

Eighth Edition



The New Testament

A Student's Introduction

Stephen L. Harris

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A STUDENT'S INTRODUCTION

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A STUDENT'S INTRODUCTION, EIGHTH EDITION

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For Geoffrey Edwin, Jason Marc, and Kevin L.

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Preface to the Eighth Edition

Like its predecessors, the eighth edition of *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction* is designed for undergraduates beginning their first systematic study of the Christian Greek Scriptures. The purpose of this introductory text is twofold: to familiarize readers with the contents and major themes of the New Testament and to acquaint them with the goals and methods of important biblical scholarship.



Rearrangement and New Features

To facilitate students' learning experience, material in the new edition has been rearranged into six parts. The first chapter of Part One provides an overview of the New Testament and its relationship to the Jewish Scriptures, known to Christians as the Old Testament. After surveying the literary genres that early Christian authors adopted to express their beliefs, this chapter describes the usefulness of scholarly—historical and analytical—approaches to studying the sacred writings. Greatly expanded, the second chapter traces the gradual development of the New Testament canon, illustrating the importance of historical events, such as the Jewish Revolt against Rome and the patronage of the emperor Constantine, respectively, to the contents and the final tally of New Testament books.

In Part Two, “The Three Worlds in Which Christianity Originated,” the text reviews the three major forces that largely shaped and defined the new faith: Judaism, Greek culture, and Roman political power. As twenty-first-century scholars increasingly emphasize the historical context of Christian origins, this textbook integrates

vital new research on the Jesus movement's interaction with imperial power. Closer focus on the tension between Christ and Caesar appears not only in the fuller coverage of emperor worship (Chapter 5), but also in the discussion of the Book of Acts, where Paul's “gospel” of Jesus' kingship sparks riots and seems to undermine Roman social stability (Chapter 12). To many in the Greco-Roman world, the message that the kingdom of God is superior to the Roman Empire seems to subvert the government's legitimate authority.

Part Three, “Diverse Portraits of Jesus,” discusses the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teaching. While emphasizing the theological orientation of the Gospel writers, Chapter 6 now also underscores scholarly contributions to our understanding of the Gospels' composition, including the Synoptic Problem and the two-document hypothesis. The presentation of John's unique Gospel—strikingly different from the three Synoptic accounts—offers a more nuanced analysis of the author's realized eschatology, particularly his creative handling of the early apocalyptic expectations that Jesus would soon return to earth (Chapter 10).

Coverage of scholarly attempts to recover the “historical Jesus” has been expanded to include recent modifications of the quest. At the same time, the discussion has been streamlined for greater clarity (Chapter 11).

Part Four features the Book of Acts, in which the author of Luke's Gospel presents an idealized account of the early church. The writer's candor about the destabilizing social effects of the Christian message is brought into sharper focus, a theme that carries over into Part Five, “Paul and the Pauline Tradition.” In addition to outlining the influence of the Roman patron-client model

on Paul's thought, this section also offers greater coverage of his theology, especially the paradigm-changing nature of new critical interpretations. The controversial issue of pseudonymity—composing documents in the name of a deceased writer, such as Paul or Peter—is given further attention, as is the church's inclusion of pseudonymous letters and other works in the New Testament canon.

Part Six, “General Letters and Some Visions of End Time,” highlights characteristic anxieties of the church in the decades shortly before and after the turn of the first Christian century. Many of these later New Testament documents were apparently composed in response to doctrinal disputes or reflect disappointment in believers' apocalyptic expectations. Whereas John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, paints a lurid scenario of End Time that will “soon” culminate in Jesus' Second Coming, some later writers, such as the pseudonymous author of 2 Peter, deal specifically with failed hopes of an early Parousia. Like the other catholic epistles confronting a church in crisis, the three letters from the Johannine community—the same group that had produced the Gospel of John—reveal quarrels over doctrine and conduct that bitterly divided their members.

A new chapter—“Outside the Canon: Other Early Christian Literature”—reviews important documents that the church ultimately did not accept into the New Testament. These rejected works include pseudonymous Gospels, such as those ascribed to Thomas, James, Peter, and Judas. Discovered in 1945, the Gospel of Thomas contains versions of Jesus' sayings that may be as old or older than those incorporated into the canonical Gospels. Other writings, such as the Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), represent the worship practices of early Jewish-Christian communities, some of which rituals are remarkably similar to contemporary church services. In its present form, the Didache probably dates from about 100 CE, and is thus older than several of the catholic epistles (see Chapter 20).

Other new features include the addition of several boxes highlighting important themes or subjects, such as “The Role of Women in John's Gospel” (Box 10.6); “The Christian Message's Disruptive Effect on Greco-Roman Society” (Box 12.4); “Through a Glass Darkly: Justification and Unconditional Love” (Box 15.1); and “Gnosticism” (Box 18.3). In addition, many sections of the text have been rewritten to incorporate trends in current scholarship, including an extensive updating of the “Recommended Readings.”



Pedagogical Aids

This text offers numerous devices to help students learn the material quickly and easily. As in previous editions, each chapter begins with a concise summary of key topics/themes, and important terms are printed in **boldface**, listed at the end of every chapter, and then defined in the expansive Glossary at the back of the book. To help readers remember essential information, each chapter includes pertinent Questions for Review, as well as aids to facilitate class dialogue, Questions for Discussion and Reflection. The extensively updated Recommended Readings refer students to publications available at most college and university libraries. Representing the work of leading scholars, the books listed provide crucial insights and analytical tools for enhancing our understanding of the New Testament and the sociohistorical environment in which it developed.



Online Resource

Additional resources for *The New Testament* can be found on the Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/harris8e. Students will be able to access multiple choice, true/false, and essay

quizzes to test comprehension as well as chapter summaries. Instructors can take advantage of an Instructor's Manual with testbank questions and PowerPoint lecture slides.



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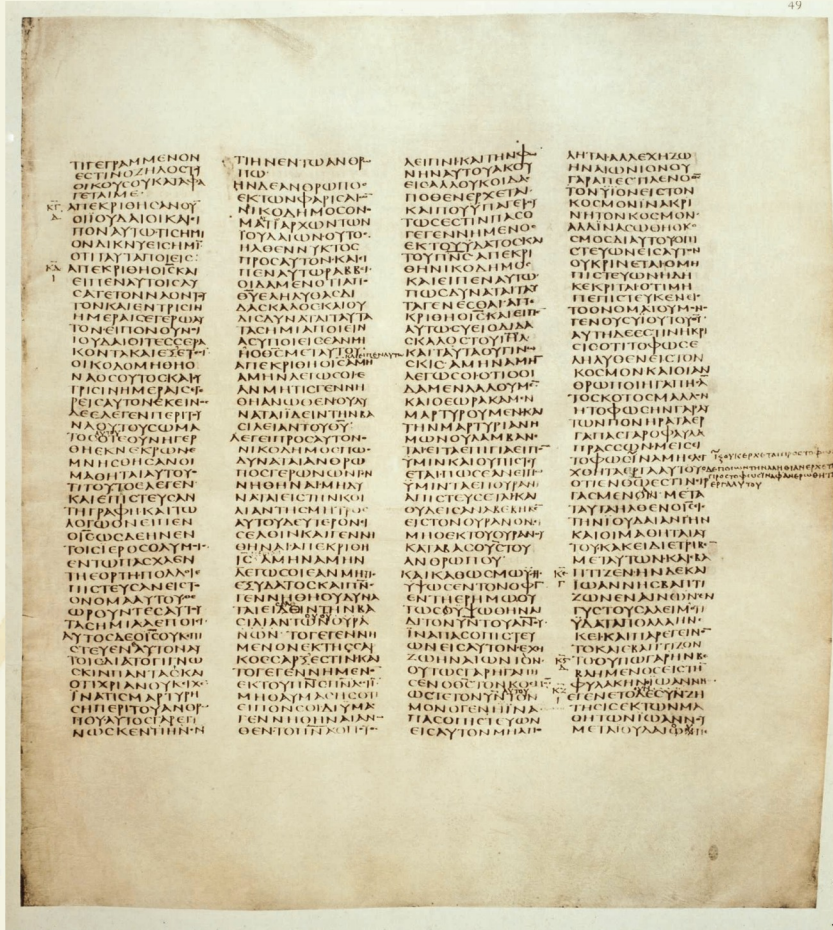
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PART ONE

An Invitation to the New Testament





CHAPTER 1

An Overview of the New Testament

*Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Mark 1:1**

Key Topics/Themes A collection of twenty-seven Greek documents that early Christians appended to a Greek edition of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), the New Testament includes four Gospels, a church history, letters, and an

apocalypse (revelation). The early Christian community produced a host of other writings as well, which scholars also study to understand the diverse nature of the Jesus movement as it spread throughout the Greco-Roman world.

People read the New Testament for an almost infinite variety of reasons. Some read to satisfy their curiosity about the origins of one of the great world religions. They seek to learn more about the social and historical roots of Christianity, a faith that began in the early days of the Roman Empire and that today commands the allegiance of more than 2 billion people, approximately a third of the global population. Because Christianity bases its most characteristic beliefs on the New Testament writings, it is to this source that the historian and social scientist must turn for information about the religion's birth and early development.

Most people, however, probably read the New Testament for more personal reasons. Many readers search its pages for answers to life's important ethical and religious questions. For hundreds of millions of Christians, the New Testament sets the only acceptable standards of

personal belief and behavior (see Box 1.1). Readers attempt to discover authoritative counsel on issues that modern science or speculative philosophy cannot resolve, such as the nature of God, the fate of the soul after death, and the ultimate destiny of humankind.

Jesus of Nazareth, the central character of the New Testament, provides many people with the most compelling reason to read the book. As presented by the Gospel writers, he is like no other figure in history. His teachings and pronouncements have an unequalled power and authority. As an itinerant Jewish prophet, healer, and teacher in early-first-century Palestine, the historical Jesus—in terms of the larger Greco-Roman world around him—lived a relatively obscure life and died a criminal's death at the hands of Roman executioners. His followers' conviction that he subsequently rose from the grave and appeared to them launched a vital new faith that eventually swept the Roman Empire. In little more than three centuries after Jesus' death, Christianity became Rome's official state religion.

*Unless otherwise noted, all New Testament quotations are from the New English Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); (see Chapter 2, p. 36).



BOX 1.1 The New Testament: A Relatively Modern Artifact

A printed, bound copy of the New Testament that readers can hold in their hands is a relatively modern development. Until the fourth century CE, the New Testament did not even exist as a coherent entity—a single volume containing the twenty-seven books in its now-familiar table of contents. Before then, believers, and even church leaders, had access to individual Gospels or subcollections, such as compilations of Paul’s letters, but not to a comprehensive edition of the entire text.

Even after Rome made Christianity the state religion and imperial patronage encouraged the production of an official Christian Scripture, New Testaments were extremely rare. Not only were manuscript copies prohibitively expensive, but the vast majority of people in the Roman Empire could neither read nor write. It was not until the printing press was invented in the fifteenth century CE, permitting the eventual mass production of Bibles, that the New Testament as we know it came into being.

Clearly, the New Testament authors present Jesus as much more than an ordinary man. The Gospel of John portrays him as the human expression of divine Wisdom, the Word of God made flesh. Jesus’ teaching about the eternal world of spirit is thus definitive, for he is depicted as having descended from heaven to earth to reveal ultimate truth. About 300 years after Jesus’ crucifixion, Christian leaders assembled at the town of Nicaea in Asia Minor to decree that Jesus is not only the Son of God but God himself.

Given the uniquely high status that orthodox Christianity accords the person of Jesus, the New Testament accounts of his life have extraordinary value. Jesus’ words recorded in the Gospels are seen not merely as the utterances of a preeminently wise teacher but also as the declarations of the Being who created and sustains the universe. The hope of encountering “God’s thoughts,” of discovering otherwise unattainable knowledge of unseen realities, gives many believers a powerful incentive for studying the New Testament.



What Is the New Testament?

When asked to define the New Testament, many students respond with such traditional phrases as “the Word of God” or “Holy Scripture.” These responses are really confessions of faith that the

Christian writings are qualitatively different from ordinary books. Some students express surprise that non-Christian religions also have **scriptures**—documents that these groups consider sacred and authoritative (having the power to command belief and prescribe behavior). In fact, many other world religions possess holy books that their adherents believe to represent a divine revelation to humankind. Hindus cherish the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavadgita; Buddhists venerate the recorded teachings of Buddha, the “enlightened one”; and followers of Islam (meaning “submission” [to the will of Allah]) revere the Quran (Koran) as transmitting the one true faith. Ideally, we approach all sacred writings with a willingness to appreciate the religious insights they offer and to recognize their connection with the cultural and historical context out of which they grew.

Given the historical fact that the New Testament was written by and for believers in Jesus’ divinity, many readers tend to approach it as they do no other work of ancient literature. Whether or not they are practicing Christians, students commonly bring to the New Testament attitudes and assumptions very different from those they employ when reading other works of antiquity. The student usually has little trouble bringing an open or neutral mind to exploring stories about the Greek and Roman gods. One can read Homer’s *Iliad*, an epic poem celebrating the Greek heroes of the Trojan War, without

any particular emotional involvement with the Homeric gods. However, this objective attitude toward supernatural beings is rare among persons studying the New Testament.

To be fair to the New Testament, we will want to study it with the same open-mindedness we grant to the writings of any world religion. This call for objectivity is a challenge to all of us, for we live in a culture that defines its highest values largely in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We can most fully appreciate the New Testament if we begin by recognizing that it developed in, and partly in reaction to, a society profoundly different from our own. To a great extent, the New Testament is the literary product of a dynamic encounter between two strikingly different cultures of antiquity—the Jewish and the Greek. A creative synthesis of these two traditions, early Christianity originated in a thoroughly Jewish environment. But in the decades following Jesus' death, Christianity spread to the larger Greek-speaking world, where it eventually assumed the dominant form that has been transmitted to us.

The Jewish world of Jesus and his first disciples was centered in **Palestine**, an area at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea now partly occupied by the modern state of Israel (see Figure 1.1). According to the biblical Book of Genesis, God had awarded this territory—the **Promised Land**—to his chosen people, the Jews.* In Jesus' day (the first third of the first century CE[†]), however, the land was ruled by Rome, the capital of a vast empire that surrounded the entire Mediterranean basin, from France and Spain in western Europe to Egypt in northeast Africa and Syria-Palestine in western Asia (see Figure 1.2). As a Palestinian Jew, Jesus experienced the tension that then existed between his fellow Jews and their often-resented Roman overlords

(see Chapters 5–10 for discussions of Gospel references to Jewish-Roman relations).

Although many students automatically ascribe their own (twenty-first-century North American) values and attitudes to Jesus' world, it is important to recognize that, even today, inhabitants of the eastern Mediterranean region do not view life as Americans typically do. In the Mediterranean's agrarian, conservative peasant society, old ideas, values, and practices contrast sharply with those in the West's technologically sophisticated democracies. Two thousand years ago, the degree of difference—social, religious, and political—was even greater, a fact that must be considered when studying the Gospel accounts of Jesus' interaction with Palestinian villagers and Roman officials. The more we learn about first-century Palestinian-Jewish and Greco-Roman customs, social institutions, and religious beliefs, the better we will understand both Jesus and the writers who interpreted him to Greek-speaking audiences (see Chapters 3–5).



The New Testament and the Hebrew Bible

Before considering the second great historical influence on the creation of the New Testament—Greek thought and culture—it is helpful to describe what the New Testament is and how it relates to the older Jewish Scriptures, the **Hebrew Bible** (so called because it was originally composed in the Hebrew language, with a few later books in a related tongue, **Aramaic**; see Boxes 1.2 and 1.3). Basically, the New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven Christian documents, written in Greek and added as a supplement to a Greek edition of the Hebrew Bible known as the **Septuagint** (see below). The Christian Bible, therefore, consists of two unequal parts: the longer, more literarily diverse Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the Old Testament), and a shorter anthology of Christian writings (the New Testament). Bound together,

**Jew*, a term originally designating the inhabitants of Judea, the area surrounding Jerusalem, also includes all members of the covenant community living outside Palestine.

[†]CE (the Common Era), a religiously neutral term used by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others, is synonymous with the traditional AD, initials representing *anno domini*, Latin for “in the year of the Lord.” BCE (before the Common Era) corresponds to BC (before Christ).



FIGURE 1.1 Palestine at the time of Jesus (early first century CE). Located at the eastern margin of the Mediterranean Sea, this region promised to Abraham's descendants was then controlled by Rome (see Figure 1.2).



FIGURE 1.2 Map of the Roman Empire (c. 30 BCE). By the reign of Augustus (30 BCE–14 CE), the Roman Empire controlled most of the known world.



BOX 1.2 Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha

TORAH

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

PROPHETS

Former Prophets
Joshua
Judges
Samuel (1 and 2)
Kings (1 and 2)
Latter Prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
The Twelve (Minor Prophets)
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

WRITINGS

Psalms
Job
Proverbs
Ruth
Song of Solomon
Ecclesiastes
Lamentations
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah
Chronicles (1 and 2)

DEUTEROCANONICAL BOOKS (APOCRYPHA)

1 Esdras
2 Esdras
Tobit
Judith
The rest of the chapters of the Book of Esther
The Wisdom of Solomon
Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirah
Baruch
A Letter of Jeremiah
The Song of the Three
Daniel and Susanna
Daniel, Bel, and the Snake
The Prayer of Manasseh
1 Maccabees
2 Maccabees

the two testaments form the Christian Bible. **Bible**, a term derived from the word *biblia* (meaning “little books”), is an appropriate title because this two-part volume is really a compilation of many different books composed over a time span exceeding 1,100 years.

In considering early Christians’ use of the Hebrew Bible, however, we must remember that the Jewish Scriptures did not then exist as an easily accessible bound volume. At the time of Jesus and the early church, the Hebrew Bible existed only as a collection of separate scrolls

(see Chapter 2). Few Jews or early Christians owned copies of biblical books or read them privately. Instead, most Jews and Jewish Christians only heard passages from the Mosaic Torah or prophetic books read aloud at religious services in the local synagogue or at a Christian house church. If at the latter, they likely heard the Scriptures read not in the original Hebrew but in Greek translation.

That the early Christian movement appropriated the Hebrew Bible, which had been created by and for the Jewish community, is



BOX 1.3 Organization of the Hebrew and Christian Greek Scriptures

The contents of the New Testament are arranged in a way that approximates the order of the Hebrew Bible, which is also called the Tanakh, a term whose consonants represent

the three principal divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures: the *Torah* (Mosaic Law or instruction), the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and the *Kethuvim* (Writings).

OLD COVENANT (TESTAMENT)

T *Torah* (five books of Moses)
A
N *Nevi'im* (Prophets)
 Histories of Joshua-Kings
 Books of the Prophets
A
K *Kethuvim* (Writings)
H Books of poetry, wisdom, and an
 apocalypse (Daniel)

NEW COVENANT (TESTAMENT)

Four Gospels (story of Jesus)

 Book of Acts (church history)
 Letters of Paul and other church leaders

 Book of Hebrews, catholic epistles, and an
 apocalypse (Revelation)

extremely significant. Believers who accepted Jesus as the Jewish **Messiah** (Anointed One, a term applied to all of Israel's kings; see Chapter 3) looked to the Jewish Scriptures—the only written religious authority for both Jews and early Christians—to find evidence supporting their convictions. When New Testament authors refer to “Scripture” or “the Law and the Prophets” (cf. Luke 24:27, 32), they mean the Hebrew Bible, albeit in a Greek (Septuagint) edition. In composing their diverse portraits of Jesus, the Gospel writers consistently clothed the historical figure in images and ideas taken from the Hebrew Bible. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, virtually every word or action of Jesus is interpreted in terms of ancient biblical prophecy (see Chapter 8).

Testament and Covenant

The very term *New Testament* is intimately connected with the Hebrew Bible. In biblical usage, **testament** is a near synonym for **covenant**, which refers to an agreement, contract, vow, or bond. To appreciate the New Testament concept of the

bond between God and humanity, we must examine the Hebrew Bible's story of God's relationship with **Israel**, the ancient Near Eastern people with whom the Deity forged a binding covenant, making them his exclusive partner. Exodus, the second book of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), recounts the solemn ceremony in which the Israelites conclude their central covenant with **Yahweh** (the sacred name of Israel's God) (Exod. 19–20; 24). Under the terms of the **Mosaic Covenant** (so called because the Israelite leader **Moses** acts as mediator between Yahweh and his chosen people), the Israelites swear to uphold all the laws and commandments that Yahweh enjoins upon them. These legal injunctions are contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Together with the Book of Genesis, which serves as an introduction to the framing of the Mosaic Covenant, this section of the Hebrew Bible is known as the **Torah** (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4). Meaning “law,” “teaching,” or “instruction,” the Torah is also referred to as the **Pentateuch** (a Greek term for the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy). According to Mark's Gospel,

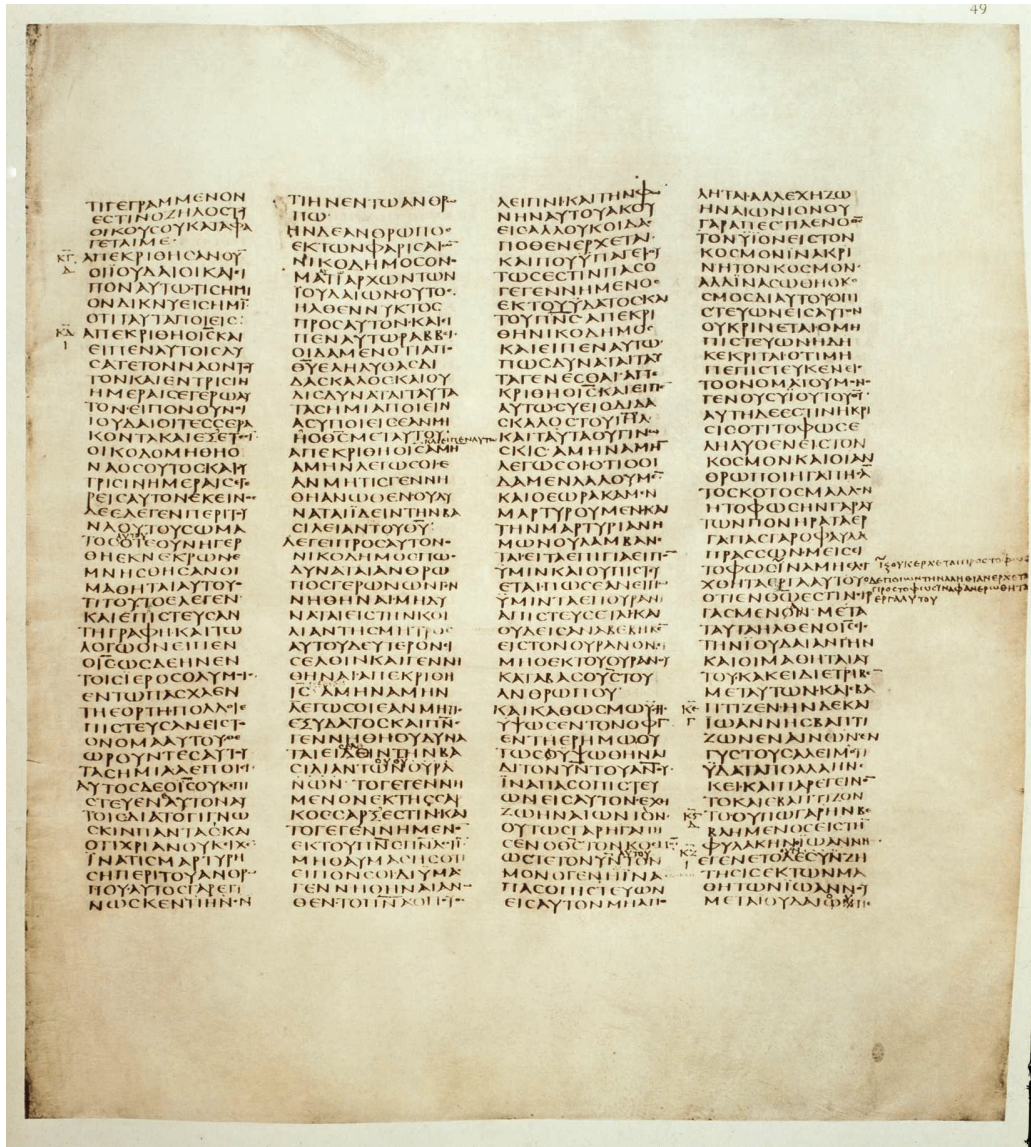


FIGURE 1.3 A page from John's Gospel in the Codex Sinaiticus. The oldest complete copy of the New Testament, the Codex Sinaiticus was produced about 330–350 CE.

when Jesus is asked to state Israel's most essential teaching, he cites Torah commands to love God and neighbor (see Mark 12; cf. Deut. 6:4–5 and Lev. 19:18).

According to stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant, Yahweh's vow to protect Israel is contingent upon the people's faithfulness in keeping Yahweh's instructions; failure to obey the

more than 600 covenant laws will result in Israel's destruction (Deut. 28–29; see Box 3.1). Some of Israel's later prophets concluded that the people had been so disobedient that Yahweh eventually rescinded his covenant vow, abandoning Israel to its enemies. Writing about 600 years before the time of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah promised that Yahweh would replace