

Fixing the New Testament

It's bloated, biased and it distorts history

Barrie Wilson, PhD
Professor, Humanities and Religious Studies,
York University, Toronto

1. Preface

The New Testament is highly treasured by all Christians. Traditional Christians such as Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and Anglicans rank the Bible coequal to tradition. Tradition reflects the decisions of the various ecumenical Church councils of the first five centuries as well as on-going theological insight into the truth of the faith. So, for the vast majority of Christians in the world today, tradition, along with the Bible, provides the basis for Christian belief.

On the other hand, Reformed Christians such as Reformation and Post-Reformation Protestants and Evangelicals place the Bible ahead of tradition and so use it to cut out some Catholic and Orthodox doctrines.

Whatever its relative ranking, however, from the perspective of Christian faith, the revered writings of the New Testament represent the key underpinning of theology and the Church. It provides the basis for the worship of Jesus and offers believers the promise of salvation. For many it represents the inspired Word of God.

Thus the New Testament undoubtedly represents a trusted, reliable source of information.

But is it?

This paper argues that the New Testament is bloated, biased and that its contents distort history. It's in urgent need of repair.

Strange as it may seem to some, there was no New Testament in the early Church. The idea of a "new" versus an "old" testament did not occur to anyone until the late 2nd century. Moreover, the contents of the present New Testament was not determined until the late 4th century – 367 to be precise. It stems from a list promulgated by Archbishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt. In time, other influential bishops agreed with his choices. Thus we came to have the 27 books he selected as the New Testament – out of dozens of early Christian writings available.

What's wrong with this selection? Why does it need fixing? How should it be repaired? What are the consequences for Christian faith today? These are the questions with which this book wrestles. These questions take us into foundational issues of early Christianity. The book is meant for those who are willing to explore, who enjoy hard questions and who are motivated by a genuine desire to sort out history accurately, not just to accept faith uncritically.

Others who do not wish to wrestle with their faith may find some of the questions and approaches disturbing. They may wish to turn around and not proceed with this line of inquiry.

So, to whet the appetite, here's where we are headed.

Biased?

Shaped by events and decisions in the 4th century, the writings that make up the New Testament reflect the literature of only one faction of early Christianity. It's the literature of the specific Christian community favored by the Roman Emperors Constantine and Theodosius, a group Bart Ehrman refers to as the "Proto-Orthodox."¹ Out of the many Christian faith communities – and many non-Christian religions as well -- these emperors endorsed one faction. It was the leaders of this group that created our present New Testament. Naturally, they weighted their authoritative scriptures with the writings they preferred.

So it is biased in the sense that it ignores the writings of many other early Christian groups, promoting only one view of the faith.

It is also biased in another sense: the New Testament itself reflects 4th century thinking. It reflects debates in that era that came to view Jesus as divine, Mary as special and Paul as the pre-eminent apostle – all highly contested views within early Christianity.

Thus the New Testament is unrepresentative of the many diverse groups that made up pre-Constantine Christianity. The literature of the Gnostic and Ebionite Christians in particular is excluded from the canon. The New Testament is as representative of early Christianity as it would be if we were to collect the encyclicals of Popes John Paul and Benedict today and say that these Catholic writings represent the literature of contemporary Christianity. Well, they do, in part and for many Christians, but Protestants, Orthodox, Anglicans, Evangelicals and many other groups would rightfully argue that their positions had been overlooked.

Just not fair.

Bloated?

The New Testament privileges Paul's theology. Of the 27 books that make up the New Testament, 14 are writings either by Paul or attributed to Paul. In addition, the large Book of Acts focuses primarily on the doings of Paul. So 15 out of 27 writings – more than 50% -- are devoted to Paul's perspective. In that sense the New Testament is bloated, top-heavy with Pauline Christian theology.

This was to be expected, for the segment of early Christianity that the Roman emperors favored were Pauline Christians.

The New Testament thus excludes other ways of understanding Jesus, his message and significance. Some Christian communities focused more than Paul did on Jesus' life and teachings.

¹ The term "Proto-Orthodox" is a convenient term coined by Bart Ehrman to refer to that faction of early Christianity which won out over all its rivals in the 4th century. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Surprisingly, they attributed little if any import to his suffering, death and resurrection. Their focus was on the promised Kingdom of God and they looked forward to its eventual manifestation on earth. So thought Jesus' first followers in Jerusalem, the "Jesus Movement" under James.

They also thought of him as human.

So, too, there were other ways of understanding redemption, not just as a sacrifice on the cross, an atonement for human sin – Paul's view. Some conceived of salvation as the result of a life-giving union between Jesus and the Heavenly Wisdom, Sophia. Some thought that what was at issue was not human sin but a fundamental rift within the cosmos. So contended the Gnostic Christians for whom Jesus was the messenger of the one true God, enlightening us with the knowledge of our true identity. That such a view may strike some readers today as strange is a testament to the power of Paul's perspective. It was, however, a familiar view within early Christianity as Gnostic Christians both promoted this view of salvation within their writings and celebrated the mystical union between Christ and Sophia within their sacraments.

The New Testament thus vastly overrates Paul's importance in the context of his own time. Where is James, Jesus' real successor, for instance? Where are the twelve disciples? Were they mere nobodies?

Are we supposed to see Jesus only through Paul's prism? His unique perspective?

Why privilege Paul the outsider, the leader who never knew the Jesus of history and who showed little interest in his life or teachings?

Distorts history?

As we read the New Testament critically, we find that it distorts history to suit theology. It selects writings that heighten Jesus' divinity, in keeping with Paul's theology that proposed looking at Jesus as a God who emptied himself, taking on human form – a divine-human, a Christ figure. The four canonical gospels included within the New Testament contain passages that reflect this view, unlike other gospels which do not. Theology drives selection.

Moreover, the New Testament

- obscures the Jesus of history
- hides his disciples
- ignores Jesus' influential brother (James)
- downplays the role of Mary Magdalene while enhancing the role of Mary Jesus' mother
- blames the Jews for the execution of Jesus rather than the Romans
- obscures the fact that there were many more early writings than just the ones found in the New Testament.

In so doing, the present New Testament contorts history in order to advance a polemical view of the origins of Christianity.

In their zeal to go beyond the constraints of tradition, the Protestant Reformers landed upon the Bible as the foundation of faith, especially the New Testament and the writings of Paul. The problem, however, is that the Reformers didn't go far enough. They didn't reach 1st century bedrock, just the 4th

century. A further rethinking of the faith and its foundation is required if Christian leadership and believers wish to be faithful to the Jesus of history and to the movement he created.

We need to imagine what a revised New Testament would look like. Is it time to fix the Bible? Should the canon of the New Testament be reopened to reflect the views of contemporary scholarship and the interests of those who value historical accuracy rather than polemics?

2. The Problem

Jesus promised us eternal life in the Kingdom of God. That was his message. He assured his audiences that world transformation was in the offing. It was coming soon, within the lifetime of his hearers. That's what they were led to expect – life without end in the world that God intended for humanity. There was nothing in his message about creating a new set of devotional reading. A New Testament is a very poor second choice, certainly no substitute for the social reality Jesus himself envisaged.

Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God built upon the messianic dream myth of ancient Israel. It was promoted by ancient prophets – Isaiah and Zechariah among them. It was a topic of speculation in some of works not included within the Old Testament, books such as Enoch and the 1st century BCE Psalms of Solomon. The devout members of the Dead Sea Scroll Community eagerly anticipated the day when God would recreate the world, rewarding the righteous, eliminating evil and wicked people, raising the righteous dead, creating universal peace – all this culminating in the worship of the one God in the new purified Temple in Jerusalem. Such, too, was Jesus' message. He assured everyone that if they shaped up, they'd have a place in God's new world.

That didn't happen, however. Jesus died before the Kingdom he promised materialized. What we ended up with instead was the church and a growing library of new writings. That's a far cry from what we were told would happen.

The New Testament as we have it did not descend from on high. It was not transferred by God to the hand of Moses on Mount Sinai as the traditional picture of the giving of the Torah would have it. Rather it evolved slowly over time, as early Christian leaders wrote letters, gospels, novels, theological treatises, biblical commentaries along with imaginary tales of the exploits of the apostles. Some works were highly popular, copied extensively and disseminated throughout the Roman Empire.

Many Christian communities likely did not have a complete set of writings, even of the ones favored by their particular group. Writings were costly and probably many smaller assemblies had limited access to writings. Perhaps they possessed only one gospel or just some of the letters of Paul.

Marcion

There was no one bundle of authoritative Christian scriptures in the first few centuries. Who first thought of a "canon," that is, a collection of authoritative *Christian* writings? The honor likely goes to Marcion in the mid 2nd century who first proposed a collection of writings for the congregations which subscribed to his views. His short "Bible" included some of the letters of Paul, the Gospel we call Luke but which he thought was written by Paul. That's all. Both were edited to remove any references to Jewishness of Jesus. No Old Testament writings -- Marcion's theology of the God of this world as an inferior harsh deity would have precluded that. Nor did he think of Jesus as a Messiah. So he had no

need at all for the Jewish writings. No gospels such as Matthew, Mark or John. No other writings. His “Bible” was a quick read and totally centered on the views of his hero, Paul.

Marcion didn’t think of this grouping of texts as a “new” testament. They probably just represented the writings of Paul he needed to reinforce his own brand of theology. He was Paul’s most consistently follower ever, even insisting on celibacy for all the members of his congregations!

But he was the first to have proposed a collection of Christian writings and he did so not long after the Jewish community, around the turn of the 2nd century, closed its canon of Law, Prophets and Writings.

The idea of a “new” testament, as opposed to an “old” one, occurred somewhat later than Marcion. That concept was first proposed in the late 2nd century by Irenaeus.

3. So How Did We Get a New Testament?

There were no “Bible-believing” Christians within the first four centuries. There couldn’t have been. After all, there was no New Testament until the 4th century. None of the official creeds of Christianity contained any mention of a Bible forming an essential part of Christian faith.² There’s no statement from Jesus indicating that he encouraged belief in the Bible.

Everyone was expecting a new environment, not new literature. Where was the Kingdom that Jesus had promised? Where was world transformation? Why the delay? Why hadn’t things turned out the way Jesus envisaged? The world after Jesus’ death looked very similar to the world before his execution. Likely some experienced deep disappointment and disillusionment with a promise that hadn’t come true. No one was asking, what’s the next Christian best-seller? Or what’s the next writing to be penned by an apostle? So it is not surprising that a New Testament was slow to form. It just wasn’t in the cards.

The fact that there was no New Testament for some centuries comes as a shock to some people who just assume that the New Testament has been around for as long as there have been Christians. No, this was not the case. James, Jesus’ brother, worked without a New Testament. So, too, did Paul along with Peter and the rest of the disciples. The canonical gospels were composed anonymously later by second, third and fourth generation Christians. According to scholars today, Mark was composed around 70; Matthew a bit later on, in the 80’s; Luke around 90 or later; John in the 90’s or later.³ So the gospels we have in the New Testament originate from 40 to 70+ years after the death of Jesus around the year 30. That’s 10 to 30 years after the death of James in 62 and Paul and Peter in the mid 60’s. They were likely composed after many of the original disciples had died out, after the disappointment that

² The Nicene Creed contains the phrase, “On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.” Here ‘Scriptures’ refers to the writings of the Old Testament.

³ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). It should be emphasized that these dates are educated guesses, built upon what we think is the way in which early Christianity evolved. The manuscript trail for many of the writings included in the New Testament only goes back to the 4th century. We have no first century originals.

the Kingdom had not come to the generation of Jesus' hearers and after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70.

Archbishop Athanasius

Fast forward three hundred years later, to 367 – that's a key date for our story. That's when the present shape of the New Testament took place. The listing of the books that make up our New Testament is the result of a letter Archbishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt, sent to all the churches and monasteries under his control. All the writings he cited were well known but they were not, of course, the only writings in circulation among Christian congregations. His was a narrow selection of some 27 books out of the hundreds available for inclusion. In time, other bishops agreed with Athanasius, but no formal decision was ever taken in a Church Council that this compilation, and this one alone, represented the one true recollection of early Christianity, its new testament. It simply evolved and was accepted.

Selection Criteria

Curiously enough, in the ancient Church, there is no record why these books and only these were selected. There are some hints along the way – believed to have written by an apostle, used by many of the churches, orthodox theology and so on – but nothing definitive.

There is no decision either as to the nature of the compilation – whether the canon was closed or open. That question was never asked ... or answered.

Moreover, there was no ecumenical Church Council that created a theology of the Bible. Oddly enough, while Councils discussed the person of Jesus, his relationship to divinity, the special status of Mary and formulated the definitive creeds, there was no meeting devoted to the topic of the Bible – what authority it should exercise in the formation of theological doctrine or the role it should play ethical decision-making. The credibility, reliability, authority or role of the New Testament was simply not top of mind. It was on no one's agenda.

Many works that were equally influential with those chosen were excluded from Athanasius' list. Ignored was what was probably the most popular of all 2nd century writings, *The Acts of Thecla*. That work recounts the fascinating exploits of Thecla, Paul's most devoted female follower. This work was a novel found on the "bookshelves" of many a 2nd century Christian home. Thecla was converted by Paul's message of sexual renunciation – that's how he was understood. After many terrible ordeals and miraculous escapes, she spends her life performing a ministry of baptizing, preaching and teaching. It's a work that empowers females, allowing them to perform in the public domain ... but at a price, namely asceticism, giving up sexuality and marriage.

Also ignored was the popular *Gospel of Peter* which now exists only in fragmentary form. That writing put the Jewish king Herod Antipas clearly in charge of ordering Jesus' death. It sought to exonerate once and for all any suggestion that the Roman Pontius Pilate played any role in this execution.

Nor did Athanasius' list include the various *Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*. These were written to various communities across modern day Turkey as this early 1st century bishop bravely journeyed on his way to death in Rome.

Even the highly influential *Infancy Gospel of James* didn't make it into the canon. This writing, so instrumental in helping to form the theology of Mary, Mother of Jesus, outlines her special birth, her carefully protected home life, her exceptionally pure upbringing in the Temple and her coming under the protection of Joseph, an elderly widow. All these, and many more, were ideal candidates for inclusion into the repertoire of influential Christian texts.

Nor did Athanasius' compilation take into account the writings favored by other Christian groups. There was considerable fluidity amongst Christian communities of the first four centuries concerning what books were read in their respective liturgies and considered authoritative. Pauline, Ebionite and Gnostic Christians valued and enjoyed different collections of writings.⁴ For Pauline Christians this included not only the writings of Paul (and those attributed to Paul) but also the four canonical gospels.

The Gnostic communities, on the other hand, had their own preferred writings – e.g. the intriguing *Gospels of Thomas, Mary Magdalene and Philip* – even one attributed directly to the Savior himself. They advanced a complex cosmology in the *Apocryphon of John* and produced other texts that helped believers discern their own answers to the three fundamental questions Gnostic Christians thought worthwhile answering: who are we? Where have we come from? And, where are we going?

Gnostic Christians held a different view of Jesus and the process of redemption than did Pauline Christians and their texts reflect this alternate theology of salvation. They attributed no significance to Jesus' death, preferring to place the emphasis upon the teachings of the living Jesus who acts as a catalyst for Christians coming to know themselves, achieving gnosis or "insight" into their true nature. A messenger from the one true God -- the ultimate God-beyond-God from whom all creation evolved -- Jesus brought salvation into the world by enlightening those who came to self-awareness. For them, the chief apostle was Mary Magdalene, Jesus' closest companion and most knowledgeable follower.

The Ebionites – successors to Jesus' first followers in Jerusalem (the Jesus Movement led by his brother James and other of the original disciples) used a version of the Gospel of Matthew which did not include the virgin birth narrative. For them, Jesus experienced a normal, natural birth. They also had such gospels as the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Nazareans* which now exist only as fragments. More extensive writings survive, however, the so-called *Pseudo-Clementines* as well as the important *Letter of Peter to James* and his *Response*.

The Ebionites differed from Paul, holding that the religion of Jesus embraced Torah. They viewed Jesus as a human being, in keeping with Jewish messianic expectations, and attached no significance to Jesus' death. They rejoiced in his teachings, in his interpretation of the Law, and looked forward to the day when the Kingdom he announced would become material reality.

There were likely dozens of other early Christian communities which used other writings, now lost, or a mixture of the ones already mentioned.

So, for the first four centuries, there was no one agreed upon set of writings, no "New" Testament and, for that matter, no "Bible-believing" Christians. Congregations would have read

⁴ See Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* and his *Lost Scriptures*.

different texts, interpreting Jesus and his message quite differently. As a result, there was no common base of documents upon which to articulate a unified theology. It is not surprising, therefore, that within the family of Christian congregations of the first four centuries a great many views circulated regarding Jesus, his teachings, the way to salvation, the elements of right belief and the relationship of the new movement to Judaism and Torah-observance.

Nor was one Christian community “normative.” That is, there was no one identifiable group that was so sufficiently mainstream that all dissenters from that position could be regarded and judged as heretics. Every group thought that the others were teaching false doctrines. Everyone warned their followers to be wary of false teachers and liars. These were confusing times and the sheer variety of texts contributed to this unsettling diversity.

So how did the New Testament come to be? So how did Athanasius arrive at his list? What criteria did he use? We simply do not know. He simply promulgates the list: he does not provide a rationale.

Prior to Athanasius there were others who listed key Christian writings for their respective communities. Both Eusebius at the beginning of the 4th century and Origen somewhat earlier list books. While the criteria for inclusion aren’t clear, it is likely that these early biblical scholars were attempting to ferret out texts which they thought were written by the apostles. It seems likely that these later Church leaders were after firsthand *apostolic* evidence while not dismissing other interesting interpretations of the faith by late 1st century and 2nd century writers. It isn’t clear, however, that they thought they were outlining anything as authoritative as a New Testament. More likely they were listing writings that were commonly in use in their communities, as guidance for others. These congregations were members of the faction of early Christianity that won out over all its rivals in the 4th century, the “Proto-Orthodox.” That’s a convenient way of referring to the faction of early Christianity favored by Emperor Constantine in 313 and by the Emperor Theodosius who made it into the official religion of the Empire in 381. After 381 it was open season on all other forms of Christianity, the pagan religions, the schools of Greek philosophy – all other forms of worship except Judaism which was tolerated.

So the New Testament gradually took shape, over several centuries, led by leaders bent on “grading” the sources at their disposal, whether as apostolic or non-apostolic.

That’s the usual story how the New Testament occurred, resulting in Athanasius’ definitive list in 367.⁵

⁵ E.g. Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007)

4. Should There Have Been *This* New Testament?

Criterion of Apostolicity Fails

We now know that these early church leaders – Origen, Eusebius and Athanasius – didn't get it right. That is, they erred in their judgment, unwittingly, concerning what writings were genuinely apostolic and which were not.

Some of the writings included in the New Testament are anonymous. These include the four gospels – they are attributed to a “Mark,” a “Matthew,” a “Luke,” and a “John,” but we have no idea who these individuals were or what their links were to the earliest Christian groups. The latter 2nd century attributions to the apostles (Matthew and John) or to associates of apostles (Mark and Luke) are highly suspect and most scholars dismiss these attributions. There were, after all, other gospels with other impeccable attributions – gospels attributed to Mary Magdalene, Philip, Thomas, Peter and even one attributed to the Savior himself. If one accepts one set of attributions, why not all the others? Attributions were common in the ancient world and many books not included in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) were attributed to Enoch, Adam, Ezra, Joseph, Solomon, the Twelve Patriarchs, Abraham.⁶ None of these works were, of course, written by the individuals who are named. They are all anonymous.

So the four canonical gospels would disappear from the New Testament under the criterion of apostolic authorship.

Similarly, because the same author who composed Luke in the late 1st century also wrote the Book of Acts, we have no idea of the provenance of this work either. This writing, moreover, seems not to know of Paul's letters and where we can check Acts' information about Paul from Paul himself, we find that it makes many mistakes. It is demonstrably an unreliable source of information about Paul. This is getting ahead of our story ... we'll discuss this in detail below. But, again, using the criterion of apostolic authorship, the Book of Acts would be eliminated.

Other writings included in the New Testament are forgeries. These include the Pastoral Epistles – 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus. These texts were falsely attributed to Paul and include a number of positions the Paul of history would have disavowed, such as the injunction that women should remain silent in churches. Many of Paul's esteemed co-workers were female and Paul complimented them for their earnest efforts from time to time. Likely the Pastorals were written in response to the *Acts of Thecla* which endorsed the role of women. In that popular work women could baptize, teach and exercise leadership roles within the Church.

The Pastorals (as well as Hebrews also attributed falsely to Paul) would disappear from the New Testament as non-apostolic.

Moreover, the authorship of some New Testament texts is simply unknown. Is the James of the Letter of James really the James who is the brother of Jesus, the leader of Jesus' first followers? Is the Letter of Jude really written by the Jude, another brother of Jesus? Who is the John who penned the Book of Revelation? All these are likely not eye-witness accounts.

⁶ See James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, volumes 1 and 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1958).

If we were to follow the criterion of apostolic authorship, then we would end up with just the authentic letters of Paul,⁷ assuming that this self-proclaimed apostle really was an apostle. The apostolic credentials of Paul were not universally recognized within early Christianity – the Ebionites thought of him as a false teacher and the Gnostics ignored him. Even if Paul were admitted as an apostle, a very short New Testament would emerge: there would be the seven authentic letters of Paul. It would be exclusively weighted towards one individual.

These ancient errors concerning apostolic authorship on the part of early Christian biblical scholars should give us serious cause for concern. They open up for us important questions: how fixed is the canon? Is it closed for all time? More radically, could some present works be excluded? Other works be included? And on what basis if the criterion of apostolic authorship is dropped?

Is the canon of the New Testament like the canon of western literature, the list that used to be taught in universities as “Great Books of the Western World”?⁸ That canon has come under intense scrutiny over the past thirty years to include authors other than “dead white men” and to include within its scope literature critical of colonization, race, gender and class. Perhaps it is time to consider revising the canon of the New Testament.

Many “Bibles”

But there’s another reason why the usual story how we got the New Testament – that lineage through Origen, Eusebius and Athanasius -- is fundamentally flawed.

It ignores one blatant fact. There wasn’t one and only one *normative* Christian community in the ancient world, any more than there is today. There wasn’t one neat identification of “correct Christianity” with everyone else lined up on the outside as “heretics.” There is no one group we can privilege in that respect. So any account of the formation of the New Testament privileging this one group is automatically suspect and yet that is the usual way in which the story of canon development is told.

Today there are about six main Christian families: the Orthodox and Churches of the East, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Protestant and post-Reformation Protestants (e.g. Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists), Evangelicals and a number of denominations we might call “Others.” In that latter category might be placed Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons and many others. What constitutes the only and only one true – or normative -- expression of Christianity would depend on one’s perspective.

The Orthodox and Churches of the East generally could rightfully claim that they represent the oldest strand within on-going Christianity. They could also contend that the Church of the West

⁷ According to Bart Ehrman (*The New Testament*, p. 287), the undisputed Pauline letters include: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. Those judged as possible forgeries attributed to Paul: Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians. Those probably forgeries are the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus).

⁸ E.g. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages* (Riverhead, 1995).

separated from them by its addition, in 1054, of the phrase “*filioque*” [“and the Son”] to the creed. This emendation of the agreed-upon creed addresses an obscure facet of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Church of the West – Roman Catholic – wished to affirm that the Holy Spirit within the Divine Trinity proceeds not only from the Father but also from the Son (that is *filioque*). That one word created the largest split within Christendom ever.

On the other hand, Roman Catholics, numerically the largest Christian denomination, might boast that it alone represents the authentic Church. Its ancestry, it is alleged, extends back to Peter, the first pope or bishop of Rome. By virtue of its pedigree – and overwhelming numbers – it can claim continuity, authenticity and protector of the correct message through the office of the papacy. Other churches would then be “defective” either in terms of ministry, or message. In terms of the Catholic grading system of other Christian groups, the Orthodox and Anglicans would come off looking reasonably good, with some questions about Anglican orders and theology. But, Protestants and Evangelicals, in Catholic eyes, would be defective with respect to both ministry and message.

Protestants, on the other hand, would likely argue that theirs is the true message, being based firmly on the Bible. But Protestantism has fractured into thousands of sects based on that one premise.

Evangelicals would insist that “true Christians” need “a born again” experience.

So who embodies “correct Christianity” and who is “heretical” depends upon one’s stance. This was true in the ancient Church. There were many different communities, with different theologies regarding Jesus, salvation, the nature of correct teachings and practices. Each viewed themselves as correct and the others as heretical. Paul viewed James and his followers as “agents of Satan.” The Ebionites considered Paul “a false teacher.” The Gnostics considered all others to be ignorant.

So there was no one group of Christians that could be “privileged” as undeniably correct, then or in the ancient world.

This means that we need to recognize that different ancient Christian denominations had different “Bibles” and that the drive to canonization led by Origen, Eusebius and Athanasius represents the historical development of only one strand of early Christianity. Most accounts of the formation of the New Testament canon go off the rails on this assumption – assuming that the Proto-Orthodox alone possessed the truth and that the development of their Bible was the only one in play.

Admittedly, they were the ones who won out. But this falsifies the messy picture of pre-4th century Christianity.

Each group had its own “Bible.” While that term is used anachronistically -- they never referred to their compilations as “bibles” or as a “New Testament” – yet each possessed favored writings which were authoritative for their teachings, used within their liturgies and employed by their clergy in teaching and proselytizing.

Thus we have the Ebionite Bible, the Gnostic Bible, the Marcionite Bible and undoubtedly many more.

All these alternative Bibles were ignored by Athanasius and the strand of early Christianity that succeeded in gaining imperial endorsement in the 4th century.

Consequently, the New Testament we have reflects the views of one -- but only one -- segment of early Christianity. While it was an important expression, it was not the only form of the religion that is perhaps best described as “Christianities” rather than a single Christianity. Thus the New Testament is not a neutral collection of early Church writings: it reflects only the material favored by the Proto-Orthodox. It provides a poor basis for understanding the complexities of early Christianity.

The New Testament Unrepresentative

The New Testament represents a biased, selective, politically-motivated collection of writings that reflects the viewpoint of the faction of Christianity favored by the form of early Christianity endorsed by the Roman emperors Constantine and Theodosius in the 4th century. These emperors wished to have one religion with one set of writings and one authorized creed to bolster one empire, with one set of laws and one government. So the authority of the New Testament rests upon the authority of the 4th century Church and the decisions it took to help bolster the belief system of the Roman Empire. Its contents, structure and theology represent the stance of 4th century official Christianity. As a result, the views of Ebionite, Gnostic, Arian and many other Christianities are not reflected in these writings. The New Testament is by no means a neutral, representative set of writings reflective of the diversity of early Christianity.

The sacred writings went from a wide, diverse literature to a narrow one reflecting the viewpoint of one faction of Christianity. The selection of writings reflects these decisions and so **the authority of the New Testament rests upon the authority of the Church – the 4th century Church -- not the other way around.** It is not as if we first had the New Testament and then the Church evolved out of it. The Church came first; then the writings. It was the Church, that of the Pauline Christians, who judged which writings were right and authentic, and, by and large, it selected writings favorable to its point of view. Hence Church and Scriptures becomes a circular process: the Church approves the New Testament and the New Testament supports the Church.

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The unrepresentative nature of the New Testament plus the failure of the early Christian leaders to correctly apply the criterion of apostolic authorship opens up the question: does the New Testament now need fixing? Do we continue to live with their errors? And do we need to accept their one-sided bias?

5.The New Testament – A 4th Century View

With the New Testament we should not imagine that we are getting a firsthand glimpse into the early Church. While the writings that make up the New Testament were originally composed earlier, the New Testament compilation reflects 4th century theological concerns. Everything is filtered through the 4th century outlook which viewed Jesus as divine, Mary as special and Paul as the pre-eminent apostle. This shapes our understanding today of how the religion emerged. The 4th century represents the birth of the Church in the form that we know it today. All families of Christians today stem from the decisions taken within this century.

Anyone interested in historical accuracy, however, needs to guard against this narrow perspective, the 4th century prism.

That influential century saw a tremendous consolidation of power – one faith for one empire, with one government, one set of laws and one military. A Church backed by imperial might. Church and Empire together -- surely the Kingdom of God on earth as some undoubtedly thought. That one faith was expressed in part through one hierarchical infrastructure. The layering of bishop/ priest/laity represented a strong organizational model that offered the Empire, and its citizens, tremendous advantages. The bishops, viewed theologically as successors to the apostles, were the guarantors of accurate teaching and acted as interpreters of the faith. In constant communication with one another, they provided a bulwark against rival forms of Christianity that were not so well organized, particularly the Gnostics which lacked centralized administration and which had fragmented into dozens if not hundreds of different sects.

The development of one canon of New Testament scriptures also fostered this growing sense of unity and uniformity. It determined, at least to the satisfaction of the victorious Proto-Orthodox party, the writings which were to be considered authoritative and which ones were to be discounted.

The Creeds

One management structure and *one* collection of writings were reinforced by *one* set of doctrines formulated in authoritative creedal statements – the Nicene Creed and the later Creed attributed to Athanasius. These thrashed out in technical language the position of the Proto-Orthodox faction. Each carefully crafted phrase battled rival Christian positions as it expressed Jesus' relationship to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, God's incarnation and the purpose of Jesus' mission and the mandate of the Church. The Nicene Creed itself became the rallying cry, henceforth the definition of what it meant to be Christian. Christians were those who held to this statement of faith. Everyone else was simply wrong – eternally wrong since "correct belief" was necessary for salvation. Pity the poor folk who thought that Jesus was of *similar* substance to the Father rather than the *same* substance, let alone those who considered Jesus to be solely human.

The Nicene Creed was developed in 325, at the Council of Nicea backed by Constantine. This statement of faith trumpeted that Christ was God in human form. He was "true God from true God, begotten, not made." Moreover, he "became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man." Hence we have an affirmation of the doctrine of the Incarnation, God becoming human. This was first conceived of centuries before by Paul who wrote that God emptied himself and took on human form, but with the Nicene Creed, it took on a more philosophical character. As the later Creed of Athanasius puts it succinctly,

For the right faith is that we believe and confess
that our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Son of God,
is God and man.

God, of the substance of the Father,
begotten before the worlds;
and man, of the substance of His mother,
born in the world.

Perfect God and perfect Man,
of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.

So Jesus is both God and man. He is of the *same* substance as God the Father. He is begotten – not made -- but also born. He is at one and the same time completely divine and completely human. But he is not two entities but one.

Complementing the doctrine of the Incarnation was the doctrine of the Trinity. This complex belief concerns Jesus' relationship to divinity. The creeds are careful, however, not to lapse into polytheism, while also affirming that one substance is manifested in three forms. As the Creed of Athanasius affirms:

the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. But yet there are not three gods but one God.

The Nicene Creed is also noteworthy, not only for what it includes, but what it excludes. Note the following two sentences, separated by a period.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.[←]

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.

That “.” encompasses all of Jesus' life, his teachings, the parables of the Kingdom of God, the Sermon on the Mount, the injunction to observe Torah more strictly than did the Pharisees – everything in between birth and death, his whole human existence. That's absolutely amazing and it shows the sweep of Paul's perspective in brushing aside the significance of the Jesus of history.

Pre-eminence of Paul

The Proto-Orthodox were Pauline Christians who focused their faith on identifying with the suffering and death of Christ. Their hope was that just as he was raised from the dead, so, too, would they. Eternal life was the reward for this correct belief.

The Christ for Paul was the Jesus who had encountered him, post-death, in a mystical, life-altering experience just outside Damascus. He conceived of the Christ as God emptying himself, taking upon himself human form: hence Christ was a divine-human. Christians of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries had to work out the implications of this view, how to express it in precise theological language, and, as we have seen, the Nicene Creed and the one attributed to Athanasius were the result.

For the Proto-Orthodox, Paul was Jesus' real successor to the virtual exclusion of all the disciples whom Jesus had personally trained to assume political roles within the Kingdom. They reshaped and reimaged the faith along lines developed by Paul. The messianic kingdom as world transformation was quietly replaced by an emphasis upon Christ as the savior of humanity. The vehemently anti-Roman stance of Jesus and James was replaced by one that was softer, more favorable to Roman rule. “The Jews” were now held responsible for Jesus' death, not, of course, the Roman Pontius Pilate. Identification with the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ became the object of the religion, not membership in the Kingdom. The Jewish substratum of Jesus message was swept away in favor of a movement akin to a mystery religion.

One consequence of this adoration of Paul was the vast amount of attention given to Paul and his writings within the New Testament.

Paul's perspective represented the prism through which Jesus was to be viewed. Gone was the perspective of other leaders – James, Jesus' brother, was virtually ignored, along with all the other early followers of Jesus.

Mary, the God-bearer

Beliefs about Mary, Mother of Jesus, developed throughout the first four centuries. From a frightened Jewish teenager, likely 12 to 15 years old when she became pregnant with Jesus, she emerges on to the scene in the 4th century as a quasi-Goddess. Two gospels develop a Virgin Birth narrative (Matthew, Luke), using imagery drawn from Hellenistic society used to bolster the special nature of the Roman religious deities and emperors to explain the status of Jesus. A virgin birth, in the 1st century, did not make Jesus unique. It did, however, place him on par with the most influential figures in the Mediterranean world.

If Jesus was a divine-human, then, people asked, why was Mary chosen to be his mother? What made her so special? Was it just her virginity? Her perpetual virginity?

By the mid 2nd century the Proto-Orthodox had answered this question. Someone created *The Infancy Gospel of James* which recounts Mary's own "immaculate conception." Mary's mother, Anna, conceived under mysterious circumstances while her husband, Joachim, was away. Mary is brought up in exceptionally pure circumstances, first at home where she had no contact with the outside world and then, secondly, within the Temple in Jerusalem which seems to have run a "daycare" center.

The questions continued. If Jesus were the savior, then, without Mary, there would not have been a redeemer. What was Mary's role, then, in God's plan of salvation? Following this line of questioning, Mary becomes regarded as the Second Eve, the pure one. Unlike the first Eve, the evil one, she reverses what that primal female had created: Mary plays a key role in the process of human redemption. She is a co-redeemer alongside her son, Jesus: a "co-redemptrix" in some Christian circles.

In 431 at the Council of Ephesus Mary was proclaimed "theotokos," that is, God-bearer, or, more awkwardly, "Mother of God" or "God-bearer." She becomes the holy gateway to her son, the friendly, female face who grants access to the divine. Undoubtedly the most popular Christian prayer in the world today is "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

Mary Mother of Jesus came to share a divine-human status with her son. She had her own special birth, a unique upbringing and status as a perpetual virgin and key player in the drama of redemption. She was the Mother of God. While these later doctrines are not contained within the New Testament, they have important repercussions. For one thing, it meant that the Ebionite version of the Gospel of Matthew which did not contain a Virgin Birth narrative was not the one chosen for inclusion in the New Testament. Also her holiness and exceptional purity constituted an important reason why Jesus' family – the brothers, the sisters -- had to be written out of the narrative and his siblings explained by various ad hoc interpretations (as half-brothers, step-brothers or as cousins).

The Great Transformation

The doctrines *about* Jesus – especially those of the Incarnation and Trinity -- had the effect of focusing the faith on the Christ, the God in human form who sacrificed himself for the redemption of humanity. It was Christ who saves by his sacrificial death, not his message. In a sense, anything the earthly Jesus did or taught became irrelevant. The Nicene Creed makes this abundantly clear: it omits any mention of his teachings – nothing occurs between the phrase “he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man” and the next phrase, “For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.” It is as if Jesus’ human ministry counted for nothing. Only the last few moments mattered: crucifixion and resurrection.

Being divine meant that Jesus’ human side – his Jewishness, male sexuality, family life, close friends and disciples – had to be written out of the picture. This included diminishing the stature of James, his brother, and Mary Magdalene, his close female associate and companion. So, too, did the views of the Ebionites who regarded Jesus as human have to be shunned – the successors to Jesus’ first followers ironically condemned as heretics. The Gnostics, with their emphasis upon the leadership role of Mary Magdalene also had to be disregarded.

By the 4th century, a Jewish messianic movement, anti-Roman to the core became transformed into the theological bulwark of imperial might as Church and Empire coalesced.

So the New Testament embeds a 4th century perspective in several ways.

- It includes four gospels favorable to the views of the faction that won out.
- It promotes the views that Jesus was divine; that Mary was special and that Paul was the pre-eminent apostle.
- It ignores the views of other pre-4th century Christian groups

These views are embedded within the pages of the New Testament and they skew our understanding of Jesus, his family, disciples and close associates. Jesus is distanced from his humanity and his Jewishness. Those who use the New Testament uncritically are “buying into” a 4th century perspective. It is not a bedrock 1st century document.

6. The New Testament Distorts History

A. The Book of Acts Changes Paul’s Personal History

We can easily demonstrate how the New Testament distorts history from within the New Testament itself. There is one book we can check and this represents just the tip of the revisionist iceberg. The Book of Acts performs a radical make-over of the Paul of history, mythologizing him beyond belief.

In his Letter to the Galatians written in the mid 50’s, Paul stresses that the message he proclaims comes directly from a revelation from Christ. He was not taught it. He is emphatic about this, noting specifically that after his life-altering experience he did not confer with any human being and denies that he went immediately up to Jerusalem. Rather he went away into Arabia, eventually returning to Damascus. After three years, he did visit Jerusalem briefly, for 15 days, and met only with Cephas (Peter) and James. He mentions, too, a subsequent visit some 14 years later.

So from this, if we take Paul at his word, his gospel comes directly from his mystical experience with Christ. Unlike the other disciples, he did not undergo a three-year apprenticeship. His was an instantaneous commission. Paul's credibility along with his credentials as an authorized apostle was under attack and his Letter to the Galatians was intended to set matters straight. He gives what he thinks would suffice to bolster his readers' impressions of him as a person sent directly to them by God.

In the Book of Acts, however, the author of that late 1st century work narrates the story of Paul's experience three times (9:1-30; 22:4-16; 26:9-18). The details are substantially enhanced and the story has grown in the telling. The composer of the Book of Acts is, in modern terms, "a spin doctor," and he's relating these incidents to make some key points. For one thing, he shows a marked tendency to rest key theological points upon heavenly visions -- not only Paul's vision but also Peter's vision setting aside the Jewish dietary laws. In other words, the view he is putting forward is on par with the Hebrew prophets whose message comes from the heart and mind of God himself.

He also shows the irrationality and irascibility of "the Jews." No matter when or where Paul shows up, for seemingly no good reason they fly off the handle and want to kill him. There are more attempts on an individual's life and more attempted stonings in the Book of Acts than anywhere else in the Bible. It portrays "the Jews" as simply beside themselves.

Acts has a powerful agenda at work, as we shall see. It is to promote Paul as *the* apostle of Christ, valiantly working in spite of opposition -- from "the Jews" and from the original disciples of Jesus. He alone is the flag-bearer carrying on what he thought Christ intended him to do.

The work would be better named "The Acts of the Apostle," not the "Acts of the Apostles," for all the other leaders are virtually ignored. Only the work of Paul counts.

The spin Acts gives Paul's personal experience also leaves us with many unanswered questions. Let's go through his version carefully, noting how it differs from Paul's own account of his experience and also observing the many questions it raises for the astute reader.

As Acts tells the tale, Paul initiates a plot against members of the Community of The Way by approaching the high priest in Jerusalem. He asks for authorization to go to Damascus to bring back to Jerusalem members of this community. The Way is the term used of Jesus' first followers in Jerusalem -- it was also a phrase used of the Essenes as well.

So, as Acts tells us, Paul is acting as a bounty hunter. His mission is to bring back men and women who belong to this sect of Judaism back to Jerusalem in chains, presumably for punishment.

Immediately we suspect that something isn't quite right with the story. For one thing, what was the crime? Believing in a Messiah? That was not a crime for there were many messianic Jews within the 1st century. The Essenes expected they'd live to see the messianic era and were actively preparing for God's intervention in human affairs to bring about this culmination of world history. Likely some Pharisees and Zealots held messianic beliefs.

For another, why Damascus? Why go so far afield? To a place clearly outside the jurisdiction of the high priest? There were many members of the Community of The Way much closer to home, why, even in Jerusalem itself.

Why would the high priest care? Why would he authorize such an undertaking?

What were Paul's credentials for being a bounty hunter? Why would the high priest even engage him, assuming that the wanted these individuals arrested?

What credibility would Paul have had with the high priest? Paul indicates that his views were along Pharisaic lines. The high priest was a Sadducee. Sadducees and Pharisees didn't get along. Why would the Sadducean high priest have engaged the services of the Pharisaic Paul? Weren't there Sadducean mercenaries available for the task.

The problems begin to multiply and we begin to suspect that we are being set up.

Just outside Damascus Paul and his companions hear a voice and Paul sees a flash of light. It is interesting that they all hear the voice. What ensues is a dramatic encounter between Christ and Paul. Paul is temporarily blinded. Meanwhile in Damascus a member of the Community of The Way named Ananias is told in a vision (note that vision-thing) to go to Judas' house to look for a man from Tarsus. Ananias does so, lays his hand upon Paul's head, restoring his sight. Paul is then baptized. Paul then spent several days in Damascus, entering synagogues and affirming that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah. This enrages "the Jews" and the plot to kill him. Paul escapes.

Nothing is said of Paul's companions who presumably would not have been paid if they were to return to Jerusalem empty-handed. Why didn't they immediately arrest Paul? He now fitted the bill and should have been brought back in chains to Jerusalem, to await punishment.

Moreover, no reason is given why Paul's message would enrage the Jewish people of Damascus in a way that Ananias and other members of the Community of The Way did not. This provides us with important information: Paul's message differed significantly from theirs. Members of The Way could live in peaceful co-existence with other factions of Judaism; Paul could not. They weren't saying the same thing.

We then learn that Paul goes to Jerusalem where Barnabas introduces him to the apostles. This differs from what Paul had said he did immediately after this experience – he told us, you will remember, that he went away into Arabia and did not visit Jerusalem until three years later. Also when he was in Jerusalem, he was there only briefly, meeting with Peter and James – not "the apostles" as the Book of Acts would have it.

Acts continues that Paul moves freely in Jerusalem – freely? In spite of his having reneged on the high priest's mandate? Didn't the high priest care? Why wasn't the high priest come immediately after Paul for failing to fulfill his end of the bargain?

Paul runs afoul of the Hellenists, that is, Greek-speaking Jews, and, once again, what Paul says so enrages them that they seek to kill him. Once again, we see the author of the Book of Acts hidden agenda at work – to glorify Paul and to vilify his opponents. It also again reveals that what Paul was saying different from what Jesus' first followers maintained. They, after all, lived in Jerusalem in harmony with other Jewish factions, the Sadducees excluded (but then the Sadducees didn't get along with any other Jewish faction – not just the Jesus Movement but also the Pharisees and the Essenes).

So the leaders in Jerusalem pack him off to Caesarea and from there to his home town, Tarsus. Then, as the Book of Acts notes, the church in Judea experienced peace!

Nothing in this elaboration adds up. Paul's experience has been stretched beyond credibility so as to enhance his stature as fighting against massive odds and maximizing his contact with the Jerusalem leadership. It distorts what Paul says about this phase in his life.

In other words, where we can check a book of the New Testament, we learn two things. First, there are hidden agendas at work. Secondly, we discover that the writers are not hesitant to rewrite history to suit their political and theological purposes.

The Book of Acts is not presenting history: it is rewriting history as "Christory." It is not a reliable account. Clearly Acts should not be relied upon for an understanding of the history early Christianity. But it does serve another, more useful purpose: the Book of Acts is valuable for an insight into how the New Testament writers operated – how to spin the story advantageously.

Acts is myth-making, creating nothing less than the Paul myth. The mythologized Paul of the Book of Acts is not the Paul of history. That Paul, the historical Paul, was the outsider, the one who never knew or met Jesus, the one whom Jesus' first followers rejected. In the hands of the author of Acts in the late 1st century, however, Paul becomes transformed into the faithful follower of Jesus, at odds with Jesus' original disciples and family members, who misunderstood him. His different message replaced theirs...and that of Jesus.

B. The New Testament Masks Jesus' Disciples

Why are Jesus' disciples not *central* to the New Testament story? That's what we – and they – had been led to believe by Jesus. The disciples were supposed to be the princes of the new movement, individuals hand-picked by Jesus and especially trained to be the bearers of his message. They anticipated being rulers of the restored tribes of Israel in the messianic kingdom. The Kingdom would come and they would assist Jesus in running God's earthly government. In republican terms, if Jesus were to be the president of the new world, then they would form his cabinet. That's what they were led to believe – that they'd live to see the day when they would be the most influential group of leaders on the world stage.

So what happened? What went wrong?

The canonical gospels move very quickly from the political expectations of the disciples prior to Jesus' death to their proclaiming resurrection -- all very quickly, just a matter of days. There is no explanation how they might have made this transition, the adjustment from one mandate to an entirely different one, from a political role to a religious one. How did the disciples cope with what was undoubtedly a gut-wrenching personal, emotional and spiritual issue? It all happened over a long weekend, it seems from Luke and the Book of Acts. What they had been trained for dissipated, replaced by another altogether different task. Curiously enough, the New Testament simply does not address this abrupt transition and it is a glaring omission.

Even if their role changed dramatically, why do we hear so little about the doings of these leaders-in-waiting? What do we really know about Peter, Thomas, Matthew, Bartholomew and the rest of the disciples? That's another highly curious omission in the New Testament story.

Surprisingly all these Galileans get quickly replaced by Paul, the mystery man from Tarsus.

Seemingly, rather than a three year training program, all it took for Christian leadership was one vision – that of Christ to Paul on the road to Damascus. If that's all it took, what sense can be made out of the time the disciples spent with Jesus? Did it serve any purpose whatsoever? Was it all for naught?

What, then, do we know of Jesus' disciples?

As it turns out, very little. None of the letters attributed to such apostles as Peter, John, James or Jude are viewed by modern scholars as actually written by them. Nor, in their view, was the Gospel of John written by John the apostle. And no one now knows the identity of the John who wrote the Book of Revelation. So many 1st century individuals with the same name compound the confusion as scholars try to judge apostolic authorship.

Peter

There are some references to various apostles in Acts. This writing creates speeches which it assigns to Peter, for instance. It is important, however, to realize that these are not transcripts. Even that late writing has to invent a vision for Peter to authorize his breaking Jewish dietary laws (Acts 10:9-28; Acts 11:1-18). That, incidentally, provides an important "tip off" that Jesus himself did not authorize departure from Torah in this respect....it was an after-thought.

We hear of Peter not only in Jerusalem but also in Antioch and Corinth. According to ancient Church tradition he was crucified in Rome, upside down.

We do not know what the Peter of history thought or said, whether he sided with James' view of Jesus as Torah-observant...or with Paul as non-Torah-observant... or was somewhere in between. The two letters of Peter were not written by Peter nor were the various other works attributed to him, e.g. the Gospel of Peter or the Apocalypse of Peter.

Several centuries later, Peter assumes prominence within western Christianity. As first bishop of Rome, he becomes mythologized as the first pope and the first amongst equals, even during his lifetime, the person on whom Jesus would build his Church. The idea of papal supremacy represents a later political move, backed by theology, and tells us nothing about the Peter of history.

John, James (son of Zebedee), James (brother of Jesus)

The Book of Acts also references various "pillars" within the community in Jerusalem, not only Peter but also John and James (Jesus' brother). It also mentions the killing of James, the son of Zebedee by King Herod Agrippa I in the mid 40's C.E. (Acts 12:2). Neither the letters of John nor the Gospel of John are by the disciple John, according to most New Testament scholars, so we have no first-hand information in these sources.

In terms of James, the brother of Jesus, fortunately Josephus tells us more about him than does the Book of Acts. His account -- plus another one by Hegesippus mentioned by Eusebius -- reveals James' zeal for the Torah, his Nazirite convictions and the manner of his death in 62. Revered by later Ebionites, writings such as the *Letter of Peter to James* disclose his role as guardian of the authentic religion.

Thomas

Eusebius in the 4th century knew of the main outline of the careers of such disciples as Peter, Philip, John and Thomas. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, for instance, he mentions various later traditions and documents such as *The Acts of Thomas* which alleged trace that disciple's journeys from Israel through Syria into India. Eusebius appears to recognize that he has very little information on which to base his account of the disciples.

Why are Jesus' Original Disciples Such Shadowy Figures?

For the most part, the careers of the disciples after Jesus' death remain shadowy. There are several ways of understanding this.

One approach is to say that judged as a training program for leadership within the messianic Kingdom, Jesus' 3-year mentoring mission must be considered an abysmal failure. They didn't perform that job, as rulers, because God had not acted to transform the world. History did not unfold as Jesus promised. He died before the kingdom appeared as God failed to act on cue. The disciples eventually died, not having had the opportunity to fulfill their political mandate.

Alternatively, many of the disciples may have just abandoned the cause after the premature death of their leader. A failed messiah, they may have concluded, and reverted to their previous occupations. Some may never have returned to fulfill their role as apostles of the new movement. That may account for why we hear so little about most of them.

Another possible explanation is that perhaps some of the disciples grouped around James, Jesus' brother, and shared his perspective on the continuing movement. They, like him, waited for the Kingdom to materialize and for them to assume their powerful positions. Since Paul was at odds with James and his movement, this may account for their lack of mention within the New Testament.

Or, perhaps more likely, the original disciples may have been written out of the narrative in order to center the spotlight on one individual, namely Paul. He is positioned within the New Testament as Jesus' real successor.

So, from twelve down to one major figure.

C. The New Testament Obscures the Jesus of History

In the late 20's, Jesus began a mission in the Galilee, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand. What people had yearned for generations was finally going to come to pass. It was imminent and people had to prepare for a wonderful future.

But, apart from that cryptic announcement, what else do we know about the Jesus of history? The outline of his life is slim. He was born around 5 BCE before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE. He engaged in a 3-year mission in the late 20's CE. He was crucified by the Romans around the year 30 as a political threat -- the "King of the Jews." What else do we know?

Very little it seems.

What was Jesus' daily routine -- he got up in the morning. Then what did he do? What was his favorite meal, for instance? Who cooked? Where did he go? Did he meet with his students regularly? Did they study Torah together? From where did he obtain the scrolls? From the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus' headquarters for his mission? Who led the services in that synagogue anyway? How did he plan his itinerary? Was there a master plan for his mission?

Why did he think that the Kingdom of God was about to take shape on earth? Why now? How did he know the timetable?

Moreover, what was the nature of his earlier upbringing? Where did he study the Hebrew Bible, especially Deuteronomy and Isaiah from which he often quoted? Was there a synagogue in Nazareth and did it have scrolls? That seems highly unlikely, given the size of Nazareth at the time of Jesus. It was an obscure tiny hamlet tucked away in the shadows of Sepphoris. Did Jesus go away to study? That seems a possibility. In the late 20's, when he comes on the scene in Nazareth, his neighbors are amazed at his learning -- where did he get all this? they ask. And so do we. That they were amazed at his erudition seems surprising if they had watched a promising student progress through the local school into serious Torah study. So if he went away, where might he have gone?

What was the nature of his relationship with his siblings -- his four brothers (James, José, Simon, Judah) and several sisters? How did he get along with his parents? Was there an extended family? Were Mary's parents still alive and did they live nearby? By tradition they were named Anna and Joachim. Did his sisters marry? They would have married when they were around 12 to 15 years old -- Jesus himself would likely still have been in his teen-aged years. Did Jesus himself marry? That was to be expected of any Jewish male -- to fulfill the commandment "to be fruitful and multiply." He would not have fulfilled Torah had he not been married and it would have been a cause for considerable disrespectful conversation. If he did marry, he would have done so prior to turning 20, so sometime around 15 CE.

What languages did he speak and read? He would have spoken Aramaic. Presumably he could read Hebrew, for that was the language of the sacred scrolls, although, in practice, Aramaic commentaries on the Torah portions were provided to worshippers, most of whom would not have known Hebrew. These are called "targums" and many survive. Did he also speak or at least understand portions of Greek? That was a possibility, with the Hellenistic colony of Sepphoris only a few miles removed from Nazareth.

There's more than a thirty year gap in Jesus resume, from the time of his circumcision in Jerusalem on the 8th day to the beginning of his mission. Only one incident is recorded during this interval: his going to the Temple in Jerusalem for Passover at the age of 12 and dawdling there while his parents started the return journey to Nazareth. This doesn't give us much to work with.

The four canonical gospels in the New Testament purport to tell us about Jesus' mission. That's the focus of these writings – his selection of the disciples, his teachings to crowds and to the disciples around northern Israel, his final trek to Jerusalem along with his trial and execution.

For all that, however, can we now open the New Testament and reliably say: "See, Jesus said such-and-such"? Can we not simply reconstruct Jesus' life by following the words in the various gospels and confidently say that Jesus went from this place over to this one, and so forth? While often employed by members of various faith communities, this "Bible tells me so" approach to understanding Jesus is fraught with difficulties.

Knowing about the Jesus of history and his teachings is problematic because of several factors.

First of all, Jesus himself wrote nothing. We have none of his words first-hand. There are no transcripts -- nothing like Facebook or Twitter accounts that record moment-by-moment events as they occurred. There is no corroborative evidence from contemporary Jewish or Roman sources about his life or mission. John the Baptist and James (Jesus' brother) came to the attention of the Jewish historian Josephus. There may be a few words in Josephus about Jesus, but that passage is highly disputed.

Secondly, the canonical gospels date from 40 to 70 or more years after his death, from roughly 70 – 100. In other words, the writers did not know Jesus first-hand: they relied upon hear-say and wrote what they had heard from others about him. Not surprisingly with this methodology, they differ significantly in terms of what he did and said. This is especially true of the Gospel of John which differs significantly from the other three -- the "Synoptic Gospels" which share a similar outlook. The Synoptic Gospels show Jesus speaking in parables about the Kingdom of God; the Gospel of John, however, has him speaking in monologues about himself – two very different emphases. The Synoptic Gospels, moreover, also differ from each other, with Matthew and Luke both comfortable with correcting Mark. Matthew, for instance, corrects Mark and omits the point that Mark makes that Jesus did away with the dietary laws: for Matthew, Torah was still in effect. The gospels also do not agree on such matters as Jesus' genealogy; what was said at Jesus' baptism by John; the details of his trial; and even Jesus' last words on the cross – either "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matthew 27:46) or "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46)," two vastly different attitudes at the moment of death.

In addition, as Bart Ehrman has shown in *Misquoting Jesus*,⁹ some of the gospels may have been tampered with over the course of the first three centuries, to make the text conform to evolving doctrine.

There are also other gospels not included within the New Testament. *The Gospels of Mary, Philip, Thomas* and the *Gospel of the Savior* fall into this category. Moreover, there are gospels which no longer exist except for short quotations, e.g. the *Gospel of Peter, Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Ebionites*. The gospels which were excluded differ markedly from the canonical ones.

And yet which ones are right? How do we judge?

⁹ Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). See also his *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effects of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Are we to rely on the judgment of the 4th century bishops? How did they decide which ones to include ... and which to exclude?

These reasons call for caution in using the New Testament uncritically for information about the Jesus of history – what he said, where he went and what he did. Scholars refer to this issue as “the problem of the historical Jesus.”

But there is a far deeper reason to be wary of taking the words of the canonical gospels at face value. This has to do with one of the most important transformations made by the early Church, a shift enshrined in the New Testament itself. It is a change that makes our knowing the Jesus of history problematic.

To understand the magnitude of this transformation, we need to back up and consider the most important crisis mentioned in the New Testament: Jesus died before the Kingdom he promised materialized.

Scholars agree that the central teaching of the Jesus of history was the coming Kingdom of God, a transformed world, which he led his followers to believe would happen within their lifetimes. He sent out his disciples in teams of two to announce this startling news to many communities within Israel. Similarly, on another occasion, he sent out “the Seventy” with the same mission, to alert people to what was about to occur. Towards the end of his life, he re-enacted movements that he thought would signal God’s intrusion into human history: entering Jerusalem in the manner of a messianic king and purging the Temple symbolically of corruption by attacking the currency conversion booths. He must have thought that the Kingdom was just about to be made manifest.

Instead he was quickly arrested, tried, convicted and executed.

While Jesus undoubtedly expected that he might suffer, his disciples wondered what had happened to the promise. Where was the Kingdom? they rightfully inquired.

That was the key question and how Jesus’ early followers coped with these dashed hopes is not mentioned within the New Testament. Jesus’ followers expected that the Kingdom of God would appear on earth – a supernatural act of God that would forever change history and earth’s landscape. But then, seemingly over a weekend, we find Christians proclaiming that Jesus was resurrected and that he ascended into heaven. That dramatically changed the entire focus, for it threw into question the whole point of Jesus’ message and the status of the Kingdom.

This shift in perspective from Jesus as preacher of the Kingdom of God to Jesus as resurrected is often overlooked. Luke and Acts makes it appear that this transformation was virtually immediate, with the disciples making a very quick transition from the expectation that the Kingdom of God would materialize within Jesus’ and their lifetime to proclaiming a very different message, Jesus as resurrected and ascended into heaven. Both Matthew and John (chapter 21:2) record a different tradition. Many of the disciples had returned to the Galilee, to resume their former occupations. These included Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael of Cana, the two sons of Zebedee (James and John) and two other disciples. Clearly they thought the mission was over.

The most important reason why it is difficult today to discern the teachings of the Jesus of history is his remake as the Christ. The “Christ overlay” permeates the New Testament, largely as a result of the teachings of Paul. This makes his suffering, death and resurrection all important. That’s all that counts. His life before his death was just prologue.

The creeds of Christianity make this abundantly clear as already mentioned. This statement of faith goes from “he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” Period. Then it continues, “For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.” In that one period is encompassed his whole life, teachings, training program, mission, all his parables of the Kingdom of God and the Sermon on the Mount with its injunction to a higher righteousness. None of this is reflected in the official statements of Christian belief.

It’s as if Jesus never lived or had anything important to say.

D. The New Testament Changes the Focus

As we have seen, Paul dominates the present New Testament – genuine letters, letters attributed to him, disputed letters and the Book of Acts which is really about the deeds of Paul. The New Testament really is the book about Paul and the religion he created. It’s Paul’s perspective that trumps whatever the Jesus of history said or did.

Paul single-handedly changed the focus, away from the teachings of Jesus to those about the Christ. Starting with his experience on the road to Damascus, the Christ figure becomes Paul’s central focus. For Paul, the Christ was a mystical being who communicated in and through him. This Christ figure he equated with the risen Jesus. For Paul, Jesus was a God-human, a pre-existing divine being who had emptied himself, assuming human form in order to save all who believe in him.

This propelled Jesus into the ranks of Roman mystery deities, a dying-rising savior figure common to the belief systems of the Mediterranean world. It also distanced Jesus from his humanity and from Jewish messianic expectations with its hope for world transformation. The contrast between a Jewish messiah and a Gentile Christ is substantial. The Jewish messiah is to be a transformer of this world, a human agent who along with God brings about the culmination of human history. The messianic era will be a time of universal peace, the resurrection of the righteous, the punishment of the wicked, the restoration of Israel to world prominence and the worship of the one God. By contrast, a dying-rising savior is a being who rescues people from this world, who grants eternal life to those who participate in his suffering and dying.

It was Paul who effected the conceptual transition of Jesus from possible Jewish Messiah to a Gentile Christ. This transformation is fundamental to an understanding of early Christianity. The claim that Jesus was the Jewish messiah – a claim that would be hard to substantiate when one compares the achievements of Jesus with the requirements for being a messiah – becomes transposed into that of a Hellenistic savior, the God-human who is raised from the dead. In the mid 2nd century, Marcion, perhaps Paul’s most devoted and consistent follower, recognized that while Jesus – the Christ – might be the savior of humanity, he was definitely not the messiah of Judaism. For Marcion that did not matter.

It is curious how little effort is made within the New Testament writings to connect Jesus as Messiah to the Jewish job description for a Messiah. True, the Gospel of Matthew does have some references to Jesus fulfilling Old Testament predictions – that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, that his mother would be a virgin, that God’s Son would come out of Egypt. Most of these references, however, are extraneous to the real requirements for a Jewish Messiah: world transformation, the eradication of evil, the overthrow of all sinful governments, the establishment of Israel as a respected authoritative country, world peace, the resurrection of the righteous dead and the worship of the one God. That was the job description.

Jesus' first followers – the Jesus Movement in Jerusalem under James and the other disciples – and their successors, the Ebionites, clung to the original belief that in time the Kingdom would appear as promised. Adhering to his teachings, they maintained that all had not been for naught and that somehow, sometime, they would live to see Israel restored, the righteous Torah-observers rewarded and evil destroyed. The Pauline Christians went in a vastly different direction, downplaying messianic expectations while elevating salvation through Jesus' death seen as sacrificial. Imaging Jesus as a dying-rising savior God-human masked the Jewish Jesus and possible Messiah. As soon as Jesus was billed as a savior, then having to demonstrate that he was a Messiah, in Jewish terms, was taken off the agenda. Mostly it remained forgotten and undefended.

Paul's teachings about the Christ enjoyed enormous success, especially when coupled with a rejection of Jewish Law. Paul's creation of a religion that removed the focus from a Jewish messiah had enormous implications for understanding other writings of the New Testament. For instance, the canonical gospels were written after the success of Paul's Gentile Christianity and were written in that light. Thus Jesus is said to make extravagant claims about himself and his proximity to "the Father," ("I and the Father are one;" "No one comes to the Father but through me;" "I am the Way the Truth and the Life."). This renders the focus of his mission about himself, hinting at his divinity, not his teachings. That reflects "the Pauline shift," the movement away from the teachings of Jesus to beliefs about the Christ. That Christification of Jesus permeates the canonical gospels. It was not the way that Jesus' first followers and their successors, the Ebionites, viewed Jesus. For them, he was a human being, having experienced a normal, natural birth, and potential Messiah – that depended upon him returning to assist God in completing the task he had announced.

So extreme caution is in order concerning how we use the words of the canonical gospels when it comes to understanding early Christianity. There is **an opacity** – a rich "Christ gloss" or "Christ veneer" -- through which we can perhaps see only dimly the authentic teachings of Jesus of history rather than the Christ of faith. We cannot simply quote gospel and verse and be confident that this reflects an actual rendering of what was said at the time. The process of editing, amending and especially the conceptual filter through which the material concerning the Jesus of history was processed all have to be taken into account. The gospels are not verbatim transcripts, although they are often treated that way within denominational contexts.

It is also to raise the question: can one really go "backstage" behind the New Testament mythologizing? If so, how?

But, if not, what's the result? Is the mythological layer too thick for us to penetrate now? Are we really just stuck with the Christ of faith?¹⁰

Do the contents of the present New Testament help or hinder us in this task? Are there ways of opening up the canon so as to permit the Jesus of history to shine through?

¹⁰ That's the conclusion that Tom Harpur draws in several works including *The Pagan Christ* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004) and *Water into Wine* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2007). This represents one way of solving "the problem of the historical Jesus," to abandon the quest as futile. If there was indeed a human being underneath the Christ layer, then, for Harpur that person is irretrievable today.

E. The New Testament Invents Church History

For the same reason there should never have been a New Testament, there should never have been a Church. Jesus promised us the Kingdom of God. He did not say, “Repent, for the Church is at hand.”

So how did we get from Jesus and his mission to the Church? How did we go from a Jewish teacher-healer preaching a message that resonated with Jewish apocalyptic expectations to a Church that emphasized the worship of Jesus as the divine-human savior of humanity? How did a separate institution evolve, with different beliefs and practices than Judaism? Why was the messianic aspect of Jesus proclamation simply ignored?

The development of the Church was not a straightforward “linear” one, seamlessly evolving from Jesus through Paul into the Church.

Paul’s Christ religion was not that of Jesus and his first followers. They differ in terms of origins, beliefs and practices. The stark contrasts between the religion of Paul and that of Jesus/James become apparent. One is a Jewish, Torah-observant messianic community on the one hand, very much like the Essenes and the Pharisees in many respects. The other is a predominantly Gentile, non-Torah-observant, Christ-centered community. The two movements represent two different religions not variations on one.

Paul’s is a separate religion, one that exists right from its inception outside Judaism. It is also one that also from its earliest origins sets up a separate infrastructure. Not only was Paul an organizer, he assumes the role of an authoritative teacher and adjudicator of controversies.

It is not sufficiently, however, just to say that Paul and James differed. How they became linked is the remarkable accomplishment of the Book of Acts. It invents an early Church history by mythologizing Paul and enhancing the amount of contact Paul had with James and the leaders in Jerusalem. It also makes Paul out to be more Jewish than he himself ever let on.

The Book of Acts also creates the notion of a Jerusalem Conference in the late 40’s. Curiously, no one ever references the decision of this council – not the followers of James and not Paul himself, even when he had the opportunity in his Letter to the Galatians. That Conference alone ties Paul’s movement to the Jesus’ movement, as if they were two prongs of one enterprise.

The Book of Acts links Paul to that of Jesus’ first followers by converging two previously separate religions. Acts does so to create an historical pedigree for Paul’s cult of the Christ. In order to create an aura of antiquity for his new religion – a necessary requirement for attracting Roman converts – Acts links Paul to James and through him back to Jesus and biblical Judaism, all the while making no mention of the central practices and beliefs of that ancient religion. It accomplished an amazing remodeling of Paul. In order to create this linkage, all the author of the Book of Acts had to do was to twist Paul’s biography.

Once that convergence was made, a new religion attached to an ancient one – all the while ignoring its central teachings, that of Torah-observance and not having any other God – the way is paved for the theological developments that blossomed in the 4th century. The person of Christ becomes central and his relationship to God has to be defined.

We should recognize that Acts is a novel, a work of historical fiction. It represents what the author of Acts wanted Pauline Christians to believe about their movement and, in this, he was tremendously successful.

What really happened? Did James really endorse Paul via the Jerusalem Conference?

Probably not. That Conference belongs to the realm of mythmaking, the author of the Book of Acts' creative endeavor to attach Paul to the Jesus Movement and through it, to Jesus and the Jewish tradition generally. It is more likely that there existed in antiquity two parallel religions: the Jesus Movement which in time became the Ebionites; and then Pauline Christianity which eventually formed the Church. They were separate religions with little ability to interact, intermarry socialize or even eat together.

In time, however, none of that mattered. Acts had created an early Church history, and, despite its implausibility, it was believed.

7. So, What Needs Fixing?

What's wrong with the present New Testament is that it conceals as much as it reveals.

Specifically:

- The early Church leaders erred in making their selection, assuming that apostolicity was their criterion. If that principle were upheld today, all we would have in the New Testament would be a few undisputed letters of Paul; the rest, eliminated.
- It distorts history, downplaying the role of Jesus' humanity, his family, friends and disciples. In particular it marginalizes such influential leaders as James.
- It is unrepresentative, ignoring the literature of other early Christian communities, the Gnostics and the Ebionites among them.
- It's bloated with Paul, far too "top heavy."
- It embodies a 4th century outlook. The selection itself favors a specific view of Jesus (as divine), of Mary (as special) and of the apostles (with Paul as the chief apostle). While this may represent the theology of the Proto-Orthodox, it was emphatically not the only view of these matters within the Church prior to the 4th century.

The New Testament clearly needs fixing and we need an open debate on the canon.¹¹

As it stands, it creates a mythologized Jesus, a mythologized Paul and a fake church history.

¹¹ See my articles "A New New Testament – Is it Time?" and "What Would a New New Testament Look Like?" posted on this website.