Babylonians. Israel, with its capital Samaria, fell to the Assyrian army in 722-21 BC, its people were deported, and foreigners settled in their place. Judah suffered two humiliations at the hand of the Babylonians: the surrender of Jerusalem in 597 and its destruction in 586 BC. Captives were carried off to Babylon on both occasions, but because foreigners were not settled in Judah, and the captives were allowed some measure of freedom—at least to associate with one another—the life of the people continued both in Babylon and in their native land. The exile was a disaster long announced by the prophets as a divine judgment, but the experience led the Israelites to a reconsideration of their own meaning as a people, and to the writing down and interpretation of their old traditions.

The Postexilic Period

The people were set free from Babylon in 538 BC, when the Persian king Cyrus established the Persian Empire. The prophets Ezra and Nehemiah were leaders in the era after the exile when institutions were reestablished and the Temple was rebuilt. Judah became a province of the Persian Empire, and the people had relative autonomy, especially in religion. At some point during the postexilic period, the history of Israel became the history of Judaism, but at precisely what time is debated. By the beginning of the Christian era the people had survived the rise of the Hellenistic empire (333 BC), the Maccabean revolution (168-165 BC) and rule, and the establishment of Roman control in Palestine (63 BC). After an abortive revolution in AD 70 that led to the destruction of Jerusalem, their life changed dramatically.

Theological Themes of the Old Testament

The theological themes of the Old Testament are rich, deep, and diverse. No single theology is found in these writings, because they emerged from many individuals and groups over several centuries. They reflect not only a development of thought but also differences of opinion and even conflicts. For example, different interpretations of creation are preserved side by side, and prophets on more than one occasion challenged the views of priests. The themes of the Old Testament are coherent with and related to one another, but they are not a systematic theology. The canonization of the Bible, while establishing an official list, also recognized substantial diversity.

The God of Israel

The most obvious theological theme of the Old Testament is both the most pervasive and the most important one: Yahweh (the personal name of God in the Old Testament) is the God of Israel, of the whole earth, and of history. This theme echoes from Exodus 20:3 (“You shall have no other gods before me”) throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and it is the basis for all other theological reflection. It would be misleading, however, to identify this theme as monotheism; that term is too abstract for the texts in question, and in all but some of the latest materials the existence of other gods is taken for granted. Generally the other gods are held to be subordinate to Yahweh, and in any case Israel is to be loyal to only one God. That God is affirmed to be the creator of the earth, the king active in history to save and to judge, all-powerful but concerned for his people. He is known to reveal himself in diverse ways—through the law, through events, and through prophets

and priests. The distinctive Old Testament language about God links the name of Yahweh with events: “I am the Lord [Yahweh] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2). Israel confesses who God is in terms of what he has done or will do, rather than in terms of his nature. History then takes on special importance as the sphere of divine action and interaction with his people. The only significant exception to this use of historical language is the wisdom literature.

Covenant and Law

Two other themes fundamental to the Old Testament, covenant and law, are closely related. Covenant signifies many things, including an agreement between nations or individuals, but above all it refers to the pact between Yahweh and Israel sealed at Mount Sinai. The language concerning that covenant has much in common with that of ancient Near Eastern treaties; both are sworn agreements sealed by oaths. Yahweh is seen to have taken the initiative in granting the covenant by electing a people. Perhaps the simplest formulation of the covenant is the sentence: “I will take you for my people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7). The law was understood to have been given as a part of the covenant, the means by which Israel became and remained the people of God. The law contains regulations for behavior in relation to other human beings as well as rules concerning religious practices, but by no means does it give a full set of instructions for life. Rather, it seems to set forth the limits beyond which the people could not go without breaking the covenant.

The Human Person

The Old Testament stresses an understanding of human beings in community, something important for the people of such a covenant. The individual human being was conceived of as an animated body, as Genesis 2:7 suggests: “Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” That “breath” should not be viewed as a “soul” but simply as “life.” In the Old Testament, the human being was seen as a unity of physical matter and life, the whole a gift from God. Consequently, death was a vivid reality; views of afterlife or resurrection appear only rarely and late in Israelite thought. Another theme that appears in the prophets and is basic elsewhere is that Yahweh is a just God who expects justice and righteousness from his people. That includes fairness in all human affairs, care for the weak, and the establishment of just institutions. With these and other themes, it is small wonder that the Hebrew Scriptures provided the foundation for two world religions, Judaism and Christianity.

The New Testament

The New Testament consists of 27 documents written between AD 50 and 150 concerning matters of belief and practice in Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world. Although some have argued that Aramaic originals lie behind some of these documents (especially the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle to the Hebrews), all have been handed down in Greek, very likely the language in which they were composed. Text, Canon, and Early Versions For a time, some Christian scholars treated the Greek of the New Testament as a special kind of religious language, providentially

given as a proper vehicle for the Christian faith. It is now clear from extrabiblical writings of the period that the language of the New Testament is koine, or common Greek, that which was used in homes and marketplaces.

Manuscripts and Textual Criticism

Extant Greek manuscripts of the New Testament—complete, partial, or fragmentary—now number about 5000. None of these, however, is an autograph, an original from the writer. Probably the oldest is a fragment of the Gospel of John dated about AD 120-40. The similarities among these manuscripts is most remarkable when one considers differences of time and place of origin as well as the methods and materials of writing. Dissimilarities, however, involve omissions, additions, terminology, and different ordering of words. Comparing, evaluating, and dating the manuscripts, placing them in family groups, and developing criteria for ascertaining the text that most likely corresponds to what the authors wrote are the tasks of critics. They are aided in their judgments by thousands of scriptural citations in the writings of the early Fathers of the Church and by a number of early translations of the Bible into other languages. The fruit of the labor of text critics is an edition of the Greek New Testament that offers not only what is judged to be the best text but also includes notes indicating variant readings among the major manuscripts. The more significant of these variants usually appear in English translations as footnotes citing what other ancient authorities say (see, for example, Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11; Acts 8:37). Critical editions of the Greek New Testament have appeared with some regularity since the work of the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus in the 16th century.

Precanonical Writings

The 27 books of the New Testament are only a fraction of the literary production of the Christian communities in their first three centuries. The principal types of New Testament documents (gospel, epistle, apocalypse) were widely imitated, and the names of apostles or other leading figures were attached to writings designed to fill in the silence of the New Testament (for example, on the childhood and youth of Jesus), to satisfy the appetite for more miracles, and to argue for new and fuller revelations. As many as 50 Gospels were in circulation during this time. Many of these noncanonical Christian writings have been collected and published as New Testament Apocrypha.

Knowledge of the literature of the period was greatly increased by the discovery in 1945 of the library of a heretical Christian group, the Gnostics, at Naj Hammadi, Egypt. This collection, written in Coptic, has been translated and published. Major scholarly attention has been focused on the Gospel of Thomas, which purports to be sayings of Jesus, 114 in all, delivered privately to Thomas, one of the 12 apostles. The Canon No clear records are available documenting what determined the church’s decision to adopt an official canon of Christian writings or the process by which this occurred. For Jesus and his followers, the Law, Prophets, and Writings of Judaism were “Holy Scriptures.” Interpretation of these writings was, however, governed by the work, words, and person of Jesus as he was understood by his followers. The apostles who preserved the words and deeds of Jesus and who continued his mission were regarded as having special authority. That Paul, for instance, expected his letters to be read aloud in churches and even exchanged among the

churches (see Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:26 ff.) indicates that a new norm for belief and practice was developing in the Christian communities. This norm consisted of two parts: the Lord (preserved in the “gospels”) and the Apostles (preserved primarily in “epistles”). Tracing the history of the development of the New Testament canon by noting which of the books were quoted or cited by the early Fathers of the Church is an uncertain process. Too much is made of silence. It seems that the earliest attempt to establish a canon was made about AD 150 by a heretical Christian named Marcion whose acceptable list included the Gospel of Luke and ten Pauline Epistles, edited in a strong anti-Jewish direction. Perhaps opposition to Marcion accelerated efforts toward a canon of wide acceptance. By AD 200, 20 of the 27 books of the New Testament seem to have been generally regarded as authoritative. Local preferences prevailed here and there, and some differences existed between the eastern and western churches.

Generally speaking, the books that were disputed for some time but were finally included were James, Hebrews, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, 2 Peter, and Revelation. Other books, widely favored but finally rejected, were Barnabas, 1 Clement, Hermas, and the Didache; the authors of these books are generally referred to as the apostolic fathers. The 39th festal letter of St. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, sent to the churches under his jurisdiction in 367, ended all uncertainty about the limits of the New Testament canon. In the so-called festal letter, preserved in a collection of annual Lenten messages given by Athanasius, he listed as canonical the 27 books that remain the contents of the New Testament, although he arranged them in a different order. Those books of the New Testament, in their present-day order, are the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), the Acts of the Apostles, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

Early Versions

Because the New Testament was written in Greek, the story of the transmission of the text and the establishing of the canon sometimes neglects the early versions, some of which are older than the oldest extant Greek text. The rapid spread of Christianity beyond the regions where Greek prevailed necessitated translations into Syriac, Old Latin, Coptic, Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, and Arabic. Syriac and Latin versions existed as early as the 2nd century, and Coptic translations began to appear in the 3rd century. These early versions were in no sense official translations but arose to meet regional needs in worship, preaching, and teaching. The translations were, therefore, trapped in local dialects and often included only selected portions of the New Testament. During the 4th and 5th centuries efforts were made to replace these regional versions with more standardized and widely accepted translations. Pope Damasus I in 382 commissioned St. Jerome to produce a Latin Bible; known as the Vulgate, it replaces various Old Latin texts. In the 5th century, the Syriac Peshitta replaced the Syriac versions that had been in popular use up to that time. As is usually the case, the old versions slowly and painfully gave way to the new. The Literature of the New Testament From a literary point of view, the documents of the New Testament are of four major types or genres: gospel, history, epistle, and apocalypse. Of these four, only gospel seems to be a literary form originating in the Christian community.

Gospels

A gospel is not a biography, although it bears some resemblance to biographies of heroes, human and divine, in the Greco-Roman world. A gospel is a series of individual accounts of acts or sayings, each having a kind of completeness, but arranged to create a cumulative effect. The writers of the Gospels apparently had some interest in chronological order, but that was not primary. Theological concerns and readers' needs strongly influenced arrangement of materials. One would expect, therefore, that even though all four New Testament Gospels center on Jesus of Nazareth and all four are gospels in literary form, differences would still exist among them. And that is the case. Apart from the accounts of Jesus' arrest, trial, death, and resurrection, which are strikingly similar in all four, the Gospels differ in important details, perspectives, and accents of interpretation. In all these ways, the Gospel of John stands most noticeably apart from the others. In this Gospel, Jesus Christ is portrayed more obviously as divine, all-knowing, all-controlling, and "from above." The other three are called synoptic (viewed together) Gospels because, despite differences, they can be viewed together. Placed in parallel columns, Matthew, Mark, and Luke impress the reader with such similarities that they have spawned many theories about their relationships. The most widely held scholarly opinion is that Mark was the earliest written and became a source for Matthew and Luke. Most likely, Matthew and Luke each had other sources as well as a common source, a conjecture made on the basis of much shared material not found in Mark. This theorized but as yet unidentified source has simply been called Q, or Quelle (German, "source"). In a preface, the author of the Gospel of Luke speaks of having researched many narratives about Jesus (see Luke 1:1-4).

History

Historical narrative is best represented in the New Testament by the Acts of the Apostles, which is the second of two volumes (sometimes called Luke-Acts) ascribed to St. Luke. These two books tell the story of Jesus and the church that arose in his name as one continuous narrative, set in the history of Israel and of the Roman Empire. The history is theologically presented; that is, it interprets what God is doing in this event or with that person. Acts is unique in the New Testament in its use of historical narrative for purposes of proclamation.

Epistles

The epistle or letter in the Greco-Roman world was a fairly standardized literary form consisting of signature, address, greeting, eulogy or thanksgiving, message, and farewell. St. Paul found this form congenial to his relation to the churches he had established and convenient for an itinerant apostle. The form became widely accepted in the Christian community and was used by other church leaders and writers. The epistles that they wrote, some of which appear in the New Testament, are really sermons, exhortations, or treatises thinly disguised as epistles.

Apocalyptic Writing

Apocalyptic writing appears throughout the New Testament but is most extensive in the Book of Revelation. Apocalypses are usually written in times of severe crisis for a community, times in which people look beyond the present and beyond human sources for help and hope. This literature is highly visionary, symbolic, pessimistic about world conditions, and hopeful only in terms of the invisible beyond the visible and the victory beyond history. Just retribution and reward characterize the visions of the end of the world. Apparently, Revelation was written during the persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Domitian, who reigned from 81 to 96.

Literary Forms

Within these four major types of literature, many forms appear: poems, hymns, confessional formulas, proverbs, miracle stories, beatitudes, diatribes, lists of duties, parables, and others. Recent scholarship has given a great deal of attention to literary form not only as necessary in understanding content but also as a vehicle by which the reader can share the experience created in a given passage. Forms have the power to create worlds and to define relationships; they are not mere accessories to content. In the writings of biblical scholars, much attention in the past was focused on the parable, which for centuries was regarded as an allegory. At the close of the last century, the German biblical scholar Adolph Jülicher (1857-1938) took a new direction in the interpretation of parables. He insisted that the New Testament parables be understood as real similes, rather than as allegories. Thus, he held that Jesus' stories should be understood as illustrations, the meanings of which could be restated in single themes or propositions. More recently, parables have been respected as works of literary art, having a force and function similar to poetry, and therefore not to be destroyed by paraphrase or summary or propositional digest. As literary art, a parable does not simply make its point, but it does its work on the reader—creating, altering, or even shattering a particular view of life and reality. Scholarly explorations into other literary forms in the New Testament are also under way.

History in the New Testament

The New Testament is not a collection of maxims, reflections, and meditations dissociated from historical concreteness. On the contrary, its documents focus on a historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, and address the problems faced by his followers in a variety of specific contexts in the Roman Empire. This concern with historical events, persons, and situations does not mean, however, that the New Testament submits itself to purely historical and chronological interests.

Determining the Broad Chronological Outline

A number of difficulties are encountered in a historical reconstruction of the period as revealed in New Testament sources. First, the documents are arranged theologically, not chronologically. The Gospels are first because they tell the story of Jesus, but they were written between 70 and 90, as much as 60 years after his death. The Acts of the Apostles is also from this period. The Epistles of Paul, however, are earlier; they date from the decade between 50 and 60 because they were written at the very time Paul was involved