
THE NEW TESTAMENT

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION



EDWIN D. FREED

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The illustration on the cover is a detail of a mosaic found in the vault of the upper loggia of the Church of S. Vitale, Ravenna, depicting the mystic lamb.

PREFACE

The Bible, which has influenced the thought, literature, institutions, and values and mores of Western culture for almost two thousand years, consists of the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT). While the OT is a collection of religious writings fundamental to the Jewish religion, both the OT and the NT are the sacred scriptures of the Christian religion. The purpose of this introductory text is to help the interested reader learn about and participate in critical study of the NT.

This book is written for students and other lay people who have had no formal training in NT studies. Although it is not to be considered a “popular” book—the kind that usually oversimplifies material and presents it so rapidly that the book rarely challenges the thoughtful and intelligent reader—this text is written with very little of the technical language used in more advanced works. However, in order to satisfy the intellectual appetites of the very curious readers, some sections are particularly detailed. For those who are less enthusiastic, a cursory reading of those sections will provide insight into the complex issues involved in the critical study of the NT. Through use of the most recent information available and through modern techniques of biblical study, this book provides a critical and objective introduction to NT study.

The book’s aim is to inform, not to convert, and to educate, not to indoctrinate. Evidence supporting diverse interpretations of the NT is presented to inform and enlighten the reader on subjects about which certainty is too often assumed. This text, therefore, is designed for the thoughtful and open-minded reader who is willing to go beyond denominational and romantic approaches.

Convinced that it is best to study the NT in light of the settings out of which the writings originated, I have included a general introduction to subjects important for understanding these settings. To help clarify the specific situation or problems addressed by each writer, the book also includes introductions to each NT writing. In this way the reader today can better understand how each writer’s first readers probably understood what the writer was saying.

This text has three major divisions. It begins with Jesus and the gospels, since that is where the NT begins. Acts and Paul’s letters are treated next, in Part II, because Acts records the earliest history of Christianity after the conclusion of Jesus’ ministry. Acts also provides an introduction to the life and work of the apostle Paul. Part III considers the rest of the NT writings, which come from times of persecution and controversy. The introductions to each group of writings in Part III explain why the sequence is rather arbitrary.

This book should be used with a modern translation of the NT. The reader should also use a text of the first three gospels printed in parallel columns. The one I have used is *Gospel Parallels* (Nashville: Nelson, 1967). Unless indicated otherwise, translations from classical and Jewish writers are my own. However, I have used several different translations by other scholars, to whom I acknowledge my debt in this general way.

Because of the nature of this book, the footnotes have been kept to a minimum. Those given are intended both to encourage the reader to do further study and to acknowledge the contributions of other scholars. However, I am indebted to many more scholars, both from this country and abroad, than are cited. I hereby express my appreciation to all whose work may be reflected in this book.

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Very special and warm thanks go to my wife Ann for the photographs in this book—which are reproduced from her color slides—for many thoughtful suggestions, for always being around to give loving assurance and assistance, and especially for her help with the indexing.

Finally, for friendly encouragement and invaluable help with the writing, I am most grateful to our daughter Jane Freed Roberts, to whom this book is affectionately dedicated.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

Key Dates	Important Events in Jewish and Christian History
332–331 B.C.	Palestine conquered by Alexander the Great.
198–142 B.C.	Palestine under the control of the Seleucids.
165 B.C.	Religious freedom won by Judas Maccabee. First Hanukkah.
143–142 B.C.	Political freedom won by Jonathan and Simon Maccabee.
125 B.C. (?)	Qumran becomes site of Jewish sect, probably Essenes. Pharisees and Sadducees come into prominence.
63 B.C.	Jerusalem and temple destroyed by Pompey of Rome.
37–4 B.C.	Palestine ruled by Herod the Great. Jesus born c. 6–4 B.C.
27 B.C.	
4 B.C.–A.D. 39	Rule of Herod's sons, Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip.
A.D. 14	
A.D. 26–36	Pilate procurator of Judea. John the Baptist and Jesus.
A.D. 37	
A.D. 41–44	Agrippa I, king of Judea. Disciple James executed. Jews expelled from Rome under Claudius.
A.D. 48–54	Paul visits Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus.
A.D. 54	
A.D. 56–64	Paul arrested in Jerusalem, tried, and taken to Rome.
A.D. 66–73	War of the Jews against Rome. Jerusalem and temple destroyed. End of temple worship, Sadducean party, and Sanhedrin. Pharisees and rabbis become teachers in Judaism.
A.D. 79	
A.D. 81–96	
A.D. 96	
A.D. 98	
A.D. 117–138	Bar Cochba leads Jewish revolt against Rome under Hadrian.

Roman Emperors**New Testament Writings****Key Dates**

Augustus		27 B.C.
Tiberius		A.D. 14
Gaius		A.D. 37
Claudius		A.D. 41–44
	1 and (?) 2 Thessalonians	A.D. 48–54
Nero	1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans	A.D. 54
	Philippians, Philemon, Colossians (?)	A.D. 56–64
Galba, Otho, Vitellius	Mark, Ephesians (?)	A.D. 66–73
Vespasian		
Titus	Matthew	A.D. 79
Domitian	Hebrews, 1 Peter, Revelation	A.D. 81–96
Nerva	Luke-Acts, John	A.D. 96
Trajan	Letters of John, James	A.D. 98
Hadrian	Jude, 2 Peter, pastoral epistles	A.D. 117–138

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INTRODUCTION

THE SETTINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament (NT), which contains twenty-seven of the Bible's sixty-six books, is a collection of religious literary works. The gospels, a distinctive literary form, begin this collection. They are followed by Acts, which is a history of the early church, and the letters of Paul. Then come other letters, written by a number of early Christians, and Revelation, representing a literary form known as *apocalypse* that is peculiar to Jews and Christians.

Study of the history, religion, and literature of the NT is important for several reasons. Most important, perhaps, it helps us understand the Christian religion. Historically, the NT provides knowledge about the life and teachings of Jesus, that famous teacher whose followers came to regard as not only human, but also divine. Furthermore, the NT informs us about the way the early Christians, or followers of Jesus, lived and thought. It also provides insights into the life and work of Paul, whose writings inspired the religious reformation of the sixteenth century, a move-

ment that gave birth to Protestantism as a separate entity from the Catholic church.

Since the Reformation, the NT has remained sacred scripture for both Catholicism and Protestantism, the two main divisions of Western Christian religion. Spiritually, the NT has inspired worship, study, and personal meditation for Christians throughout the world, and it has remained basic to Christian faith and practice. Beyond historical and spiritual significance, the NT, with the Old Testament (OT) of the modern Bible, has also had a major influence in shaping the systems of justice, governments, social institutions, and art of Western culture.

It is important to realize that for Jesus and his first followers neither the New Testament nor the Bible existed in the modern sense of those terms. Their "Bible" consisted of the sacred writings or scriptures of the Jews, which today are called the Old Testament; as you read this book, remember that the term *Old Testament (OT)* is actually a relatively modern designation for the Jewish scriptures.

The works that have survived in a collection known today as the New Testament were written by early Christians.

Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew from Galilee in ancient Palestine, was the inspiration for the whole NT. Jesus' first followers were all Jews, but gradually non-Jews, whom the Jews called Gentiles, also became his followers. All of these followers came to be called Christians, who formed religious communities known as churches, and the churches collectively formed an institution called the church. Members of the church wrote, collected, and published the diversified writings of the NT because they thought them useful for instruction in Christian faith and life. They did so during specific times in response to particular situations. In this chapter we will study the settings out of which the NT writings developed during the first century of the Christian era¹ to better understand how they originated and why they were written. This, in turn, can help provide insights into plausible interpretations of NT scriptures.

The first four books of the NT, the gospels, deal with the life and teachings of Jesus, and therefore are set in ancient Palestine, which was a part of the Roman Empire east of the Mediterranean. We will focus first on the history and government of Palestine as it was controlled by the Greeks, looking specifically at the influence of the complex phenomenon known as Hellenism—Greek culture as spread beyond Greece. Following our study of Palestine under Greek rule, we will examine its history and government under Roman rule. We will then examine peoples and languages, schools and education, and economic conditions to better understand the social and cultural background of the gospels.

Next we will look at Graeco-Roman religions and the Jewish religion in ancient Palestine to obtain an idea of the religious context in which Christianity developed. Because Jesus and most of his first followers were Jews, the early Christian church began as a

sect within Judaism. As that sect separated from its parent, its followers became mostly non-Jews, or Gentiles. Therefore, it is important to study not only Judaism in first-century Palestine, but also other religions and influences of that land.

We will then shift our attention from Palestine to the Hellenistic culture of the Roman Empire north of the Mediterranean, where the early Christian church grew and developed. Because key cities in this area became centers of early Christianity, we will focus first on Rome and her provinces under the emperors from Augustus to Trajan. To provide insights into the setting within which the early church developed, we will then examine Roman law, society, and culture as they affected early Christians.

Roman religion and philosophy are the final topics of this introductory chapter. It is impossible to appreciate the thought of the NT without some knowledge of Graeco-Roman religions and philosophy, which were the religious competition for early Christianity. We will review Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism, mystery religions, Gnosticism, magic, and Diaspora Judaism.

Remember that the conditions described in this chapter composed the setting for Christianity when it emerged as a small Jewish sect devoted to Jesus. Read this chapter, then, to gain insights into the environment in which Jesus lived and taught and in which the early Christians wrote the NT as the church grew into a religion of worldwide significance.

EAST OF THE MEDITERRANEAN:

PALESTINE AND SYRIA

The gospels are set east of the Mediterranean, in lands that included Palestine and Syria. Although Jesus of Nazareth came from

a northern region of ancient Palestine known as Galilee, when Palestine came under Greek rule in the fourth century B.C. most Jews lived in Judea, a southern region about forty-five miles square, comprised of Jerusalem and the surrounding country and villages. (See the map of Palestine during the ministry of Jesus on front endpaper.)

HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT UNDER THE GREEKS (334–63 B.C.)

From Alexander the Great to the Maccabean Rebellion (334–168 B.C.)

From the time of Alexander the Great of Macedonia (a kingdom north of Greece) to the conquests by Rome, the period of Greek rule over lands of the East is known as the Hellenistic Age. Outside the Greek mainland, Greek culture—including political, socioeconomic, and religious aspects—is known as Hellenism; its military peak was reached with Alexander's conquests. (See Figure I.1.) Those living under Greek rule who adopted Greek culture (Hellenists) often contributed to the erection of theaters, gymnasia, and other buildings; many used Greek as their only language, and even wore distinctive Greek clothes. The majority of native peoples, however, continued to follow their own customs and life-styles.

The process whereby Greek culture penetrated a region, especially its cities, is called Hellenization. To what degree Hellenization was effective in general is debatable, but it was very effective in creating an international language of commerce and communication. This is important to NT study because some groups living in foreign lands (for example, Jews in Alexandria, Egypt) gave up their native languages and used only Greek—requiring their scriptures, then, to be translated from Hebrew into Greek. That translation,

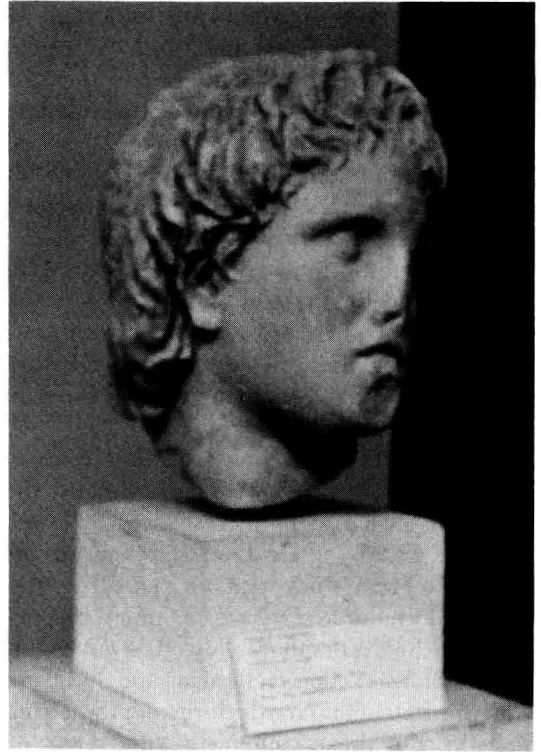


FIGURE I.1

Sculptured head of Alexander the Great as a youth, in the museum in Pella, Greece, his birthplace.

known as the Septuagint and abbreviated LXX (from the Latin “seventy,” because of the Jewish legend that seventy men independently had made the same translation), became the Bible used by Christians.

The Jews of Palestine came under Greek rule with the conquests of Alexander the Great and his Greek successors c. (circa or about) 332 B.C. Governmental affairs were in the hands of a high priest, the supreme political and religious leader, who was assisted by a body of aristocratic priests and older men known as the Gerousia. After Alexander's death in 323 B.C., his generals fought for control of his empire, which was divided into

three parts, two of which are important in Jewish history: Seleucia and Egypt. Seleucia, comprised of Syria, Phoenicia, and the surrounding regions north of Judea, was ruled by Greek enthusiasts from Antioch called Seleucids and Antiochids, and Egypt was ruled by Ptolemies, also Greek enthusiasts, from Alexandria. Until 198 B.C., Judea, the land of the Jews, was overrun by the forces of Seleucia and Egypt, who fought against each other to control it. Most of the time it was ruled by Ptolemies, who let the Jews live in comparative peace with their high priest in charge of local affairs.

In 198 B.C. Antiochus III (the Great) of Seleucia got control of Judea. Kind to the Jews, he settled many in new cities, allowed them to live by their laws, and eased tax burdens. From this point on, party politics among Jews themselves was as much responsible for the events that followed as any external conflict between Hellenism and Judaism. The pro-Seleucid party in Jerusalem was Hellenistic. But these Hellenists were regarded as unfaithful Jews by conservative Jews, who united under the name *Hasidim* (pious) and opposed all efforts of Hellenization.

Because Antiochus IV, successor to Antiochus III, offered the position of high priest to the highest financial bidder, the high-priesthood changed quickly several times, and a clash developed in Jerusalem between the priestly aristocracy and those who wanted to preserve the legitimacy and sanctity of the priestly office. Antiochus IV, realizing that the strength of Jewish nationalism lay in its religion, determined to eliminate the *Hasidim*. He forbade circumcision, sabbath observance, and reading of scripture. He built an altar to Zeus in the temple and sacrificed a pig, an unclean animal according to Jewish law. Subsequently, devout Jews from the family Hasmon (later called Maccabees) rose in revolt (1 and 2 Maccabees; Josephus, *Ant.* 12–14; *War* 1).

The Maccabean Interruption (168–63 B.C.)

Reaction of the Jews to the Hellenism of Antiochus IV was threefold. Some forsook their own religion and obeyed him (1 Macc 1:41–44, 52). The *Hasidim*, secretly following the law of Moses, passively resisted and preferred to die rather than submit. In the village of Mod-ein, some rural Jews under the Maccabees actively rebelled when an aged Jewish priest, Mattathias, killed a Syrian officer and a Jew because they were about to sacrifice to Zeus. Mattathias and his five sons, including Judas, Jonathan, and Simon—all intensely devoted to Judaism—fled to the hills, where a group of nationalists joined them. Although greatly outnumbered and sometimes severely defeated, they ultimately gained complete freedom for the Jews by resorting to guerilla warfare and clever diplomacy.

In 165 B.C. Judas won religious freedom for the Jews. He and his followers cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, restored regular Jewish worship, and instituted the first Hanukkah (Dedication), a festival commemorating the dedication of the temple. By saving Jewish religious freedom, Judas aroused a new sense of Jewish nationalism founded on the law given by God.

Jonathan (161–143 B.C.) and Simon (143–135 B.C.) carried on the struggle and won political independence for the Jews in 142 B.C. Then, during the time of Hyrcanus (135–104 B.C.), son of Simon, three major Jewish parties appeared: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes (discussed below). Aristobulus (104–103 B.C.) and Jannaeus (103–76 B.C.), sons of Hyrcanus, expanded the territory of the Jews and secured its borders. Intrigue and murder in the ruling family, however, helped to erode that security, and a struggle between the Pharisees and Sadducees erupted into civil war. Alexandra (76–67 B.C.), widow of Jannaeus, became a partisan of the Pharisees