Making the New Testament cut

As early as the first century CE, Christians were publishing all kinds of books about Jesus. At some point, though, believers had to decide which ones were the most important for all Christians. Church leaders made the final decisions, but the criteria they used respected both history and the wider community of Christians. To make the New Testament cut, a book had to be

- **Apostolic**: By *apostolic*, the leaders meant that the book had to be traceable to one of the apostles or eyewitnesses. This criterion ruled out later texts.

- **In traditional use**: To be in traditional use, a text had to be in use from an early period of the Church, and therefore cited by early Church fathers whose dates are known.

- **Catholic**: When the Church fathers said that a text had to be *catholic*, they meant catholic with a small c, which is the Greek word for "universal." The book therefore had to be in use in many Christian communities around the Mediterranean — not just in a select few.

- **Orthodox**: By *orthodox*, the Church leaders meant that the book had to be in sync with emerging mainstream Christian teaching.

Some Christian leaders also felt that books had to be suitable for public reading at worship services; this meant that they had to meet the previously listed criteria and be edifying rather than merely entertaining. And no doubt there were political factors as well. For example, gospels popular in the major urban centers, such as Rome and Alexandria, would carry a lot of weight.

By about 180 CE, a consensus on 20 books was emerging. However, each person's list of 20 added a couple of other titles that differed from list to list. Eusebius, the great Church historian under Constantine, published a list of 22 books in 325 CE. Athanasius's definitive *Easter Letter* in 367 CE provides the earliest evidence for the current total of 27 books.

The most famous heretical texts: Gnostic notions of Jesus

The Gnostic gospels, dialogues, and apocalypses are the most famous heretical books in early Christianity. These books are famous not only because so many second-century Christians denounced them, but also because many of them were actually found in 1945.

The Gnostic gospels are very different from the canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). This difference was due to the Gnostic teaching that the material world was evil and that the path to salvation lay in cultivating the spark of *gnosis* (from the Greek word for "knowledge") implanted in each person. So, for this group of Christians, Jesus's earthly life was irrelevant, which meant that they rarely told stories about it in their gospels.

In one of the most famous archaeological finds of the 20th century, a farmer digging for fertilizer found 13 codices (or bound books) in an earthenware pot near Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt. These 13 books contained 46 separate works in Coptic (the language of upper Egypt), including the following:

- The Gospels of Thomas and Philip
- The Gospel of Truth
- The Gospel of the Egyptians

Additional Gnostic materials were discovered in Oxyrhynchus and other Egyptian sites, including the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene), Greek fragments of the Gospel of Thomas, and most recently, a third-or fourth-century codex containing pages and fragments of these books along with the Gospel of Judas.

I mention earlier in this chapter how the Gospel of Thomas is made up of all sayings, no stories. So, Jesus may as well be disembodied! In several of these books, he is disembodied — all the action takes place after he's risen and all the revelation is secret wisdom. In these gospels, you won't find any bodies healed, any meals with sinners, any enjoyment of the earth, and any teachings about marriage. In fact, the only intercourse that happens in these texts is the union of human reason with divine reason (see the nearby sidebar "The Da Vinci Code and the Gospel of Judas" for more information).

These gospels were labeled heretical because the mainstream Church had a more positive view of human bodies, sexuality, and the material world in general. They valued the human and historical Jesus. Besides, these gospels were written too late and were popular in only a few isolated places. Apart from some sayings in the Gospel of Thomas, they don't help reconstruct the historical Jesus.

Apocryphal texts

The early Church generated a lot of traditions regarding Jesus that were wildly popular but didn't make it into the Bible. The traditions take the same forms that the canonical books do: gospels, acts of various apostles, letters, and apocalypses.

One of the most entertaining traditions is the infancy gospel tradition. The gospels of Matthew and Luke are the only canonical texts to mention Jesus's conception and birth. But they narrate very little about his childhood. So, inquiring early Christian minds wanted to know what his infancy in Egypt was like. They wanted to know more about Jesus's parents, Mary and Joseph, than the canonical gospels dish up, particularly as the issue of Jesus's virginal conception grew in importance. And most of all, these early Christians wondered what he was like as a child. After all, with all those divine powers,
Hebrews 7:14 admits that Jesus is from the tribe of Judah.
This fact agrees with the gospel view that Jesus is from the
line of David but it complicates the epistle's claim that Jesus
is the new high priest (the priests came from a different tribe).

Jesus's teaching against oaths is referred to in James 5:12,
though Jesus isn't cited by name (see Matthew 5:34–37).

The teaching about “the stone which the builders rejected”
is mentioned in 1 Peter 2:7 (see Matthew 21:42; Luke 20:17).

Jesus's teaching that one should not return evil for evil comes
up in 1 Peter 3:9 (see Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28; Romans 12:14).

Revelation 3:3 and 16:15 refer to the approaching end of time
and how it will catch many people unaware. The language

None of the previous texts give free-standing new material that’s
independent of Q or the gospels, so the gospels and their sources,
along with corroborating evidence from Paul’s epistles, remain our
most important literary evidence for Jesus.

Recovering Traces in Later
Christian Sources

Christians continued to write books about Jesus in the centuries
after his life. Sayings and complete stories were told in these books,
and many of them were quoted by early Church leaders. These
newest books add some (but not much) information to the
historical record of Jesus.

Sayings in the agrapha

The word agrapha literally means “unwritten things” in Greek. It’s
a bit of a misnomer in gospel studies, though, because it refers to
sayings and traditions about Jesus that were actually written down.
What makes them less reliable is that either they were late additions
to gospels that made the New Testament cut or they were recorded
in books that didn't make the cut at all.

The story of the woman caught in adultery, for example, counts as
one major agraphon (John 7:53–8:11). The woman is thrown before
Jesus for judgment as the crowd stands ready to stone her. Jesus
first stoops to draw in the dirt, and then he says, “Let the one among
you without sin be first to cast a stone.” At that point the crowd
slowly dispersed. This story is a popular one in Christian tradition,
but it’s considered an agraphon because it isn’t in the earliest
manuscripts of John’s gospel.

Overall, 225 such sayings are scattered in early gospel versions
and other writings that aren't included in the New Testament. The
most frequently mentioned agrapha is also one of the briefest.
The one I'm talking about is when Jesus says, “Be competent
money-changers” (it's cited more than 70 times by the early
Church fathers but isn't found in the New Testament at all).

Some agrapha seem to depend on the canonical gospels, which
means that they aren’t independent witnesses to traditions about
the historical Jesus (see Chapter 3). Others can be ruled out as
evidence of the historical Jesus because they address second-
century issues and debates (such as Jesus's sinless nature or Gnostic
notions of how people are saved). Because they're so short, so late,
quoted out of context, and only able to be tested against Matthew,
Mark, and Luke, it’s difficult to know whether even a few of these
agrapha are authentic. Scholars estimate that only 7 to 18 of the
original 225 agrapha may actually go back to Jesus.

Heretical and hidden traditions
in complete texts

More significant than the brief agrapha sayings are the many
complete books about Jesus that circulated in early Christianity,
apart from the 27 that later made it into the New Testament. Here’s
a rundown of the types of books:

Some of these books were gospels, apocalypses, and dialogues
that were judged by early Christian leaders or later church
councils to be heretical (contrary to mainstream teaching).

Other books were gospels, acts of the various apostles,
teachings, and legendary tales that were very popular in the
early Church but just weren’t considered worthy enough to
become actual “scripture” (see the sidebar “Making the New
Testament cut” for more information). This last group of books
is considered apocryphal, or hidden. These books weren’t
called this because they were actually hidden by anyone,
but because they weren’t in the final published lists.

Because scholars look at any early sources they can get their
hands on and because they can’t afford to rule books out based
on judgments that later Christians made, they tend to read all this
material for possible evidence of Jesus. However, as you find out
in the following sections, these books offer little help in the hunt for
the historical Jesus.
Jesus was a rabbinic student who went astray or a rabbi who led his students astray.

Jesus was tried fairly for blasphemy and idolatry, but no one came to his defense.

Each of these traditions confronts a gospel claim: that Jesus was the son of God and son of David, that he was a legitimate healer and teacher, and that he was arrested and tried hastily and illegally on trumped-up charges. While these are all late traditions and don’t tell us much about the historical Jesus, they do tell us a tremendous amount about later historical debates between Jews and Christians in a region where the playing field was relatively level.

However, the playing field wasn’t level at all in the Christian Byzantine Empire or in Western Europe. Christians’ horrific treatment of the Jews over the centuries in the name of Jesus has understandably shaped Jewish views of the man. His death becomes their death sentence, or at the very least a license to harass them. The gospels share the blame for this, even while the authors of some of the worst passages were most likely Jewish themselves.

For example, the author of Matthew has the Jewish crowd cry to Pontius Pilate, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matthew 27:25), and later Christians took that literally, using it to justify obscene violence against people they labeled “Christ-killers” or deicides (God-killers).

It wasn’t just that “the Jews” were perceived to be guilty of that past deed; it was also the fact that they weren’t Christian. Their very existence raised a kind of perpetual question mark over Christianity, suggesting that Christian beliefs may be wrong, which is what Christians couldn’t tolerate.

This makes the stakes very high today whenever people take a look at the gospels’ portraits of Judaism or the quest for the historical Jesus. There are a lot of places where Christian biases for Jesus can become prejudices against Judaism. For example, a Christian who wonders why God sent Jesus might answer that Jesus had to correct a corrupted Jewish religion or supplement a deficient Jewish revelation. These interpretations target Jewish belief and practice as the culprits — the reasons why God intervened. That’s why it’s so important to reconstruct the Jewish Jesus carefully and to recognize that Jesus was killed not by “the Jews” as a group, still less the Jews of all time, but rather by the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate with the collaboration of a few leading Jewish aristocrats.

For general information about Judaism, check out Judaism For Dummies by Ted Falcon and David Blatner (Wiley).

**Jesus in Islam**

A core belief of Islam is the absolute unity, or tawhid, of Allah (Allah is the name of God in Islam). While Christians share this as the third member of the Trinity strikes a Muslim’s ear as shirk (a tently refer to Jesus as “son of Mary” rather than the “son of God” consi-epithet usually found in Christian creeds.

Given the Muslim’s view of Jesus, it’s interesting that the Qur’an preserves the tradition that Jesus was a great miracle worker. After proof of his divine connections. Surah 5:110 is an example of Jesus’s and breathing life into them, which mirrors a tale told among Christians in the apocryphal Arabic Infancy Gospel (see Chapter 9).

Even more interesting is the Qur’anic view of Jesus’s crucifixion in surah 4:157-158. In this passage, Jesus isn’t actually crucified and therefore doesn’t die: “They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it was made to appear so” to the onlookers. Allah raises Jesus up to himself without allowing Jesus to suffer anything. His exemption from suffering and death makes sense in the Qur’an because of the strong theme that God never abandons his prophets to such a fate.

Some Christians at the time were saying something similar — that Jesus didn’t die on the cross — but unlike the Qur’an, they were also saying that he couldn’t die because he wasn’t really human to begin with. These folks were called Docetists, and they thought that Jesus was completely divine (I discuss them in Chapter 15). Within the Muslim faith, that notion would be shirk because Muslims don’t believe that Jesus was divine at all, nor do they believe that Mohammed (their great prophet to whom the Qur’an was revealed) picked up stories like this from other people like the Docetists. Instead, they believe that the words of the Qur’an came directly from Allah.

Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet and as one of the most important messengers of Allah. They believe in Jesus’s importance because he had an authentic scriptural revelation (the Injil, or gospel, from the Greek euangelion) and because he had not only an audience but also an enduring community of followers (as did Abraham, Moses, and Mohammed). However, a final prophet was needed to clarify the revelation, as the Qur’an claims the Torah and gospel predict (Qur’an 7:157; Muslim commentators gloss this verse by pointing to the “prophet like Moses” promised after Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 and the advocate that Jesus promises will follow him in John 14:16). Muslims believe that Mohammed was that final prophet and (through
bad guys. Even when the new hybrid Christs didn’t take the West on directly, they added new and diverse global voices to the mix, images that challenged westerners’ long-dominant views of Jesus.

Viewing Jesus in World Religions

Jesus is worshiped as God among Christians, but the other major religions of the world don’t view him in this way. Some nevertheless respect him as a moral teacher and prophet. There’s even one Christian denomination that has a different view of Jesus from other Christian groups.

Jesus in Mormonism

In 1830, Joseph Smith, Jr., founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, popularly known as the Mormon Church; its Web site is www.lds.org). The 13 million or so current LDS members view their church as the authentic form of Christianity that was restored in these latter days. LDS members accept the Christian Bible as revelation, but they also believe that whole parts of the story are missing and that corruptions entered the text in the translation process, and so additional divine revelation was needed. The supplementary revelation is in three books: the Book of Mormon, the Doctrines and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Revelation continues in the office of the President of the Church, who is considered a living prophet.

Mormon views of Jesus differ from mainstream Christianity in a number of ways. For instance, in LDS belief:

- The Book of Mormon, compiled between 600 BCE and 421 CE by Israelite descendants in the Western Hemisphere, prophesies Christ and records events in the Americas around his birth, death, and resurrection visit.
- The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit aren’t one as was determined at the Council of Nicaea (see Chapter 15). Instead, they’re three separate Personages (three individual beings) of different rank. Heavenly Father and Son have physical bodies (glorified and resurrected ones) while the Holy Ghost doesn’t. Heavenly Father is married to Heavenly Mother, and they literally pro-created all human spirits. Jesus’s human birth was in turn a literal birth accomplished by Heavenly Father and Mary.
- Jesus, as Jehovah, took a principal role in the premortal life, leading the Israelites of the Old Testament. When folks needed atonement for the inevitable sins that they all would commit as part of their earthly test, Jesus stepped up to the plate.

enabling everyone to be divinized. His great act of atonement for human sin was the obedience he demonstrated to his Father’s will in both the Garden of Gethsemane, where he sweat blood (see Chapter 14) and in his death on the cross. He continues his redeeming work in the postmortem spirit world, saving the ancestors of LDS converts. According to LDS teaching, Jesus is going to restore his kingdom on the American continent.

- Some 19th-century Mormon leaders taught that Jesus was married, like all good Mormons, and some even taught that he had multiple wives (including Mary Magdalene and Martha; see Chapter 10 for contrary evidence). But this teaching has gone in and out of favor in the decades since.
- Jesus was the firstborn of the spirit children. All people are just like him. In other words, everyone has a premortal spiritual existence (born of Heavenly Father and Mother), everyone gets time on earth to practice obedience, and everyone gets the chance for spiritual exaltation or godhood, achieved through the performance of Temple rites and the atoning act of Jesus. The Mormon Jesus is the Elder Brother in the family of believers. He’s a “Father” in terms of his obedience, but he’s not to be confused with the Father. He’s not a unique divine-human intermediary but a supreme example of what everyone can be.

Check out Mormonism For Dummies by Jana Riess and Christopher Kimball Bigelow and published by Wiley, for more background.

Jesus in Judaism

In Judaism, Jesus is viewed neither as the messiah nor as the son of God. He isn’t divine at all. Instead, Jews simply recognize Jesus as a first-century Jewish man whose teachings often sound much like the positions of other rabbis of the period. Some view Jesus as one of a number of failed messiahs in Jewish history; like the others, Jesus failed to usher in the messianic age because there’s still a lot of suffering in the world.

Jewish traditions about Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud were compiled sometime in the seventh century CE in a region that wasn’t under Christian control at the time. Free of the constraints of Christian imperial religion, the Babylonian rabbis could afford to be more open in their assessments of Jesus and his followers. The Talmud preserves several separate traditions:

- Jesus’s mother was an adulteress who had an affair with a Roman soldier.
- Jesus fled to Egypt and picked up magic there.
Hinduism is one of the oldest of the major world religious traditions, predating Christianity by several centuries. As Hindus encountered Christian missionaries in India in recent centuries, two notions about Jesus cropped up. They said that Jesus was one of many incarnations (avatars) of God, particularly Vishnu. This view would regularly revisit earth in one form or another to reinvigorate Hindu teaching.

Buddhism views are a little less specific and historical than Hindu traditions. Buddhists, for example, distinguish between spiritual teachers and historical teachers. Therefore, the Buddha's behavior and teachings like that of a Buddha himself, though as one would want to view Jesus as a Buddha himself, though as one who is capable of compassion and wisdom and has already achieved enlightenment. The Buddha because bodhisattvas train ceaselessly in the method and wisdom of that path to become fully enlightened, and in this path, they will arise in a variety of places to help others. The Buddha because bodhisattvas train ceaselessly in the method and wisdom of that path, similar to the Buddha himself.

Buddhists view the circumstances of delivery, while the clear seeing is where truth lies. According to Buddhist scriptures, the view of the Buddha and the orthodoxy of its truth are presented on the surface, while the core of Buddhist scriptures are philosophical and deal with metaphysical aspects of the world. However, these verbal doctrines are mostly based on how the scriptures themselves, they lose their utility because they no longer deliver a living message.

Thus, Jesus is more like a bodhisattva than the Buddha because bodhisattvas train ceaselessly in the method and wisdom of that path to become fully enlightened, and in this path, they will arise in a variety of places to help others. The Buddha because bodhisattvas train ceaselessly in the method and wisdom of that path, similar to the Buddha himself.

Buddhists view the circumstances of delivery, while the clear seeing is where truth lies. According to Buddhist scriptures, the view of the Buddha and the orthodoxy of its truth are presented on the surface, while the core of Buddhist scriptures are philosophical and deal with metaphysical aspects of the world. However, these verbal doctrines are mostly based on how the scriptures themselves, they lose their utility because they no longer deliver a living message.

Jesus was one of many incarnations (avatars) of God, particularly Vishnu. This view would regularly revisit earth in one form or another to reinvigorate Hindu teaching.

The Christian belief that God became human through Jesus gave the age-old commandment to depict the divine. In fact, the commandment to portray God through Jesus gave rise to the limitations of human and divine likeness. Artists rose to the challenge of depicting the human and divine nature of Jesus. They shaped belief about Jesus. Encounters with the East (Eastern and Byzantine art) were both difficult and productive. Artists who dealt with the human and divine nature of Jesus were said to have known something about Jesus. There are, however, many works that it's sometimes difficult to understand. Western art, on the other hand, is the art of the eastern man. Western art is in this chapter, you discover how both shaped their ideas over the centuries, and you meet some of the modern faces of Christian art.