

E-Study Guide for

DM/DR/TH655 A Contemporary Overview of the New Testament

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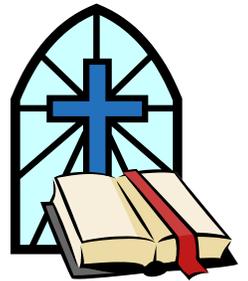
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THE HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Formation of the New Testament

When Jesus began his public life, his followers had no reason to preserve his words and deeds. It was only after his death that his disciples would share their memories of him, as is typical when loved ones pass on. The Jesus story was actually developed in the synagogue by a group of followers of Jesus called the 'Followers of the Way' through oral transmission. Eventually there were written sources but there was no structured plan to record the events that appear in the New Testament today. It was years before there was the realization that the Jesus story should be written down and preserved and nearly a half a century before any of the Gospels were completed.

As it turns out, there is a long history of conflict and discernment connected with the formation of the New Testament. At first there were several other Gospels in addition to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the letters of Paul, which included the Sayings Gospel Q, the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Peter, Signs Gospel and the Secret Book of James. However, there was a growing trend toward each community using just one of the books. This practice evolved as each evangelist began to focus on the book that supported his particular focus and the use of just one of the Gospels in each of the communities was causing division within the church.



In an attempt to unify the church, leaders set out to select the Gospels that would be officially accepted by the Church.¹ Key in this process was Irenaeus, whose goal was to establish a catholic (universal) church.² In due course four Gospels received ever-widening acceptance: Irenaeus declared that only Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John collectively and *exclusively* constitute the whole Gospel.³ The formation of the New Testament was not a smooth and orderly process and took about two centuries before completed as we see it today. In the decades just before and after 200 CE, church writers in Greek and Latin widely accepted a collection of twenty works that are known as the New Testament.⁴

The Letters of Paul

It is typically presumed that the Gospels are the earliest writings contained in the New Testament but the New Testament was not put together in chronological order. Actually, the Pauline letters, which are positioned after the Gospels, were written several years before Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The letters of Paul were written about 20-30 years after Jesus' death, while the Gospels were written 40-70 years after Jesus died (30 CE.). (Refer to APPENDIX II *Stages in the Development of the Early Church*, p.10.)

The purpose of Paul's letters was to offer advice and/or support to his followers. Paul was an evangelist and would establish communities throughout the region, for example, Thessalonica, Corinth, Galatia, etc. When Paul moved on, he would correspond with these communities. Paul's letters are in response to letters received from a particular community; however, only the letters from Paul to the community are included in the New Testament. The letters to Paul from the community are not recorded and, as a result, just one side of a two-way correspondence is presented in the New Testament.

Furthermore, there is a strong consensus that Paul did not write all of the Pauline letters. These letters/epistles remained an important means of communication even after Paul's death; consequently, the evangelists who followed him continued to write in his name to preserve his spirit and authority. Most scholars agree that Paul was the author of the following letters: I Thessalonians, Galatians, I and II Corinthians, Philemon, Phillipians, and Romans (this is the approximate chronological order). The authorship of the following three letters is disputed but discerned by a majority of scholars that they were not written by Paul: Colossians, Ephesians, and II Thessalonians. There is a near-consensus that the remaining three letters, called the Pastoral Epistles, are definitely not written by Paul: I and II Timothy and Titus.



The possibility that Paul did not write all of the Pauline Letters brings out a significant point. He has been judged harshly by many contemporary Christians, including historians, because of his alleged views related to gender, sex, and homosexuality. Passages from his letters have been quoted in ways that are injurious to those seeking equality and freedom in recent years. As an example, the passage 'Wives, be subject to your husbands' (Eph. 5:21) has been used by some Christians to reinforce the subservience of women to their spouses. However, it is very probable that Paul did not write this passage, as well as other passages that might be disturbing today. Letters that were written later could very possibly have been written by someone else in Paul's name.⁵

The Four Gospels

The Four Gospels included in the New Testament were written between 70-100 CE. They were not written by the Apostles, nor were they all written in the same time period (Refer to APPENDIX II *Stages in the Development of the Early Church*, p.10.):

Mark - early 70's CE

Matthew - 80's CE

Luke/Acts - 88-93 CE

John - 90-100 CE

What is critical in our understanding of the content of the New Testament is that the writers of the Gospels were evangelists and, rather than offering a *historical* document, their primary goal was to convey a particular view to their readers. Though they did use oral and written source materials, each of the writers focused on what they thought was significant about the Jesus story.⁶ Following are the themes of each of the four Gospels:

Theme of Mark - The Gospel According to Mark, the presumed earliest Gospel, calls itself majestically 'The Gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ (the Son of God).' This Gospel is interested in Jesus primarily as the one who died on the cross for sins. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. It is known today that Mark used the Sayings Gospel Q, which was written earlier, as a source.

Theme of Matthew – The Gospel of Matthew focuses on Jesus as the one who abides with his people always until the end of time. Jesus founded the church, in which sins are forgiven, prayers are answered, and the power of death is overcome. When the author of Matthew wrote his Gospel, around a decade later, he used the Gospel of Mark as a source, he also incorporated

other material, including material from Q, and reshaped the Mark Gospel. He seemingly supposed that now there would be no need for readers to consult either Mark or the Q.

Theme of Luke - Luke highlights Jesus as the one whose words and deeds liberate those who are oppressed in any way. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost and to bring release to all those he described as “captives.” Even though the author of Luke knows of many previous narratives, he has set out to produce his orderly account with the idea that readers should know the truth ‘more effectively.’

Theme of John – John portrays Jesus as the one who reveals what God is truly like. Jesus was the Word of God made flesh, and he revealed through his own words and deeds all that can be known of God.⁷ John does not use Mark, Matthew, or Luke as a source, even though there was a wealth of information contained in those books. This suggests that the author of the Gospel of John also intended to communicate a particular message.

Sources Used by Gospel Writers

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called synoptic Gospels. This is because they hold a common view of Jesus. In essence, there is strong evidence that the writers of the synoptic Gospels used some of the material of the previous writer(s) and then embellished the content or emphasized their particular theme.

1. Agreement between Matthew and Luke begins where Mark begins and ends where Mark ends.
2. Matthew reproduces about 90 percent of Mark, Luke about 50 percent. They often reproduce Mark in the same order. When they disagree, either Matthew or Luke supports the sequence in Mark.
3. In segments the three have in common, verbal agreement averages about 50 percent.
4. Matthew and Mark often agree against Luke, and Luke and Mark often agree against Matthew, but Matthew and Luke only rarely agree against Mark.

The fourth Gospel, however, the Gospel of John, does not use Matthew, Mark, or Luke as a source. The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar could not trace a single saying back to the historical Jesus. They therefore concluded that the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John are almost solely the creation of the evangelist who wrote it.⁸

The Compilation of the New Testament

Just as the formation of the New Testament was a lengthy struggle, the process of compiling it was also extremely involved and tedious. First of all, each of the writers had to select the material from earlier sources. They used their own judgment to determine what information to use and how to interpret and edit it. The next step was to make copies of these Gospels (all copies were handwritten, there were no copy machines) and translate these copies into various languages. None of these steps were precise, to say the least. Those making copies also had a margin of error in their efforts and the translation of the copies into various languages was extremely challenging since all languages do not have words with the same meaning. (Refer to APPENDIX I Stages in the Transmission of the Gospel Tradition, p. 9.)



Study Questions

1. How was the story of Jesus developed?
2. What was the purpose of Paul's letters and what important data is missing in connection with these letters written to the Thessalonians, Galatians, etc.
3. How long after Jesus' death were the Gospels written and in what order is it proposed that they were written?
4. What is believed to be the purpose of the Gospels, that is, what was the intent of the writer?
5. What were the themes of each of the four Gospels in the New Testament?
6. Why was the compilation of the New Testament such a tedious task?

A RECENT STUDY OF THE GOSPELS

Conflict between Religion and Science

It has been known that the New Testament was not written as an accurate account of events for a number of years, but this information was considered too controversial or too complicated for lay persons to understand and therefore kept away from the general public.

The controversy is mainly connected with a clash between science and religion that emerged in the 1800's. During this time period there had been scientific discoveries that created a growing contradiction between the biblical accounts and science.



“The profound change in astronomy was a part of the rise of experimental science, which sought to put all knowledge to the test of close and repeated observation. At the same time and as part of the same impulse, the advent of historical reason meant distinguishing the factual from the fictional in accounts of the past. For biblical interpretation that distinction required scholars to probe the relation between faith and history. In this boiling cauldron the quest of the historical Jesus was conceived.”⁹

During that era, religious leaders with a fundamentalist view of the Bible would silence -- even punish -- biblical scholars with fresh ideas that took science into consideration and, as a result, it became safer to keep these new concepts private. Many scholars, fearing open conflict or even reprisal, talked only to one another.



Inception of the Jesus Seminar

In 1985, leading scholars, referred to as Fellows of the Jesus Seminar, decided it was time to update and then make the legacy of two hundred years of research and debate a matter of public record. The participants of the Jesus Seminar include scholars with advanced degrees in biblical studies, religion or a related field, and published authors who are recognized authorities in the field of religion (refer to Appendix III - Partial List of Jesus Seminar Fellows, p. 11, for list of Fellows whose work was used in this thesis and their credentials).

Although it was known that Jesus did not say every word or perform every act recorded in the New Testament, there has been tremendous controversy over what Jesus actually said and did. The [Jesus Seminar](#) began an in depth study related to the historical Jesus. The purpose of the research was to determine more accurately Jesus' words and deeds. Thirty scholars took up this challenge at the inception of the study and, eventually, more than two hundred professionally trained specialists joined the group.

The Seminar met twice a year to debate technical papers that were prepared and circulated in advance. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Fellows of the Seminar voted, using colored beads to indicate

the degree of authenticity of Jesus' words or deeds. (For an in depth description of this process and the background of the Jesus Seminar, read the Preface, pp. ix-x, and Introduction to *The Five Gospels*, pp. 1-38.)

The Sayings of Jesus

In the study of the [Sayings of Jesus](#), the participants of the Jesus Seminar looked at 1,500 sayings.¹⁰ The sayings were taken from 5,000 different Greek manuscripts. Most of the manuscripts were copies of copies that were handwritten and therefore no two copies were the same. The goal of the Seminar was to review each of the items and determine which of them could be ascribed with a high degree of probability to Jesus. The items passing the test would be included in a database, allowing the participants to make a more accurate determination of who Jesus was.

It should be noted that the Fellows were not of the same mindset and therefore did not agree on every saying. Rather, they would vote on the *probable* authenticity of the saying. It took them six years to compile and discern this information and, based on standardized criteria, what they believed to be Jesus' words in the Gospels was determined.

The results concluded that just eighteen percent of the dialogue attributed to Jesus was actually his words. Voting does not, of course, determine the truth; voting only indicates the best judgment of a significant number of scholars. It was deemed entirely consonant with the mission of the Jesus Seminar to decide whether, after careful review of the evidence, a particular saying or parable did or did not fairly represent the voice of the historical Jesus.



The Deeds of Jesus

A second phase of the Jesus Seminar was a study of the [Deeds of Jesus](#), which took about five years (from 1991 to 1996). The Fellows examined 387 reports of 176 events; Jesus is the main subject in most of these reports.¹¹ In this study, the report in the ancient Gospels of what Jesus of Nazareth did and what was done to him was assessed, with the purpose of establishing a more accurate account of the acts of Jesus. The results concluded that just sixteen percent of the events described in the New Testament actually happened. Of the 176 events only 29 were determined to have a good chance of actually occurring.



Study Questions

1. What caused the controversy between religion and science?
2. Why was the research related to this issue kept from the general public for so long?
3. What was the purpose of the Jesus Seminar?
4. What were the results of their study of the sayings of Jesus? The acts described in the New Testament?

APPENDIX I

Stages in the Transmission of the Gospel Tradition

1. The Historical Jesus

Jesus says and does things that are considered to be remarkable

2. Early Tradition

Oral tradition: People remember what Jesus said or did and share these memories with others.

Written sources: People write down what Jesus said or did and preserve these documents.

3. Redaction of the Gospels

The Gospel writers compile their books, editing the early written sources and oral traditions.

4. Preservation of Manuscripts

People make copies of the completed Gospels and disseminate them throughout the world.

5. Translation

Scholars translate copies of the Gospels into other languages, including English.

6. Reception

Finally, we hear or read about what Jesus said and did in our modern editions of the Gospels.

Mark Allan Powell, Introduction to The Gospels (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1953) 11.

APPENDIX II

Stages in the Development of the Early Church

1-30 CE

John the Baptist, the precursor and mentor of Jesus (died about 27 CE)

Jesus of Nazareth, traveling sage and wonder-worker (died about 30 CE)

30-60 CE

Paul of Tarsus, chief founder of gentile Christianity (letters written about 50-60 CE)

Sayings Gospel Z (first edition, about 50 CE)

Gospel of Thomas (first edition, about 50 CE)

60-80 CE

Signs Gospel (eventually incorporated into John)

Gospel of Mark, the first narrative Gospel (first edition, about 70 CE)

Didache, first believers' handbook (first edition)

80-100 CE

Gospel of Matthew, incorporating Mark and Q (about 80 CE)

Gospel of Luke, incorporating Mark and Q (about 90 CE)

Dialogue of the Savior (first edition, probably 50-100 CE)

Gospel of Peter (first edition, probably 50-100 CE)

Egerton Gospel (probably 50-100 CE)

Gospel of John, incorporating the Signs Gospel (about 90 CE)

100-150 CE

Gospel of John, third edition (insertions and additions)

Secret Book of James, first edition (found at Nag Hammadi)

Gospel of Mary (found at Nag Hammadi)

Jewish-Christian Gospels (preserved in patristic quotations)

Didache, section edition (insertions and additions)

Gospel of Thomas, second edition (surviving edition)

Surviving fragment of Gospel of John (P⁵²)

Surviving fragments of Egerton Gospel (Pegerton² and Pkoin²⁵⁵)

150-325 CE

Emergence of four "recognized" Gospels

Emergence of an official collection of Christian writings ("New Testament")

Christianity becomes a legal religion (313 CE)

Council of Nicea (325 CE)

First official creeds

First surviving copies of "Bibles" (about 325 –350 CE)

Robert J. Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994)

APPENDIX III

Partial List of Jesus Seminar Fellows and Their Credentials

Following is a list of Fellows of the Jesus Seminar that have contributed to this thesis. For the complete list of participants and their credentials, go to <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Fellows/list.html>.

Marcus Borg is Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University. He has written eleven books, including *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, the best-selling book by a contemporary Jesus scholar; *The God We Never Knew*, named as one of "ten best books in religion for 1997"; *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (with N. T. Wright); and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, another best-seller. He has been national chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, co-chair of its International New Testament Program Committee, and president of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars. His books have been translated into seven languages, and he has lectured widely throughout North America, including the Chautauqua and Smithsonian Institutions, and overseas (England, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Hungary, Israel, and South Africa).

John Dominic Crossan is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, DePaul University, Chicago. He has written twenty books on the historical Jesus in the last thirty years, four of which have become national religious bestsellers: *The Historical Jesus* (1991), *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994), *Who Killed Jesus* (1995), and *The Birth of Christianity* (1998). He is a former co-chair of the Jesus Seminar, and a former chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, an international scholarly association for biblical study based in the United States.

Robert W. Funk, Director of the Westar Institute and founder of the Jesus Seminar, was a distinguished teacher, writer, translator and publisher in the field of religion. A Guggenheim Fellow and Senior Fulbright Scholar, he; served as Annual Professor of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem and as chair of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University. Robert Funk was a recognized pioneer in modern biblical scholarship, having led the Society of Biblical Literature as its Executive Secretary from 1968–1973. His many books include *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993) and *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds* (1998) (both with the Jesus Seminar) and *Honest to Jesus* (1996), and *A Credible Jesus* (2002).. d. 2005

Lloyd Geering Lecturer, St. Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, and Emeritus Professor of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand was made *Principal Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit* topping New Zealand's new year's honors list for 2001. This is the first time the strictly New Zealand honors have been given. Previously New Zealand granted Imperial Honors, under which Lloyd Geering would have been made a knight commander.

Roy Hoover is Weyerhaeuser Professor of Biblical Literature and Professor of Religion Emeritus, Whitman College, where he taught courses in ancient Greek, biblical history and literature, capitalism and socialism in theological perspective, and world religions. A Fellow of the Jesus Seminar since 1986, he wrote a

number of the papers that served as the basis for the Seminar's deliberations and has been a frequent participant in the Jesus Seminar on the Road Program. Roy Hoover is co-author (with Robert W. Funk) of *The Five Gospels. The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, 1993. His published articles have appeared in *Harvard Theological Review*, *Forum*, *The Fourth R*, and *Bible Review*. In 1992, he received the Whitman College Award for Faculty Achievement.

Robert J. Miller is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Juniata College in Pennsylvania. A Fellow of the Jesus Seminar since 1986, he was Scholar-in-Residence at Westar Institute in 2001. He is the editor of *The Complete Gospels* (1992), an anthology of twenty early Gospels presented in Westar's innovative translation, the Scholars Version, and author of *The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics* (1999) and *Born Divine* (2003).

John Shelby Spong retired as Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, in February 2000. Raised a fundamentalist in North Carolina at a time when the Bible was quoted to justify segregation, Bishop Spong came to believe that insistence on an inerrant, literal view of the Bible obscures truth and destroys faith. His subsequent challenges to the Church's position on human sexuality, the virgin birth, and the physical nature of Christ's resurrection had made him the target of fundamentalist hostility and fear. At the same time, it has offered hope to countless others who yearn to believe in God but reject pre-modern literalizations masquerading as faith.

Bishop Spong is the author of several bestselling books, including *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, *Born of a Woman*, *Living in Sin*, and *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* and is the recipient of three honorary doctorates. <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Fellows/list.html>

ENDNOTES

¹Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) p. 13.

² Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003) p. 80.

³Ibid. p. 81

⁴Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) p. 15.

⁵Ibid. p. 6.

⁶Dick Westley, *Redemptive Intimacy* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1981) p. 41.

⁷Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1953) p. 2.

⁸Robert W. Funk, Roy Hoover, Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York, Polebridge Press, 1993) p. 10.

⁹Ibid. p.2.

¹⁰Ibid. ix.

¹¹Robert W. Funk, Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus* (New York, Polebridge Press, 1998) xi.

¹² Robert W. Funk, *A Credible Jesus*, (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002) p. 4.

¹³Dale T. Irvin, Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001) 1.

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