

commentaries on Scripture, and theological writings.

For Christians, the first Scriptures they thrived on were the Law and the Prophets. These were copied and distributed since they provided the sources for one vital ingredient of the Christian message: The suffering and redemption of Jesus the Messiah had been predicted many centuries earlier.

COLLECTED LETTERS

How should Christians interpret these sources? How should they put them into practice? How should they integrate them into the life and teachings of Jesus?

PRAYER JOURNAL

“May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.” —Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:19 (NLT)

Interpretation, first of all, was given in major speeches—like those of Peter at Pentecost and those of Stephen and Paul, which were collected and edited by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, the sequel to his Gospel.

More important, there were the letters, all of which in one way or

another interpret Old Testament stories, people, and prophecies. Some of them—like Paul’s letter to the Romans, the anonymous letter to the Hebrews, the two letters of Peter, and the letter of Jude—depend on a good knowledge of the Old Testament and other Jewish texts.

DID YOU KNOW?

An influential heretic named Marcion (c. 85–c. 160) rejected the Old Testament and said the only Scriptures were parts of Luke’s Gospel and 10 of Paul’s letters.

Early Christian letters, in fact, were the first documents distributed as collections. We find a trace of this in the New Testament itself. At the end of Peter’s second letter, we read, “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters” (2 Peter 3:15-16).

So as Jesus taught, and as his apostles traveled, the earliest Christians were putting pen to paper to give us the foundational documents of the Christian Faith: the New Testament.



IRENÆUS OF LYON (c. 130–c. 202)

✦
The writings that became the New Testament began in the earliest days of the Christian movement.



A TESTAMENT IS BORN

Literacy was something Jesus could take for granted. The ability to write fluently and intelligibly was widespread in ancient Israel, almost as widespread as the ability to memorize long and complicated texts.

In other words, Jesus could count on this: Among his followers, there would be a number of people capable of not only memorizing what he said but also of writing it down.

Furthermore, Jesus and the people around him could use more than one language. Aramaic was commonly used in daily life, Hebrew in religious life.

But people were aware of a third language, that of the eastern Roman Empire: Greek. Recent

CONTINUED . . .

investigations have shown that even orthodox Jews used Greek in everyday dealings with each other. Jesus himself used Greek: in the dialogue with the Greek-speaking Syrian Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) and in the dispute about paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17), which relies on a wordplay that works only in Greek.

The first stages of New Testament writings may have happened at the time of Jesus' ministry—and they could have been precise. Shorthand writing (tachygraphy) was known in Israel and in the Greco-Roman world. We find a first trace of it in the Greek translation of Psalm 45:1 (third century BC): "My tongue is the pen of a skillful writer"—literally, "a stenographer."

DID YOU KNOW?

In AD 367, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, used the opportunity of his annual Easter Festal Letter to explain what the Old Testament and New Testament should consist of. For the New Testament, he listed the same 27 texts we have today.

Such a skill was highly necessary. Writing material was scarce: Leather or parchment was highly priced; papyrus was dependent on import. Writers were often forced to use pot shards or wax tablets, which had limited room for detailed texts. Shorthand writing was the most practical way to fit a lot of information in a little bit of space.

There was even a man among Jesus' entourage who was professionally qualified to write shorthand: Levi-Matthew, the customs official. Indeed, if Levi-Matthew had heard the Sermon on the Mount before he was called by Jesus (and could react so swiftly to this call because he had already been convinced by that sermon), one may have in Matthew 5–7 a direct result of a shorthand protocol.

Whatever the exact reconstruction of the earliest stages may be, we do know from the prologue to Luke's Gospel that there were more literary sources he could use than just the completed Gospels of Matthew and Mark: "*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word*" (Luke 1:1-2, emphasis added).

CHRISTIAN LIBRARIES

Early Christians soon gathered such writings. They were profoundly interested in the literary world. Occasionally, they talked about it with humor: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25). Or they asked for writing material: "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:13). Or they are seen in the process of

THE FIRST FOUR

A teacher named Papias, writing in about AD 110, gives us our earliest reference to the four Gospels. None of the later so-called Gospels existed yet—neither the Gospel of Thomas nor that of Nicodemus nor whomever. Papias knows and accepts the first four, and he gives us some anecdotal information about their authors.

For instance, he calls Mark "stubble-fingered," though we don't know what that means. Papias also tells us that Mark was the *hermeneutes* of Peter. This could mean interpreter, translator, or editor.

He writes that Matthew compiled the *logia* (sayings) of Jesus *en hebraidi dialecto* (in Hebrew/Aramaic dialect). It is possible he was referring to Matthew's style of Greek or perhaps to Levi-Matthew's shorthand notes of Jesus' public addresses.

The brief quotes from Papias's works leave many a question unanswered. What is clear is that Papias of Hierapolis knew about a collection of Gospels as early as the beginning of the second century—and this implies the existence of such a collection at an even earlier stage.

In about AD 180, 70 years later, Irenaeus gives for the first time the order of the four Gospels as we have it today: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In addition, he tells us that Mark's Gospel was written after the "exodus" of Peter and Paul. This word has been used as a tool for dating the Gospel. If *exodus* means "death," as many have assumed, then AD 67, the probable date of Paul's and Peter's martyrdoms, would be the earliest possible date for Mark.

The word *exodus*, however, can also mean "departure"—as in the title of the second book of the Old Testament. If that is the case, then Irenaeus is referring to a departure of Peter and Paul from Rome some time before their eventual return and martyrdom.

writing: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches" (Revelation 1:11).

So well acquainted were they with a literary tradition that literature was used in symbolic ways: "The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up" (Revelation 6:14).

This advanced interest in writing had an obvious consequence: Texts had to be collected in archives and libraries and even in stores from which copies could be ordered and supplied. Christians from a Jewish

background would have known the collected scrolls of the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and so forth. Those of Greco-Roman background would have known the collections of philosophers, like those to which Paul alludes in his letters and speeches.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls helps us understand how Jews and Jewish Christians organized their libraries.

There were three types of books: copies of Holy Scripture (what we now call the Old Testament),