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## What is the New Testament?

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### Guiding Questions

What is the New Testament, and why is it called the “New Testament”?

What barriers to comprehension do twenty-first-century readers face when approaching a first-century text?

How might ancient texts shape our contemporary interpretations of the New Testament?

... There was an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians; he was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning, seated in his chariot. He was reading the prophet Isaiah. The spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” So Philip ran up and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

(Acts 8:27-31)

### “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Twenty-first-century readers who approach the New Testament for the first time can empathize with the Ethiopian **eunuch**. Reading an ancient text in translation can be challenging. Sometimes, the text is easy to understand:

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“So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.” At other points, it is easy to understand *what* the text says, even if the text still leaves you with questions. The text may create a practical puzzle, leaving you to figure out *how* someone might do what the text says to do: “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). Other texts generate an interpretive puzzle, leaving you wondering *why* the text says what it does.

For example, if a twenty-first-century reader decides to start reading the New Testament, she might start with the Gospel of Matthew. If she perseveres through the rather daunting seventeen verses of **genealogy**, she will soon find a lively story about an engaged couple facing a deciding point in the relationship. The woman (Mary) finds herself pregnant prior to the wedding ceremony. The man (Joseph) contemplates a quiet divorce. Suddenly, an angel appears on the scene, speaking to Joseph in a dream: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife . . .” (Matt 1:20). Our attentive reader will remember that, just four verses earlier, the genealogy in Matt 1:16 identified Joseph as the son of a certain *Jacob*, not David! What is going on? Is the angel mistaken? Is the biblical text in error? Or did the translator make a mistake?

The translator is not mistaken; the **evangelist** has not erred. Rather, the identification of Joseph as “son of David” is not about biological fathers at all. The angel’s words are a theological cue. The text is intentionally calling attention to Joseph’s identity as a descendant of David, the ancient king of Israel. According to the Jewish **scriptures**, God promised that King David would have offspring, and this offspring of David would have an eternal throne. As God announced through the prophet Nathan, “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:13). Thus, Matthew’s genealogy is not designed to show that Joseph’s father was a certain Jacob. Instead, Matthew’s genealogy is designed to draw a line from David down through Jacob and Joseph to Jesus. Jesus comes from the line of David—a point that the **gospel**-writer first states in Matt 1:1 and then underscores in 1:20. A first-century Jewish reader could make these connections intuitively. Twenty-first-century readers can benefit, as the Ethiopian eunuch did, from someone to guide us.

Why do readers of the New Testament need guidance? First and foremost, the New Testament is an ancient text. We are not ancient people. Turn back the clock three hundred years, and you enter a world without telephone conversations, televised sporting events, air travel, microwave dinners, electric lights, and internet search capabilities. Continue backward another

sixteen centuries, and you draw near to the world of the New Testament. We are separated from the ancient inhabitants of Galilee, Jerusalem, and Rome by time and (for most of us) space. The New Testament writings often imply a readership that is familiar with both the socio-economic world of the eastern Roman empire and the customs and beliefs of first-century Jewish culture, particularly with the collection of ancient texts that modern **Christians** call the “Old Testament,” modern **Jews** call the **Tanakh**, and ancient Jews (such as Jesus and Paul) called “the scriptures” (see Matt 21:42; 22:29; Rom 1:2). First-century readers met those expectations. Twenty-first-century readers can fall short.

After all, the way we live has changed dramatically. We still eat, drink, work, and sleep. But other things have changed. Nowadays, many of us spend most of our time inside buildings. Many of us do not end up working in the same occupation that our parents did. Many of us have traveled more than ten miles away from the place where we were born. Many of us live in democracies. Many of us neither own other human beings as slaves nor are owned by other human beings as slaves. Many of us will live for more than fifty years—perhaps even for fifty more years after reading this sentence. And there is another example of cultural difference: all of us can read these words. Not only can we read, but many of us own books. Estimates of ancient literacy usually hover around or below ten percent of the population; production costs meant that even fewer people would own a book. Education and economics combine to generate yet another difference between then and now: we read books silently in the library or in our homes. First-century followers of Jesus, in contrast, would have typically encountered texts with their *ears*, not their *eyes*. We peruse an English translation visually; they heard Greek (or **Aramaic** or **Hebrew**) sentences read by a literate member of the **synagogue** or assembly. (You might consider reading the New Testament aloud as one small way to draw closer to the first readers of the New Testament.)

Second, the New Testament has been read and interpreted throughout the intervening centuries. Words and phrases like “our Lord Jesus **Christ**” and “**faith**” have been used and over-used to the point where the ways in which we use them may not relate well at all to the ways in which first-century authors used them. In their book *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath describe this phenomenon, which they call “semantic stretch.” When certain words are used over and over again, they lose their potency and precision. Very few readers of the New Testament can give a sound definition of the word “faith,” and even fewer accurately grasp the meaning of the word

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“Christ.” The meaning of these semantically-stretched words (and others) has been diluted. Part of this book’s mission is to help modern readers understand how ancient writers used these words and phrases.

Third, we need to explore these words and phrases in both the original Greek and contemporary English. If you have studied a foreign language, you know that it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to say the exact same thing in two different languages. Even if you can find words that convey the same basic meanings, these words arrive already enmeshed in entire cultural networks of meaning. Even though teams of expert scholars have produced up-to-date translations of the New Testament that are based on the best Greek manuscripts, it is not always possible to convey the full range of meaning present in the Greek original. For example, see John 3:3, where Jesus tells a Jewish leader named Nicodemus that “unless someone is born *anōthen*, they cannot see the kingdom of God.” The Greek word *anōthen* can mean “from above” or “again.” Based on his response to Jesus’ words, Nicodemus clearly thinks that Jesus means “born again,” or “born a second time” (John 3:4). But the ambiguity of Jesus’ words appears to be intentional—there is something about being born *anōthen* that involves both re-birth and belief in the **heaven**-sent Jesus (John 3:13). This ambiguity is shielded from the reader of an English translation of the New Testament—although many recent versions try to help by adding a translation note. Readers of the New Testament need to keep this linguistic barrier in mind; if a verse is unclear in one translation of the New Testament, consider looking at a few different translations for clarification.

So, do you have to know ancient Greek to be a good reader of the New Testament? No. Would it help? Of course, but there is an abundance of resources available for an English-speaking audience that are written by scholars who know Greek. In addition to the present work, see the many resources given at the end of each chapter.

If this linguistic distance from the Greek original seems disheartening, keep in mind that many first-century Jews dealt with a similar problem. The Jewish scriptures were written in Hebrew, but many first-century Jews did not know Hebrew. Many Jews were scattered throughout the Mediterranean world, and they had grown more comfortable speaking

Aramaic and Greek. As a result, years before the New Testament was written, the Jewish scriptures were translated. The rather free translations into Aramaic—often closer to paraphrase than translation—are called *targumim*, and the best-known Greek translations are known as the **Septuagint**. According to an early legend, the Hebrew version of the Jewish scriptures was translated into Greek by a team of seventy (or seventy-two) scholars. (The Latin word *septuaginta* means “seventy,” and the Septuagint is thus often abbreviated as “LXX,” which is 70, in Roman numerals). The so-called *Letter of Aristeas* offers one account, which describes the translation process as taking seventy-two days of work by seventy-two learned scholars in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. The author—probably a Jew writing in the late second century B.C.E.—makes clear the authoritative nature of this new translation:

As the books were read, the priests stood up, with the elders from among the translators and from the representatives of the “Community,” and with the leaders of the people, and said, “Since this version has been made rightly and reverently, and in every respect accurately, it is good that this should remain exactly so, and that there should be no revision.”

*(Letter of Aristeas 310; OTP translation)*

Evidently, this legend served to assure Greek-speaking Jews that the Greek translation of their sacred text was completely trustworthy, requiring “no revision” and no second-guessing. The existence of such a legend implies that some Jews were uncomfortable with the idea of using a translation of their sacred texts. Still, ancient Jews used the LXX widely, and many early Christians accepted this Greek translation as authoritative.

## The New Testament is a library

One place to begin our efforts is with the title itself: “New Testament.” Why do we call it “New,” and what exactly is a “Testament”? If we are to understand what this text is, we must first keep in mind that it is not just one text; it is a collection, or library, of texts. Over the years some Christians have been known to call their **Bible** “The Good Book.” But the English word “Bible” comes from the Greek *ta biblia*, which literally means “the books.” Like the larger Christian Bible of which it forms a part, the New Testament is composed of “books.” The New Testament is thus more akin to a library than to a history book or a personal letter.

In fact, *ta biblia* can mean either “the books” or “the scrolls.” In the time of Jesus, lengthier texts were usually written on scrolls; think, for instance, of the **Dead Sea Scrolls**. Around the time that the writings of the New Testament were being written, edited, and assembled, a new technology was being developed: the **codex**, or “book.” Christians quickly adopted this new technology, and most early New Testament manuscripts exist in codex form.

There are twenty-seven books in the Christian New Testament. Impressively, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox Christians are all in full agreement about which twenty-seven books form the New Testament. This sort of official list of sacred books is known as a **canon**. The Greek word *kanōn* can mean “measuring stick,” so think of a canon as a list of books that “measure up” to a certain standard. We will learn more about the process of determining which books measure up to which standard in the Post-Script at the end of this volume; at this point, let us examine one such list of books: the Muratorian Canon.

The Muratorian Canon—also known as the Muratorian fragment, since the opening lines are missing—catalogues various texts that belong to the Christian New Testament. It offers brief comments on their authorship and on their status: should they be read, or not? Some scholars believe that this Latin fragment is a translation of a Greek original that was composed in the late second century C.E. in Rome; if so, this list would be the earliest extant canon. Other scholars have dated the origin of the underlying Greek text to the fourth century C.E. in Syria or Palestine. Regardless of date, this ancient text offers a glimpse into one “measuring” of early Christian texts. The Muratorian fragment begins with a mention of the Gospel of Luke and goes on to list many writings that are found in (what we now call) the New Testament. But other writings are also mentioned:

...There is current also (a letter) to the Laodiceans, another to the Alexandrians, forged in Paul’s name for the sect of Marcion, and several others, which cannot be received in the catholic church; for it will not do to mix gall with honey. Further, a letter of Jude and two with the title John are accepted in the catholic church, and the Wisdom written by friends of Solomon in his honor. Also, of the revelations, we accept only those of John and Peter, the latter of which some of our people do not want to have read in the church. But Hermas wrote the Shepherd quite recently in our time in the city of Rome, when the bishop Pius, his brother, was seated on the throne of

the church of the city of Rome. And therefore it ought indeed to be read, but it cannot be read publicly in the church to the people either among the prophets, whose number is settled, or among the apostles to the end of time.

(Muratorian Canon, lines 63-80; W. Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson translation [Westminster John Knox, 1991], modified)

Whenever this text was written, there was clearly not a settled canonical list of books. In other words, when Christians talked about “the scriptures,” they did not always have the same group of texts in mind. Moreover, this fragment brings to light a variety of ancient categories for texts. On one hand, Paul’s letters to Philemon, Titus, and Timothy are sacred and can be read in the **church**. On the other hand, the letters to the Laodiceans and Alexandrians should be blacklisted as forgeries. Yet, there is also middle ground. The *Shepherd of Hermas* can be read privately, but not publicly; it is neither sacrilege nor sacred text. (Interestingly, the book of Revelation occupies a similar place in the Byzantine tradition; Revelation is never read publicly in the **liturgy**.)

Why is “catholic church” not capitalized in the quote from the Muratorian Canon? First, here, “catholic” simply means “universal” (from the Greek *katholikos*), not Roman Catholic (a later designation). Second, whether composed in the second century or the fourth century, the original text would not have employed capital and lower-case letters. Most Greek manuscripts of this time period—including our earliest New Testament manuscripts—did not employ capitalization, did not utilize punctuation marks, and did not even have spaces between words. These reader aids only arrived later—hence, the translations in the present work aim to preserve something of the less-marked original texts. For the sake of clarity, I do still capitalize personal names, place names, and the names of writings.

So, we have a canon, a set of texts that “measure up,” and a theologically-informed process of selection. That canonical process is interesting in its own right and will be discussed at a later point in this book. For now, we must examine the writings that emerged from these centuries of sifting. After controversies over different letters, assorted gospels, and diverse **apocalyptic** texts, the final contents of this contested library included representatives of each of these different genres.

## The literary forms of the New Testament

We know the main character of the New Testament: Jesus. Beyond that, things get complicated. No simple summary will suffice. Who is this Jesus? Some writings of the New Testament narrate the life of Jesus the first-century Jew. Others describe the (future?) actions of Jesus the heavenly lamb of God. Still others invoke “our Lord Jesus Christ” in the midst of debates over how the followers of Jesus should comport themselves. To read the New Testament, one must figure out how to read the various writings of the New Testament.

At an early stage, the current order of books in the New Testament was agreed upon. There are no documents that reliably explain the historical process of determining the order; Augustine of Hippo explains the order of the four gospels as due to their order of composition, but this hypothesis seems highly doubtful. Scholars have, nonetheless, been able to draw some conclusions; for instance, the Pauline (= attributed to Paul) letters to churches are roughly arranged from longest (Romans) to shortest (2 Thessalonians)—although Galatians and Ephesians should be transposed. They are followed by the Pauline letters to individuals, which are also arranged from longest (1 Timothy) to shortest (Philemon). The last seven letters are also arranged from longest (Hebrews) to shortest (3 John), with the exception of 1 John, which belongs between Hebrews and James if length is the criterion.

The twenty-seven discrete writings that constitute the New Testament come in three varieties: narratives, letters, and revelatory or apocalyptic literature. There are five narrative works: four gospels about Jesus (often classified as “biographies”), and one book of the Acts of the Apostles (generally categorized as a “history”). The last book of the New Testament is the book of Revelation, which scholars describe as “apocalyptic literature” (for further discussion, see Chapter Twelve). Between Acts and Revelation are twenty-one texts that appear in the form of “letters” (sometimes called “epistles”). Studying the New Testament, then, is often an exercise in reading someone else’s mail.

This analogy can be helpful for understanding the New Testament. Many letters in the New Testament were written by a man named Paul (the subject of Chapter Nine). The followers of Jesus formed “assemblies” (also called “churches”) throughout the cities of the Mediterranean world, and Paul helped to found, maintain, and connect these assemblies. So, to read a letter of Paul is to hear one half of a conversation between Paul and an early Christian community. It is no wonder, then, that scholars encounter difficulty in trying to create a tidy summary of Paul’s belief system. They are trying to flatten and categorize the many letters of Paul written in different times and places, in a variety of circumstances, to a host of diverse communities. Such efforts may be useful; still, attention to **literary form** is absolutely necessary. Paul addressed a letter “to the assemblies in Galatia” (Gal 1:2), not to “academic theologians in Western universities.”

**Second Temple** Judaism is simply the Judaism that existed during the time of the Second Temple. As the following chapter will explain, the first Jerusalem **temple** was destroyed by the Babylonians in the early sixth century B.C.E. The Jews built a second temple that was dedicated in 515 B.C.E. and destroyed in 70 C.E. Thus, “Second Temple Judaism” lasts from approximately 515 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.

Attention to literary form profoundly influences interpretation. For example, the book of Revelation can be read as a first-century pre-cursor to twenty-first-century Christian thriller novels, or it can be read against the backdrop of Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism (see Chapter Twelve for a helpful exploration of ancient **apocalypses**). The gospel depictions of “Jews” can be read with the flat stereotypes of anti-Semitic bias, or they can be read with an understanding of the beliefs and practices of Jews in the Second Temple period (the latter option is advanced in Chapter Eight). To go a bit deeper, we might also consider how to read the speeches in the book of Acts. Contemporary journalists reporting on a presidential speech are expected to quote verbatim from the address. What about the world before tape recorders, before radio broadcasts, before social media? New Testament scholars are fond of quoting the words of the fifth-century B.C.E. Greek historian Thucydides, who explains his use of speeches in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* as follows:

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And as far as what each one said in a speech, either when they were about to do battle, or when they were already engaged in battle, it was difficult to record with precision the words that were spoken, both those that I heard and those that have been reported to me from some place or another. Just as it seemed to me that each one would have said the most necessary things concerning their state of affairs, considering that these things are nearest to the general sense of what was truly spoken, so I have written.

(Thucydides, *History* 1.22.1)

On one hand, Thucydides certainly wants to report “with precision” the words that were “truly spoken.” On the other hand, that is hard to do. So, the Athenian historian has to settle for giving his best reconstruction of what would most likely have been said. And the accuracy of this reconstruction will depend on the quality of Thucydides’ sources. Given the influence of Thucydides on later historians, it is unlikely that ancient authors and audiences would expect verbatim reports of speeches within historical narratives.

It should be clearer now that reading the New Testament is complicated. Ancient authors work with different sets of expectations. Reading Paul’s mail has its limits. The gospels emerge from a different cultural context. Aware of these constraints, we can offer a working definition of the New Testament: *The New Testament is a carefully-selected collection of twenty-seven texts that were written between ca. 50 C.E. and ca. 100 C.E. by a variety of people throughout the eastern Mediterranean world. Though written in at least three distinct genres, all twenty-seven books are clearly connected to the person, work, or later influence of a main character named Jesus.* But why is it called the “New Testament”?

## Why “Testament”?

To understand why this library of texts was called the “New Testament,” we must examine both words carefully. Our English word “testament” comes from the Latin word *testamentum* (a translation of the Greek *diathēkē*). Both *testamentum* and *diathēkē* can be translated as “testament” or as “**covenant**.” Traditionally, the former translation has been more popular. But because “testament” is rarely used in contemporary English (except to refer to a “last will and testament”), it might be more helpful to translate the Latin *novum testamentum* (or Greek *kainē diathēkē*) as “New Covenant” rather than “New Testament.” What might this new covenant be?

To begin, a covenant may be defined as a binding agreement between two or more parties. In the ancient Near Eastern world, this sort of binding agreement was often solemnized through blood **sacrifice**. These covenants could be used to affirm friendship between parties of relatively equal status (e.g., in Gen 21:27), or parties of drastically unequal status. In the Jewish scriptures (or Christian “Old Testament”), covenants typically include God as the superior party and human beings (e.g., Abram in Gen 15) as the inferior.

If the covenant under discussion is a “new” covenant, then there must be an “old” covenant. Paul refers to an “old covenant” in 2 Cor 3:14, where the expression clearly refers to the covenant between God and Israel that was mediated by Moses on Mount Sinai (see Exod 19-20). For readers of the present work who are unfamiliar with Moses, Sinai, and the Sinai covenant, it may be helpful to review the contents of the **Pentateuch**—the first five books of both the Christian Bible and the Jewish Tanakh.

Readers who are unfamiliar with the story of the people of God in the (Christian) Old Testament may find it useful to read some of the biblical re-tellings of the story of Israel. The following passages review the history of God’s people: e.g., Deut 6:20-24 (from Egypt to **promised land**); Deut 26:5-9 (from Abraham to promised land); Josh 24:2-13 (from Abraham to promised land); Ps 78:12-72 (from Egypt to Davidic monarchy); Wis 10:1-12:8 (from creation of Adam to conquest of promised land); Acts 7:2-53 (from Abraham to Solomon’s temple); 13:16-41 (from Egypt to Davidic monarchy); Heb 11:3-40 (from creation to Second Temple period).

To summarize, the book of Genesis describes the creation of the world (Gen 1-2), the human **fall** into **sin** and suffering (Gen 3-11), the divine **election** (= choosing) and call of Abram (Gen 12), the establishment of God’s covenant with Abram/Abraham (Gen 15 and 17), and God’s promises to Abraham’s younger son Isaac (Gen 25:11) and to Isaac’s younger son Jacob (Gen 27:27-29). Jacob, who is renamed “Israel” (Gen 32:28; 35:10), has twelve sons; his eleventh son, Joseph, is sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen 37-50). The book of Exodus opens with the descendants of Jacob/Israel (= “Israelites”) living in Egypt as slaves (Exod 1). God raises up a prophet and leader named Moses, who persuades Pharaoh to let the people go (Exod 2-12). Moses parts

the Red Sea (technically, the “Sea of Reeds”) and leads the people to freedom; then, in the wilderness region of Mount Sinai, God makes a covenant with Israel (for more details, see Chapter Eight). This covenant binds God and the descendants of Jacob (= Israel) together in relationship; God self-identifies as “the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod 20:2). Most of the remaining chapters of Exodus, as well as all of Leviticus and the beginning of Numbers, are devoted to explaining the covenantal requirements that God expects Israel to fulfill, also known as the **law**. Deuteronomy (from the Greek words for “second” and “law”) is largely a re-telling of God’s covenantal expectations. Hence, despite the importance of creation and the call of Abram, it is fair to conclude that the Sinai covenant, or “old covenant” according to 2 Cor 3:14, lies at the heart of the Pentateuch.

The New Testament also includes explicit mention of a corresponding “new covenant.” An early Christian writer highlights the references to a “new covenant” in one of the books of the prophets (Heb 8:8-13, quoting Jer 31:31-34). According to other early followers of Jesus, the cup of wine that Jesus gave to his **disciples** at the Last Supper is (or symbolizes? or establishes?) the new covenant: “And in the same way [he took] the cup after supper, saying ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor 11:25; compare Luke 22:20). But even these explicit references to a “new covenant” do not spell out what that new covenant is or what requirements it might involve.

What is the new covenant? If you directed this question to any of the authors of the New Testament, the response would likely deal with a person (Jesus), not a set of books. (For an early Christian like Paul, the Bible was simply the Jewish scriptures, now called the “Old Testament” by Christians.) This response would have stayed constant for decades. In the writings of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (ca. 130 C.E. – 202 C.E.), for example, we find explicit, sustained theological reflection on “new covenant” in relation to “old covenant.” However, when Irenaeus talks about “old covenant” and “new,” he is probably not linking these terms with collections of sacred texts (e.g., *Against Heresies* 4.15.2). The earliest evidence we have of a connection between a new covenant and a set of texts is in the writings of the North African theologian Tertullian (ca. 200 C.E.). In his *Against Praxeas* 15, Tertullian announces that he will draw evidence from the “new covenant” (*novum testamentum*) to support his argument about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. By the end of the second century C.E., instead of reading gospels and letters that describe the new covenant

inaugurated by Jesus, we find these very gospels and letters described as the books of the new covenant, or simply as “the new covenant.”

Tertullian was probably not the first Christian theologian to apply the term “new covenant” to a collection of writings. We have two earlier references to writings associated with the “old covenant,” both by Greek theologians in the late second century C.E. (Melito of Sardis, *Fragments* 3, and Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.6.54). However, Tertullian may have been the first theologian to use another important term: *trinitas*, the Latin word for the **Trinity**.

## The New Testament as drama

From a Christian perspective, the coming of Jesus and the inauguration of a new covenant begin to resolve the dramatic tension created by human disobedience to the divine will (Gen 3). More than one New Testament scholar has argued that the overall storyline set forth in the Christian Bible resembles a five-act play. Samuel Wells offers his version as follows:

Act I: Creation (and Fall)

Act II: Israel (from the call of Abram to the Babylonian exile and beyond)

Act III: Jesus (from **incarnation** to **resurrection**)

Act IV: Church (= Christians)

Act V: End (or, to use the fancy Greek term, **eschaton**)

Act I sets the stage by introducing the setting (heaven and earth) and the main characters (God and humanity). This act also introduces the basic conflict that moves the entire narrative forward (God lovingly creates humans, but humans resist God). Act II introduces the first step toward resolution: God chooses a person (Abraham) and a people (Israel) to bring reconciliation between God and humanity. Act III offers the resolution to the basic conflict: Jesus offers forgiveness for sin and reconciliation between God and humanity. In Act IV, Christians receive the **Holy Spirit** and the charge to continue the work of reconciliation in the world. And Act V will bring the dramatic finale, bringing both tragedy for those who resist God and joy for those who remain faithful to the end.

Nowadays, “sect” can have a pejorative connotation, somewhat like the word “cult.” When scholars use the word “sect,” though, they are referring to an organized sub-group within a larger religious (or philosophical) group or school of thought. The closest modern term might be “denomination,” which is typically more value-neutral. Likewise, the term “cult” is associated with fringe religious groups in popular culture; scholars use “cult” to describe any system of ritual worship, whether mainstream or extreme.

Viewed from within this theological framework, this book primarily treats the end of Act II (the situation of the Jewish people after the Babylonian conquest) and Act III (Jesus, the star—or “superstar”—of the show). Less attention is paid to Acts IV and V, even though the writing of the New Testament might be placed in the first scene of Act IV and the eschaton will receive some attention in Chapter Twelve. We will begin by exploring the military, political, and social contexts of Acts II and III (Part One: The Setting). We will continue by learning more about the main characters in Act III; in addition to studying Jesus, we will look at John the Baptist, Mary, King Herod, and Paul, as well as other Second Temple Jews and Jewish sects (Part Two: The Cast of Characters). Then, we will take a closer look at three important words that tend to fall victim to semantic stretch or other forms of misunderstanding: **crucifixion**, faith, and apocalypse (Part Three: Reading Old Words). Finally, a Post-Script will dip into Act IV, exploring further the development of the Christian canon.

This dramatic metaphor helps to explain how the New Testament fits within a Christian theological framework, but the way this framework compresses the Jewish scriptures into two preliminary acts may raise concerns. Similarly, the label “New Testament” can be off-putting. Why this language of “old” and “new”? In our consumerist world, “new” means “good.” You want to buy the “new and improved” product, not last year’s model (which is likely marked down in price, as a token of its lesser value). Some see the label “New Testament” as a Christian claim to superiority over the Jewish “Old Testament.” And this down-grading of the status of Jewish scriptures aligns neatly with past Christian down-grading of the status of the Jewish people and their religion. Some scholars have argued that this language should be replaced with more value-neutral terminology, like “First Testament” instead of “Old Testament,” or “Christian Scripture” in place of “New Testament.”

The sentiments behind this proposal are praiseworthy, but there are many problems with the proposed solutions. First, keep in mind that Jews do not call their scriptures the “Old Testament.” Jews call their scriptures by a variety of names: the “Bible,” the “scriptures,” or most commonly, “*Tanakh*” (a Hebrew acronym that stands for the major divisions of the Jewish Bible: *Torah* [“law”], *Nevi'im* [“prophets”], and *Ketuvim* [“writings”]). Second, calling the New Testament “Christian Scripture” implies that what Christians call the “Old Testament” is not part of “Christian Scripture,” when it most certainly is! Third, as will be discussed in Chapter Eight, at least parts of the New Testament were written before “Christianity” became a “religion” separate from Judaism; hence, “Christian Scripture” runs the risk of anachronism. For these reasons, I retain the label “New Testament” for the twenty-seven writings under discussion. As stated above, though, the sentiments behind alternate proposals are laudable, and I hope that the material in the subsequent chapters will help to achieve the same ends (e.g., preventing anti-Jewish readings of sacred texts) through different means.

## Voices from the New Testament world

Before beginning our tour, I would like you to meet some of our more notable guides from the world of the New Testament. I will quote a variety of Greek and Roman historians, novelists, and philosophers; these non-Jewish authors will be introduced in the subsequent chapters. Here, I provide background on Jewish authors of the late Second Temple period.

### 1-2 Maccabees (second century B.C.E.)

The Maccabean histories form part of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox canons of scripture, but they are not considered canonical by Protestants or Jews. Regardless of modern opinions as to their canonicity, these histories are invaluable sources for the **Maccabean revolt** and subsequent **Hasmonean** rule. Written in the late second century B.C.E., 1 Maccabees chronicles the tumultuous time period from the rise of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 175 B.C.E. to the death of Simon son of Mattathias in 134 B.C.E. The focus is on the (Jewish) Maccabean revolt against the rule of the

(Greek) **Seleucids**. This revolt, caused by events of 167 B.C.E., will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

2 Maccabees claims to be an abridgment of a longer five-volume work (2 Macc 2:23), and like 1 Maccabees, it also recounts the Maccabean revolt. Second Maccabees covers a shorter period of time (ca. 175 – 161 B.C.E.). One striking feature of 2 Maccabees is the importance of **martyrdom**; 2 Macc 6-7 describes multiple executions, including a famous account of the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons (2 Macc 7). All eight martyrs face their deaths valiantly, believing that they will rise from the dead. Like 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees offers insight into the political, religious, and social world of Second Temple Judaism—the world into which Jesus was born.

## The Qumran community (second century B.C.E. – first century C.E.)

Little was known about the community that lived at **Qumran**, near the Dead Sea, until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered there in the 1940s. This trove of documents includes letters (e.g., 4QMMT), biblical commentaries (e.g., a commentary on Habakkuk, 1QpHab), community regulations (e.g., 1QS, the “Community Rule”), collections of hymns (e.g., 1QH), the earliest extant manuscripts of the Jewish scriptures (including at least parts of every book but Esther), and much more. The Qumran community is now a focus of scholarly study, but it is hard to sort out all the particulars of this mysterious community. From archaeological discoveries at Khirbet Qumran and from documents like 1QS (The Community Rule), we can say quite a bit about the practices of this ascetic sect—their process of initiation for new members, their emphasis on washings to maintain ritual purity, and their communal meals. We also can read about their self-conception as the “sons of light” who have separated themselves from the “sons of darkness,” as well as their messianic hopes and their expectations of an eschatological battle. However, it is notoriously difficult to describe the history of this group with any detail.

Readers are often puzzled by citations from Qumran, due in part to the fragmentary nature of our texts, and due in part to the strange abbreviations. What is 1QS 6.27, for example? 1QS: “1” stands for the first cave, “Q” signals that the cave was one of the eleven caves at Khirbet Qumran, and “S” is short for *Serekh*. 1QS 6.27, then, is line 27 of column 6 of the “*Serekh*” (or Community Rule) scroll found in the first cave at Khirbet Qumran. Other



**Figure 1.1** Cave Four at Qumran

The fourth cave, discovered in 1952, can be seen from Khirbet Qumran; of all the caves, this one held the largest collection of writings.

documents associated with the Qumran community include the Damascus Document, which was actually found in a synagogue in Cairo (hence its abbreviation as “CD,” “Cairo Damascus”).

## Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.E. – ca. 50 C.E.)

Philo of Alexandria was a learned philosopher, biblical scholar, and political leader. He was also a prolific writer. He lived in one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, Alexandria (in Egypt); this highly cosmopolitan city was home to the largest library of its time. Whereas Josephus (see below) focused on historical writings, Philo’s writings are generally more philosophical and exegetical. The only event in Philo’s life that can be dated with certainty is 39/40 C.E., when Philo led a Jewish embassy from Egyptian Alexandria to Rome, in order to protest the policies of the emperor, Gaius Caligula.

## Flavius Josephus (ca. 37 C.E. – ca. 100 C.E.)

Josephus was an educated Jew who was a contemporary of the authors of the New Testament writings. As described below, Josephus played an active role in the Jewish revolt against Rome, working first for the Jewish cause before later serving the Romans. His familiarity with Second Temple Judaism and his access to Roman sources combine to make him an invaluable source for the first century C.E., and he will be quoted more frequently than any other ancient writer in this book.

Josephus was born into a priestly family in Jerusalem, a few years after the crucifixion of Jesus. He underwent a rabbinic education, and he later traveled to Rome, returning to his native land in the fateful year of 66 C.E. (the year that the Jewish revolt began). In his autobiographical *Life*, Josephus claims that he tried to convince his fellow Jews not to revolt, but was unsuccessful. Still, he was appointed as the commander of Galilee, where he led the rebel forces. He held this post until he was captured by the Romans in Jotapata, following a two-month siege.

Josephus prophesied that his captor (Vespasian) would shortly become the next Roman emperor, which is exactly what happened in 69 C.E. Impressed, Vespasian allowed Josephus to accompany the Roman forces, and Josephus was an eyewitness to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Josephus was offered an estate outside of Jerusalem, but he declined. Presumably, he was aware that he was perceived as a traitor by his fellow Jews. Josephus instead went to Rome, where he was made a Roman citizen and given Vespasian's former home. There, he wrote his *History of the Jewish War* (describing the Jewish revolt), the *Jewish Antiquities* (composed of twenty books, tracing the history of the Jews from the creation of the world down to the first century C.E.), his *Life* (an autobiographical addendum to *Jewish Antiquities*), and *Against Apion* (a fascinating polemical work that defends Jewish culture and customs).

## Bibliography and suggestions for further reading

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*Theological Review* 105 (2012): 125–137. (Bovon emphasizes that ancient Christian communities accepted some texts as canonical, rejected others as apocryphal, and preserved a third category of texts as “useful for the soul”—texts like the *Acts of Paul* that were read in private but not in a public liturgy.)

Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds. *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013. (A team of expert contributors investigates the Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts of the New Testament in great detail—readers of the present work who want to go even deeper will want to consult Green and McDonald’s 640-page volume.)

Chip Heath and Dan Heath. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York: Random House, 2008. (This brilliant little book is designed to explain why some ideas are “sticky” and others are not. They include a discussion of “semantic stretch” on pp. 170–177.)

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Lee Martin McDonald. *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1988. (This short overview explains the concept of canon and the development of the canon of the Christian Old and New Testaments. McDonald treats a wide array of helpful primary sources in detail.)

Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed. *New Testament Apocrypha: Volume One: Gospels and Related Writings*. Translated by R. McL. Wilson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991. (In addition to a translation and discussion of the Muratorian fragment, this volume includes both other earlier canonical lists and translations of many “apocryphal” gospels that have not become part of the Christian New Testament.)

Samuel Wells. *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004. (In this book, Wells puts forth a new way to understand “the practice of Christian ethics,” using the language of theatrical improvisation. The third chapter describes a revised version of N. T. Wright’s five-act drama of scripture.)

**20      Into the World of the New Testament**

N. T. Wright. *The New Testament and the People of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992. (This first volume introduces Wright's larger project, "Christian Origins and the Question of God." In addition to explaining his methodology and investigating the Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds of the New Testament, Wright also sets forth his five-act model of the biblical story on pp. 141–143.)

# Part I

## The Setting



# 2

## The Kingdom of . . . God?

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### Guiding Questions

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How might various first-century **Jews** understand the phrase “kingdom of God”?

How has geography influenced history in the ancient Near East?

Why might the kingdom of God be such a central feature of Jesus’ (and his followers’) preaching?

But [Jesus] said to them, “I must also preach the good news of the kingdom (*basileia*) of God to the other towns, because I was sent to do this!”

(Luke 4:43)

### What is in a name?

“Repent, for the kingdom of **heaven** has come near!” (Matt 3:2). These are the first words off the tongue of the camel-hair-clad, locust-eating John the Baptist in the Gospel according to Matthew. After Jesus is baptized and tested, he too begins to preach with the same words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” (Matt 4:17). In the New Testament, this preaching seems to summarize the message of both John the Baptist and Jesus. How might a first-century Palestinian Jew react to such a proclamation?

Some readers might be tempted to think that this is an easy question: “Clearly, the Gospel message is simple: say that you are sorry for your **sins**, and you get to go to heaven. Isn’t that the whole point of Christianity?” (In short, no. The repentance preached by John and Jesus involves both turning away from sin and reorienting one’s life toward the God of Israel; this total

reorientation of life—and its implicit challenge to the “ticket to heaven” understanding of Christian **faith**—will be explored further in Chapter Eleven.) A twenty-first-century hearer might respond in this way to the proclamation of the “kingdom of heaven,” but a first-century Palestinian Jew would react in a very different way, having heard a very different message. To understand this reaction to the “kingdom of heaven,” we must grasp the first-century meanings of the words “kingdom” and “heaven.”

Let us begin with “heaven.” Before thoughts of clouds and harps fill your mind, you should first know that not all first-century Jews would identify “heaven” as “the place we go when we die.” The **Hebrew** *shamayim* and Greek *ouranos* can both be translated into English as either “heaven” or “sky.” And this lofty place was remembered more often as the dwelling place of God (see Ps 11:4; 80:14; Eccl 5:2), not the guaranteed destination for righteous humans (Dan 12:1-3 represents a noteworthy exception). Next, consider the textual evidence from the **gospels**. If we compare Mark’s version of Jesus’ first words, then we will find the same basic message of the coming kingdom: “But after John was handed over, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the good news (*euangelion*) of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near—repent, and believe in the good news (*euangelion*)’” (Mark 1:14-15). Matthew and Mark’s summaries of Jesus’ first preaching are nearly identical. Yet, they differ with regard to what precisely is coming near: is it the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God?

The Greek word *euangelion* literally means “good message.” Many older **Bible** translations translate *euangelion* as “gospel,” which comes from the Old English *godspel*, a combination of *god* (“good”) and *spel* (“tidings”). In this book, I usually translate *euangelion* as “good news,” unless it refers to a written text like the Gospel of Mark.

In fact, Mark’s kingdom of God and Matthew’s kingdom of heaven were referring to the same thing. When Matthew writes “kingdom of heaven,” he is referring to the same kingdom that he elsewhere labels the “kingdom of God” (see Matt 19:23-24, where both phrases are used with no apparent distinction). Matthew wants to emphasize the distinction between heavenly things and earthly things, and examples of this distinction abound

throughout the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7; see esp. Matt 6:10), as well as the rest of Matthew's Gospel.

A first-century audience might also recognize the practice of substituting "heaven" in place of "God." For instance, 1 Maccabees sometimes refers to God as "heaven." Judas Maccabeus could call upon his followers to "cry out to heaven, if he will show favor toward us and remember the covenant with our ancestors" (1 Macc 4:10). Heaven did not make a **covenant** with Judas's ancestors, but the God of Israel did. While scholars have long thought that Matthew preserves evidence of attempts to avoid the name of God, substituting "heaven" in its place, this proposal seems dubious. At least, Matthew is not very consistent; Matt 12:28 and 19:24 both refer to the "kingdom of God," and Matthew repeatedly uses the Greek word for "God" (*theos*), starting in 1:23. Second, the evidence for Jews avoiding the name of God is generally later. For example, this rabbinic discussion was not put in writing until roughly 200 C.E.: ". . . in the Temple they pronounced the Name as it was written, but in the provinces by a substituted word . . ." (**Mishnah**, tractate *Sotah* 7.6; H. Danby translation [Oxford University Press, 1933]). Third, early evidence does not suggest that first-century Jews avoided any mention of the name of God. Rather, the evidence points to restrictions on the use of one particular name for God.

Nowadays, many Jews prefer to avoid writing down or pronouncing any of the names of God. Hence, when writing in English, some Jewish theologians might type "G-d" instead of "God." These later practices echo ancient expressions of reverence for the tetragrammaton. Similarly, Christian Bibles often translate the tetragrammaton not as "Yahweh," but as "LORD" (often in small caps). Again, this measure is designed to show respect for the sacred name of God.

This particular name is the sacred four-letter name of God, also known as the **tetragrammaton** (*tetragrammaton* is a Greek word meaning "four letters"). This name, often transliterated as YHWH and pronounced as "Yahweh," was (and is) considered by Jews to be holy, and its usage was highly restricted. The first-century Jew Josephus testifies to the holiness of the tetragrammaton in his re-telling of the life of Moses (compare Exod 3:13–15): "And God (*theos*) made known to Moses his name, which had

never before reached men's ears, and about which I am not permitted to speak" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 2.276). Josephus is explaining Jewish traditions to a Roman audience. He obviously feels comfortable using "God" (*theos*) in his treatise. However, he does not reveal the tetragrammaton, for he is "not permitted to speak" of it. This deep reverence for the sacred name is rooted in the Jewish **scriptures**, and the New Testament writings consistently use Greek words like *theos* ("God") and *kyrios* ("Lord") in place of it. As a result, we should not make too much of Matthew's phrase, "kingdom of heaven." Instead, we should hear Jesus making the same announcement in Matthew and Mark (and Luke): "The kingdom of God has come near!"

What "kingdom" comes near? To answer this question, we need to begin with the word itself, "kingdom" (*basileia*). How would first-century Greek-speakers hear this word? After exploring a range of meanings, we can turn to the political history of Israel-Palestine for further insight into how first-century Jews might hear Jesus' proclamation.

The Greek word *basileia* can be translated as "kingdom" or "kingship." Thus, the "kingdom of God" can mean "the geographic expanse over which God rules." Or, it can mean "the God-given authority to rule." We find a clear instance of *basileia* meaning "kingship" or "royal rule" in the book of Revelation. There, an angel explains to John of Patmos what his latest vision means: "And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power (*basileia*), but they will receive authority as kings (*exousian hōs basileis*) for one hour, along with the beast" (Rev 17:12). Beasts and horns aside, this verse puts *basileia* (translated as "royal power") in parallel with another Greek phrase that literally means "authority as kings." No territory is mentioned here; *basileia* is clearly kingly power or royal authority.

When Jesus uses *basileia*, which meaning does he have in mind? Think about this question for a moment. Imagine you are driving a car, and you are wondering whether to turn right or left. You ask your friend, "Should I turn left?" The friend responds, "Right!" Does your friend mean to say, "Yes, correct, turn left," or do they mean that you should turn to the right? "Right" can mean "affirmative" or "the opposite of left." You must decide between the two meanings. Our discussion of *basileia*, on the other hand, does not require a choice between opposites. The various strands of meaning in the word *basileia* need not be pulled apart. The coming of the *basileia* of God might mean that God will rule over a specific area, or that God has sent someone who shares in divine kingship to the people of God, or that God is about to

act decisively in royal fashion. Or, Jesus could have been announcing some combination of all of the above.

The coming of God's kingdom thus may or may not involve specific geographic areas. Other gospel passages suggest that Jesus is indeed granted kingship over the people of God. Or, Jesus could simply be emphasizing the timing, implying that God is about to demonstrate royal power. But how might God display this power? Twenty-first-century Christian theologians can read this announcement as foretelling God's defeat of death in the **crucifixion** and **resurrection** of Jesus. The canonical gospels, however, offer no evidence that the first-century crowds who flocked to Jesus were hoping that he would suffer, die, and rise again to new life (see John 6:15 for a more realistic example of crowd expectations). What might they have expected the "kingdom of God" to look like?

## The land of Israel-Palestine and the kingdoms of the world

The answer to this question must take into account the various "kingdoms" that Jesus' first-century hearers (and their ancestors) had experienced. We find one possible answer in the ancient *Testament of Moses*, a work by an unknown author that was probably written during the lifetime of Jesus—scholars have dated the work to the first thirty years of the first century C.E. The one incomplete manuscript that has survived claims to report the final words of Moses to his successor Joshua. Early in his speech, Moses commands Joshua to "firmly establish a kingdom" for the people of Israel (*T. Mos.* 2.2; *OTP* translation). Moses goes on to describe the future history of Israel, including the Babylonian conquest (3.1-3), the return from exile (4.6), various episodes from the Maccabean times, and a probable reference to Herod the Great (6.2-7). Before Moses' closing exhortation to Joshua (10.11-15), there is a lengthy eschatological prophecy:

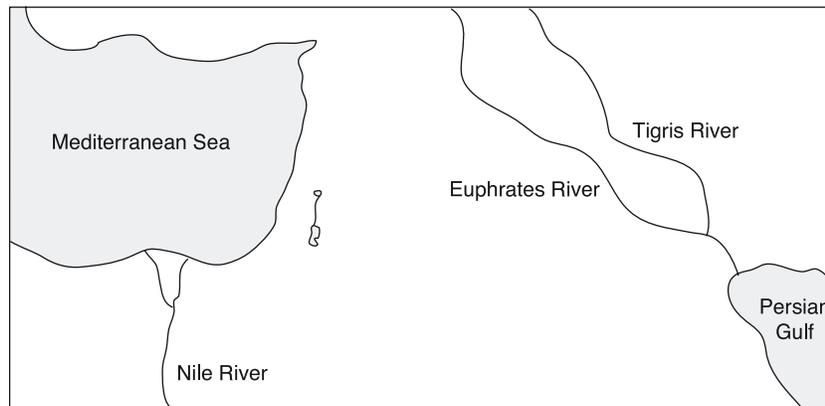
Then his kingdom will appear throughout his whole creation.  
 Then the devil will have an end.  
 Yea, sorrow will be led away with him.  
 Then will be filled the hands of the messenger,  
     who is in the highest place appointed.  
 Yea, he will at once avenge them of their enemies.  
 For the Heavenly One will arise from his kingly throne.

Yea, he will go forth from his holy habitation  
     with indignation and wrath on behalf of his sons.  
 And the earth will tremble, even to its ends shall it be shaken.  
 And the high mountains will be made low.  
 Yea, they will be shaken, as enclosed valleys will they fall.  
 The sun will not give light.  
 And in darkness the horns of the moon will flee.  
 Yea, they will be broken in pieces.  
 It will be turned wholly into blood.  
 Yea, even the circle of the stars will be thrown into disarray.  
 And the sea all the way to the abyss will retire,  
     to the sources of waters which fail.  
 Yea, the rivers will vanish away.  
 For God Most High will surge forth, the Eternal One alone.  
 In full view will he come to work vengeance on the nations.  
 Yea, all their idols will he destroy.  
 Then will you be happy, O Israel!  
 . . .  
 And God will raise you to the heights.  
 Yea, he will fix you firmly in the heaven of the stars,  
     in the place of their habitations.  
 And you will behold from on high.  
 Yea, you will see your enemies on the earth.  
 And recognizing them, you will rejoice.  
 And you will give thanks.  
 Yea, you will confess your creator.

(*T. Mos.* 10.1-10; *OTP* translation)

The author here announces the arrival of God's "kingdom" as a dominion that comprises all of creation (10.1). Using **apocalyptic** symbols also found in the book of Revelation, he describes the earth-shaking end of the current order, an end that includes the defeat of Israel's enemies. What is the kingdom of God? According to the *Testament of Moses*, it is the coming of God's royal authority over the geographic expanse of the whole world—an eschatological kingdom that will one day triumph over the kingdoms of Israel's enemies.

And enemies are a recurring feature of the history of Israel, from the time of Moses to the New Testament period. According to the book of Exodus, Israel was a people born out of conflict with Egypt. According to the book of Joshua, the people of Israel won their future homeland by wresting it from the Canaanites. And according to the rest of the historical books of the Hebrew Bible—and the history books of the intervening centuries—conflict



**Figure 2.1** Map of ancient Near East

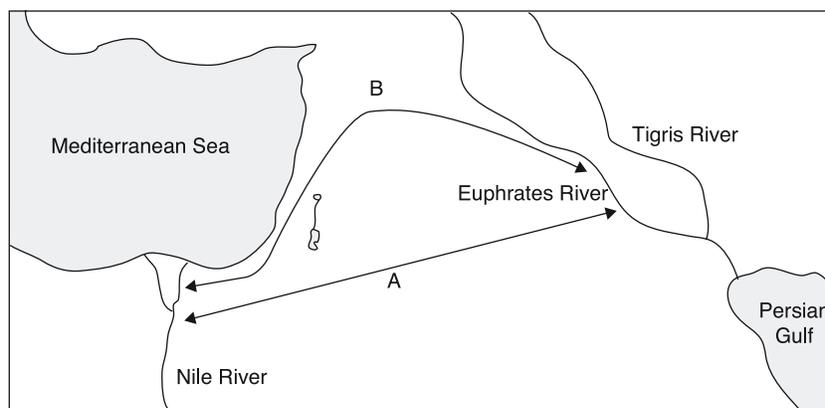
both plagued and continues to plague that small stretch of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Why?

Here, a map helps more than a text (see Figure 2.1).

In the ancient world, rivers were givers of life. Rivers provided drinking water, water for crops and livestock, and routes for transportation, trade, and communication. Unsurprisingly, major civilizations took root and blossomed in the fertile earth watered by major rivers: the Yellow (or Huang He), the Indus, the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. The latter three rivers are most relevant to our discussion, for they gave rise to the two major centers of civilization that shaped much of Israel's early history: Egypt (around the Nile River) and Mesopotamia (literally, the land "in the middle of the rivers"—the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers). As they gained wealth and power, the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations also looked to expand their boundaries through military means.

These aggressive tendencies spelled trouble for Israel. Around 1000 B.C.E., Israel was a respectable, second-rate military power with newly expanded boundaries and a divinely appointed king on the throne. It might appear that Israel would be well positioned for future prosperity. After all, if we look at Figure 2.2, we might think that warring Mesopotamian and Egyptian rulers would follow the route marked "A."

If the armies of the world powers followed route A—which was the most direct path, after all—Israel would not be on the itinerary. Unfortunately, route A leads directly through the Arabian Desert. In order to guarantee sufficient water and provisions for marching troops, the invading armies would follow route B, which led directly through Israel-Palestine.



**Figure 2.2** Map of ancient Near East, with alternate routes of conquest

This accident of geography proved tragic for the people of Israel. From the Assyrian conquest in the eighth century B.C.E. to the Bar Kokhba revolt in the second century C.E., Israel had as many enemies as there were empires in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the rest of the eastern Mediterranean world. This military-political reality casts its shadow over the first-century writers, readers, and hearers of the New Testament.

Originating in northern Mesopotamia, the Assyrians were the first foreign power to trample through the kingdom of Israel, conquering the ten northern tribes in 722/721 B.C.E. The captive Israelites were forcibly relocated and brutally assimilated. References to the “ten lost tribes of Israel” do not refer to ten tribes who went hiking on a hot summer day and took a wrong turn at the crossroads. Rather, the Assyrian conquest meant that these Israelites lost their land, lost their freedom, and, to some degree, lost their identity.

More trouble for Israel soon followed from the East. In 587/586 B.C.E., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Jerusalem **temple**, and carried the Jerusalem elite off into exile. Thus, the Babylonian empire put an end to the hitherto unbroken line of Davidic kings. Because the two captured tribes comprised the southern kingdom of Judah, these captives became known not as “Israelites” but as “Judahites” or “**Jews**.”

The Assyrian and Babylonian periods of dominance were followed by the Persian ascent to power. Cyrus II, also known as Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.E., and he issued an edict in 538 that allowed the Jews to return to their homes. Moreover, he politically and financially supported the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem temple. This return from exile