

What Would a *New New Testament* Look Like?¹

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

1. Background

Diversity

Early Christianity was a diverse community—or a diverse collection of communities. It was not, and should not be considered, a monolithic institution from its founding. Rather it was a congregation of assemblies established throughout the reaches of the Roman Empire (and beyond) with urgent and sometimes competing messages of salvation.

Jesus of Nazareth's very first followers in Jerusalem included his brother James, other family members, the disciples, various women including Mary Magdalene, and, in time, many others who were all Torah-observant Jews, clinging to the hope that Jesus would soon return to bring about the promised kingdom of heaven on earth. This earliest community is referred to by scholars today as *the Jesus Movement*.

That group or its immediate successors developed writings late in the first century reflecting their key theological concerns. These focused on the importance of observing Torah even more strictly than did the Pharisees and emphasized the teachings of Jesus regarding compassion, forgiveness and mercy as important traits for membership in the coming kingdom of God. This group's writings included a Gospel of the Hebrews; a version of the Gospel of Matthew which did not include the Virgin Birth narrative; the important Letter of James, which proclaimed that faith without works was a dead faith; and the Didache, a manual of instruction that featured a communal meal of wine and bread.

The present New Testament, however, largely reflects the position of another group—those who favored the approach of the Apostle Paul. Scholars refer to this community as *the Christ Movement*. Paul's views differed radically from those of Jesus' family and first disciples. Paul denied the ongoing validity of the Jewish Law, the Torah, and emphasized faith in the dying-rising Jesus as the gateway to salvation.

Through Paul's theology we begin to get the view of the Christ as a divine-human, a God who emptied himself, taking upon himself human form. It is also through Paul that we find the nucleus of the view that Jesus' death represented atonement for the sins of all humanity.

¹ See my paper "A New New Testament – is It Time?" posted on this website.

For the most part, the specific selection of texts in the current New Testament represents Paul's perspective. These include his letters to Christian communities from Rome to Asia Minor, as well as some later writings attributed to him. It includes four gospels, all written post-70 C.E. in light of the success of Paul's "Gentile" Christianity.

The list of what should be included in the Christian Scriptures was determined in 367 C.E. by the highly influential Archbishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt. In time, other bishops agreed with Athanasius' list. This selection dovetails with other 4th century developments that favored Pauline Christianity. It was this faction within the variety of early Christian communities that the Roman emperors Constantine and Theodosius endorsed in their efforts to unite the empire, giving it first favored status and then official status as the religion of the empire in 381. Through their efforts, including the Council of Nicea held at Constantine's summer palace in 325, the Christ Movement ultimately became the Christian Church. In turn, all branches of contemporary Christianity—Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformation Protestant, and Evangelical—stem from this 4th century decision.

Another group, the Gnostic Christians, known from the 2nd century onwards (and whose 1st century origins are unknown) went in a different direction. They regarded Jesus as an ambassador from God. His mandate was that of a "Socratic" teacher who would prod us into achieving insight into our true identity, our origins and our destiny. *The Gnostic Movement*—itself a diverse set of communities—developed literature in time including gospels attributed to Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Philip and even one to the Savior himself as well as a new creation epic, The Apocryphon of John. The writings treasured by this influential segment of early Christianity were not included in the New Testament.

These, then—the Jesus, Gnostic and Christ Movements—represent three radically different interpretations of early Christianity, all going back to the earliest days after Jesus' execution. There were probably many other forms of early Christianity now lost to us. Some think there was a community built around "Q," for instance, and there were likely other groups shaped by such figures as Thomas, Mary Magdalene and others. What we have now been able to recapture is remarkable.

The historical and social forces that have shaped what-became-Christianity have often been ignored by a failure to place the early texts in context – as if these writings dropped from the sky – and by underestimating the extreme diversity of early Christianity – as if there was just one and only one form of this variegated new religion. A *New New Testament* would demonstrate that coming to grips with the historical Jesus—his identity, mission and teachings—is ambiguous at best in *all* decades since his death around 30 - 33 C.E.

Differences over these important topics were built into Christianity *right from the outset*. Access to the plurality of documents that comprised the world of early Christianity – easily accessible today via on-line resources -- would make the debate and options clear. That is the purpose that drives the concept of a *new New Testament*.

An Important Opportunity

This opportunity to create a *New New Testament* should be welcomed by faith communities, by scholars in colleges and universities around the world and by students in other religious traditions seeking to understand better the formation of Christianity and the range of opinion that flourished right from the outset. The canon of the New Testament should be opened up just as the canon of Western Literature has been, to include the voices of those marginalized along the way.

In addition it will help move thinking back beyond the 4th century when the Church as we now know it was formed. What was Christianity like before this institutionalization? What were the varieties of belief, practices, liturgies and authoritative scriptures?

Canon Never Closed

In creating a *New New Testament* it is important to keep two things in mind. **First, the Church never closed the canon.** While the contents of the present New Testament were outlined in the late 4th century by Archbishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt, there was never a Council that passed a resolution stating that these and these alone constituted the Christian Scriptures. The canon has been left open. During the Reformation, Martin Luther proposed eliminating the Letter of James but that suggestion was not adopted. Custom dictates that the twenty-seven books represent the New Testament, but it's only that – custom, not theology, not dogma and not the result of any ecumenical Council.

No Eye-Witness Accounts

Secondly, we now know that **there are no eye-witness documents in the New Testament.** The gospels are 2nd, 3rd or 4th generation writings from 70 – 100 CE attributed by 2nd century tradition to earlier figures. We are supposed to think of “Matthew” and “John” as coming from Jesus’ inner circle and “Mark” and “Luke” from Paul’s. But that’s only attribution, on par with Gnostic attempts to ascribe some of their writings to Mary Magdalene, Philip, Thomas and the Savior. The Gospels are later writings produced by anonymous individuals for audiences in the late 1st or early 2nd century, culturally and temporally removed from the circumstances of Jesus and his enterprise.

Paul, moreover, was not an eye-witness, never having met the Jesus of history. While he attributes his religion to a mystical encounter with Christ, he did not benefit from a 3-year mentoring process as Jesus’ first followers enjoyed with him throughout northern Israel. While visions play a major role in the development of Christianity – Paul’s, Peter’s in the Book of Acts, Constantine’s vision of the cross in the early 4th century – what is surprising is how different the message of Christ is to Paul from that of the Jesus of history to his disciples. That’s startling and surprising.²

² For the significant differences between Paul and Jesus, see my book, *How Jesus Became Christian* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2008) as well as *Paul on Trial* (available at my website, www.barriewilson.com). See also James Tabor, *Paul and Jesus* (NY: Simon & Shuster, 2012).

In addition, the other letters included in the New Testament – those attributed to Paul (such as the Pastorals and likely also Ephesians and Colossians) and those attributed to other early Church figures such as James, Jude, Peter and John – all these are judged by modern scholars to be later works forged in the name of these individuals. Similarly the Book of Revelation is not viewed by contemporary scholars as having been written by Jesus' disciple John. It has been variously dated, late 1st century, early 2nd century, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, and also during the Jewish War against Rome in 66-70 CE.

So the ancient criterion – that of being an eye-witness to Jesus – fails. A new criterion is needed and perhaps that of **inclusiveness** could best serve the needs of today's investigators into the various faith traditions that comprised the earliest layers of what became Christianity.

2. Three Requirements

First of all, a *new* New Testament would need to present *all* the writings reflective of early Christianity—not just the Pauline brand which gives a very limited view of how the Church evolved. This will include writings that reflect the viewpoints of the Jesus and Gnostic Movements, for instance. For students of the Bible, this revolutionary new discussion will open a wide variety of alternate positions and allow a better understanding and appreciation of the disputes within the various communities of the first and second centuries as they sought to advance what they considered to be the real voice of Jesus.

Secondly, a *new New Testament* would arrange the writings in each section chronologically, in so far as these can be discerned today. For instance, the current New Testament presents the four Gospels before Paul, although Paul was dead before the earliest Gospel had been composed. Moreover, the Gospels are not arranged chronologically – the correct order being, according to contemporary scholars, Mark, Matthew, Luke, John. Moreover, in the current New Testament, Paul's letters are not presented in historical order. They are rather unhelpfully listed in descending order of length, thus hampering an appreciation of how Paul's thought evolved over time and in light of new circumstances.

In addition, scholars contend that the author of the Book of Acts was the same as the writer of the Gospel of Luke, but these works are separated in the current New Testament, thus making it difficult to see Luke's agenda to show how the faith expanded from the Galilee to Jerusalem (Gospel of Luke) and from there to Rome (Acts). Its message is obscured by this arrangement.

In keeping with these requirements, here's a tentative profile of what a *new* New Testament would look like.

3. A New New Testament – A Profile

Part 1: Jesus Movement/Ebionite Writings

Writings profiling the views of Jesus' first followers, their pro-Torah, anti-Roman, Jesus-as-human perspective. Background information presents the context for Jesus' political message -- the Jewish expectation of the messianic era coupled with references to potential messiahs prior to Jesus.

- Background
 - Psalms of Solomon -- #2 ; #17 – 1st cent BCE: background on a political Messiah
 - Dead Sea Scrolls – selection from *The Community Rule* – role of the righteous; eternal life
 - Josephus – selection outlining would-be Messiahs prior to Jesus: Judas the Galilean, Simon of Perea, Athronges
- Sermon on the Mount/other “M” material (that is, material found exclusively in Matthew)
- Letter of James (from current New Testament) – works, not faith, fundamental
- Letter of Jude (from current New Testament)
- Didache (a.k.a. Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) – includes a Eucharistic celebration that differs from Paul, celebrating Jesus' life, not his death.
- Letter of Peter to James – safeguarding Peter's teachings from “the man who is my enemy” [Paul]
- Eusebius' condemnation of the “Ebionites” as Jesus' first followers came to be called – an ironic twist of fate.

Part 2: Q

A new early source noted within the past century when scholars detected similarities between the gospels of Matthew and Luke that did not come from the earlier gospel of Mark. Both, it seemed, used this early source in addition to Mark in composing their writings. This additional common source is referred to by scholars as “Q” (from the German word Quelle meaning “source”).

Identifying these recollections of Jesus' sayings as a unit represents an important step in understanding how the gospels used these within the framework of a narrative gospel.

Part 3: Christ Movement/ Proto-Orthodoxy³

(I): New Testament Letters of Paul

The seven letters of Paul judged authentic by modern scholars, chronologically arranged: 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans.

(II): New Testament Gospels

Chronologically arranged: Mark (70's), Matthew (80's), Luke/Acts (90's), John (90's or later).

(III): Other New Testament Writings

These writings are difficult to date chronologically. This section would include:

- letters attributed to Paul
- letters attributed to other early figures, e.g. John, Peter
- the Book of Revelation.

(IV): Additional Writings

Additional Proto-Orthodox writings which were influential in early Christianity. These were not included in the present New Testament because they were not judged by 4th century biblical scholars (or by modern ones for that matter) as eye-witness documents.

- Infancy Gospel of James – for the developing theology of Mary, Mother of Jesus
- Fragments of the Gospel of Peter – another account of Jesus' suffering and resurrection
- Letters of Ignatius of Antioch – an important window into Pauline Christianity, ca.115CE
- Acts of Thecla – how Paul's teachings were interpreted in this popular 2nd century novel (as preaching asceticism)
- Nicene Creed --where the whole enterprise is headed.

³ 'Proto-Orthodoxy' is a useful word used by Bart Ehrman to denote that faction of early Christianity, essentially Pauline Christianity, that would, in the 4th century, become what we now know of as Christianity. See his *Lost Christianities* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.13.

Part 4: Gnostic Movement Writings

Selections from the writings of the Gnostic Movement, including these influential works:

- Gospel of Thomas
- Book of Thomas
- Apocryphon of John
- Gospel of Mary Magdalene
- Gospel of Philip
- Gospel of the Saviour