 regarding Paul). A distance of two millennia, not to mention changes of language, culture, and history, have not made the task any easier. The torrential outpouring of commentaries, studies, and essays across the centuries, all designed to explain—or in some cases, explain away—the New Testament documents, makes the task both easier and harder. It is easier because there are many good and stimulating guides; it is harder because the sheer volume of the material, not to mention its thoroughly mixed nature and, frequently, its mutually contradictory content, is profoundly daunting to the student just beginning New Testament study.

This chapter provides little more than a surface history of a selection of the people, movements, issues, and approaches that have shaped the study of the New Testament. The student setting out to come to terms with contemporary study of the New Testament must suddenly confront a bewildering array of new disciplines (e.g., text criticism, historical criticism, hermeneutics), the terminology of new tools (e.g., form criticism, redaction criticism, discourse analysis, postmodern readings), and key figures (e.g., F. C. Baur, J. B. Lightfoot, E. P. Sanders). Students with imagination will instantly grasp that they do not pick up New Testament scrolls as they were dropped from an apostolic hand; they pick up a bound sheaf of documents, printed, and probably in translation. Moreover, the text itself is something that believers and unbelievers alike have been studying and explaining for two millennia.

The aim here, then, is to provide enough of a framework to make the rest of this textbook, and a lot of other books on the New Testament, a little easier to understand.

PASSING ON THE TEXT

At the beginning of his gospel, Luke comments that “many others” had already undertaken to write accounts of Jesus (Luke 1:1–4). Although some scholars have argued that there was a long period of oral tradition before anything substantial about Jesus or the early church was written down, the evidence is against such a stance: the world into which Jesus was born was highly literate.¹ From such a perspective, the existence of the documents that make up the New Testament canon is scarcely surprising.

These documents were originally hand-written on separate scrolls. There is very good evidence that the writing was in capital letters, without spaces, and with very little punctuation. Printing was still almost a millennium and a half away, so additional copies were made by hand. In theory, this could be done by professional copiers: in a scriptorium, one man would read at dictation speed, several scribes would take down his dictation, and another would check each copy against the original, often using ink of a different color to make the corrections. This kind of professional multiplying of copies was labor-intensive and therefore expensive. Most early Christian copies of the New Testament were doubtless done by laypeople eager to obtain another letter by Paul or a written account of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That brought the price down: Christians were investing their own time to make their own copies, and they were not having to pay large sums to professional scribes. On the other hand, the private copy made by an eager and well-meaning layperson was likely to include more transcriptional errors than copies made and checked in a scriptorium.

How the New Testament canon came together is briefly discussed in the final chapter of this book. For the moment it is sufficient to observe that as the numbers of copies of New Testament documents multiplied, three formal changes were soon introduced. First, the scroll gave way to the codex, that is, to a book bound more or less like a modern book, which enabled readers to look up passages very quickly without having to roll down many feet of scroll. Second, increasingly (though certainly not exclusively) the capital letters (scholars call them “uncials”) gave way to cursive scripts that were messier but much more quickly written. And third, because the early church, even within the Roman Empire, was made up of highly diverse groups, it was not long before the New Testament, and in fact the whole Bible, was translated into other languages. These “versions” of the Bible (as translations are called) varied widely in quality.² There were no copyright laws and no central publishing houses, so there were

¹See especially Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

²The best survey is Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

soon numerous Latin versions, Syriac versions, and so forth, as individuals or local churches produced what seemed necessary for their own congregations.

Today the printing press churns out thousands of *identical* copies. When each copy is written by hand, however, if the work is of substantial length, each copy will be a little different than all others because the accidental mistakes introduced by successive copying will not all congregate in the same place. The challenge of producing a copy that is perfectly true to the original soon multiplies. A slightly later Christian, making a copy of a copy, spots what he judges to be mistakes in the manuscript before him and corrects them in his fresh copy. Unfortunately, however, it is possible that some things he *thought* were mistakes were actually in the original. For instance, it is well known that there are many grammatical anomalies in the book of Revelation. The reason for this is disputed; there are three major theories and several minor ones. But a later copyist might well have thought that errors had been introduced by intervening copyists and “corrected” them to “proper” grammar—thereby introducing new errors.

Two further “accidents” of history and geography have helped to determine just what material has come down to us. First, just as the Roman Empire divided between East and West (stemming from the decision of Emperor Constantine to establish an eastern capital in what came to be called Constantinople), so also did the church. In the West, because it was not only the official language of Rome but also tended in time to squeeze out Greek as the *lingua franca*, Latin soon predominated in the church. Initially, there were many Latin versions, but toward the end of the fourth century, Damasus, Bishop of Rome, commissioned Jerome to prepare an official Latin version that would be widely distributed and sometimes imposed throughout the churches of the West. This Latin version, revised several times, became the Vulgate, which held sway in the West for a millennium. By contrast, Greek dominated in the East, in what eventually became the Byzantine Empire. Inevitably, Greek manuscripts were used and copied much more often under this linguistic heritage than in the West, until Constantinople fell to the Muslim Turks in 1453. Many Eastern scholars then fled West, bringing their Greek manuscripts with them—a development that helped to fuel both the Reformation and the Renaissance.

Second, the material on which ancient books were written (i.e., their equivalent of paper) decomposed more readily in some climates than in others. The most expensive books were made of *parchment*, treated animal skin. Higher quality parchment was called *vellum*. More commonly, books were made of *papyrus*, a plant that grew plentifully in the Nile Delta. Papyrus has the constituency of celery or rhubarb. Long strips could be peeled off, pounded, and glued together to make sheets. Although parchment is tougher than papyrus, both materials are organic and thus readily decompose, especially when there is moisture in the atmosphere. So it is not surprising that the best caches of really ancient manuscripts come from the hot, dry sands of Egypt.

There are about five thousand manuscripts or parts of manuscripts (some of them mere fragments) of all or part of the Greek New Testament.

So just what textual evidence has come down to us? There are about five thousand manuscripts or parts of manuscripts (some of them mere fragments) of all or part of the Greek New Testament, and about eight thousand manuscripts or parts of manuscripts of versions. All of this evidence can be classified in various ways. For example, one can break it down according to writing material (parchment or papyrus). More importantly, *uncial* manuscripts of the Greek New Testament (i.e., those written in capital letters) number under three hundred, whereas there are almost three thousand *miniscules* (manuscripts not written in capitals). In addition, there are over two thousand *lectionaries*—church reading books that contain selections of the biblical text to be read on many days of the ecclesiastical year. Other sources include quotations of the Bible found in the early church fathers, and short portions of New Testament writings on *ostraca* (pieces of pottery often used by poor people as writing material) and amulets,³ ranging from the fourth to the thirteenth century. Similar breakdowns can be put forward for all the versional evidence. Although most of this material springs from the thousand-year period between A.D. 500 and 1500, the earliest fragments come from the first half of the second century.

It is useful to observe that of all the works that have come down to us from the ancient world, the New Testament is the most amply attested in textual evidence. For example, for the first six books of the *Annals*, written by the famous Roman historian Tacitus, there is but a single manuscript, dating from the ninth century. The extant works of Euripides, the best-attested of the Greek tragedians, are preserved in 54 papyri and 276 parchment manuscripts, almost all of the latter deriving from the Byzantine period. The history of Rome by Velleius Paterculus came down to us in one incomplete manuscript, which was lost in the seventeenth century after a copy had been made. By comparison, the wealth and range of material supporting the Greek New Testament is staggering.

The printing press made the hand-copying of manuscripts forever obsolete. The first printed edition of the Greek New Testament appeared on 10 January 1514. It was volume 5 of a polyglot Bible commissioned by the cardinal primate of Spain, Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros (1437–1517). Printed in the town of Alcalá, called Complutum in Latin, the work came to be known as the Complutensian Polyglot Bible. Volume 5 also contained the first printed Greek glossary, the progenitor of countless lexicons that have been published since then.⁴

³Amulets are charms, often worn around the neck to ward off assorted evils. Some amulets were simply “magic” stones or the like, but others were sayings or cherished quotations written on papyrus, vellum, potsherd, or wood. Where superstition overlaid Christian faith, inevitably some of these quotations were biblical. Obviously, neither ostraca nor amulets can provide evidence for extensive passages.

⁴For further reading, see John A. L. Lee, *A History of New Testament Lexicography*, SBG 8 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).