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CONTENTS

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FOREWORD

he pages that follow attempt to introduce a first-time reader, or a reader with only a passing acquaintance, to the two-thousand-year-old richness of the Church's New Testament. A better understanding can make us more familiar with the source and inspiration of what the Christian Churches do and teach.

In the first part of the book I outline some background to the New Testament, and then ask how this particular collection of books, known to us as the New

Testament, came into existence. It is interesting to see how we finished up with just twenty-seven books, chosen from among dozens of others that were available and read in the early Church.

The second part of the book offers an introduction to the four Gospels, and to the person and teaching of Saint Paul. These are the texts more often used, and which are read to us within the Christian liturgies. It is best to focus our attention there, rather than saying something about the purpose and message

of all twenty-seven books, some of which we seldom use or hear.

By way of conclusion, I ask about the use of the New Testament in the life and prayer of the Church. Finally, I offer an example of how a passage from the New Testament can be used in a form of prayer that has been alive in the Church for 1500 years, the practice of *Lectio Divina*: a meditative and prayerful reflection upon the Divine Word.

Francis J Moloney, SDB



Lynne Muir

INTRODUCTION

spent several years teaching in the United States of America. One of the lasting impressions I have of the people I met there was their curiosity. Many times, while travelling or in other social settings, I was asked, 'What do you do for a living?' It was never enough to say I was a Catholic priest who taught in a university. That response only invited further curiosity, so I would have to admit that my life was dedicated to the study

and teaching of the New Testament. You mean the Bible? Yes, that was what I meant. It was a surprise to many that I could spend my life with only a part of the Bible, that part written in the Christian era.

I can understand that, as the Bible is so well known 'by name'. It is seen in bookshops, and found in hotel rooms all over the world. But how many are aware that it is a large collection of different books, starting with the book of Genesis

and ending with the book of Revelation? Indeed, the Greek word *biblia*, from which we have our word 'Bible', means 'books'. The earlier and larger part of the Bible (the Old Testament, in the sense that it was written first and is thus 'older') was written across the millennium before Jesus came into the world (from about 1000 BC). The more recent section

(the New Testament, written later and thus 'newer') was written in the decades following the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (from about AD 50–100).

A collection of different books written in different times, places and languages more than two thousand years ago takes some understanding. I have spent forty years of my life working at it, and I still have a lot to learn!

For some, the Gospels, the Letters of St Paul and the other



Susan Daily

documents in the New Testament are texts they have come to know through the practice of reading them with the family or in private. For those who go to a Christian Church regularly, they are familiar stories and exhortations that are read in Church. For many, however, they are documents written a long time ago that may be quaintly interesting, but have

little or nothing to say to us or to the world we live in. Most people, we must admit, know nothing about them!

Yet wherever we go, we will find allusions to these texts. Many images that surround us come from the pages of the New Testament, especially the cross – ever popular in fashion items and as a body marking. Much of our classical, modern and contemporary art uses images that come from the New Testament, especially the image

of mother and child, but also images of biblical episodes and the lives of the saints and martyrs. Some of our expressions, used without reflection, have their origins there. It was Pilate who first washed his hands of the innocent blood of Jesus (see Matt 27:24). Now we simply say, 'I wash my hands of that.'

These allusions, however, are found in mainstream culture and language because for almost 2000 years Christian traditions

determined everyday life in much of the Western world and the new world of Africa and the Americas. What exactly is this book – or better, collection of smaller books – that we call the New Testament? Why has it been so influential for more than 2000 years? Does it still have anything to say to us? In this book I will do my best to unravel answers to these questions.

UNDERSTANDING BIBLE REFERENCES

The bible is referred to by naming the book, the chapter, and then the verse, in that order. For the books with shorter names, it is easy: e.g. Mark, John. The name of the book is generally provided in full. Longer names are abbreviated: e.g. Jeremiah becomes Jer and Matthew becomes Matt. The names and their abbreviations are provided at the beginning of your Bible. The Old Testament books are gathered together in the first part of the Bible and the New Testament in

the second part of the Bible. They are also listed separately in the front of your Bible. Thus, Mark 8:22 means the Gospel of Mark, chapter 8, verse 22. It is found in the section of the Bible that contains the New Testament. The chapters and verses are clearly printed in the Bible. Similarly, Jer 40:12 means Jeremiah, chapter 40, verse 12. This passage will be found in the first part of your Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament.

DID YOU KNOW

Many sayings in everyday use have their origins in the bible? Here are a few:

Going the extra mile Matthew 5:41

The salt of the earth Matthew 5:13

Casting pearls before swine Matthew 7:6

A wolf in sheep's clothing Matthew 7:15

United we stand, divided we fall Matthew 12:25

The blind leading the blind Matthew 15:14

The eleventh hour Matthew 20:6

Physician heal thyself Luke 4:23

Eat drink and be merry Luke12:19

The prodigal returns Luke 15:11-32

It is more blessed to give than to receive Acts 20:35

The powers that be Rom 13:1

THE WORLD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

JUDAISM

o matter how much good will I might have, reading the New Testament is difficult. It is not like any other book, and it can be hard to understand. Indeed, there are

places which appear impossible. This is the case because the books found in the New Testament were written 2000 years ago. They were written in a time, a place and a language that is foreign to us. We need to have some idea of the worlds that lie behind the writing of the books of the New Testament.

Jesus was a Jew, and so were his first disciples. The name Jesus Christ, so familiar to us as if it were his family name, really means that Jesus of Nazareth was the expected Messiah of Israel (see 2 Sam 7:12-15; Psalm 89:3-4). The Judaism of the first century was complex. It was the product of a long history that looked back to Abraham as the father of the nation, and

Moses as the one who freed Israel from the slavery of Egypt and to whom God gave the law.

David was the remembered hero, and the Messiah would be from the house of David. But the royal line disappeared and the nation had suffered great



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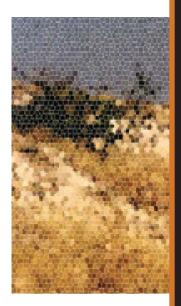
losses and exile. The land was no longer theirs. Acts of heroism a few centuries before the Christian era led to the re-establishment of Israel, but it soon fell into division and faithlessness. In the time of Jesus and the early Church, there was no independent Israel. It was ruled by Rome through

the agency of a puppet royalty, and was eventually destroyed in AD 70. Judaism has always been marked by people of great holiness and loyalty (prophets and kings). However, there were times when the God of Israel and his commandments were remembered only by a

remnant.

In the time of Jesus and the earliest Christians there were many ways of being a Jew, just as today there are many ways in which people accept the Christian faith. In those days Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, Essenes and Christians, to mention just the best known groups, lived side by side and practised a common faith.

Belief in the one true God and the observance of his commandments stood at the centre of this faith. But that observance was understood in different ways, often shaped by the history that gave birth to those various expressions of Judaism. Nevertheless, Judaism had its history, interpreted and told in what



JEWISH HOPE

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Lynne Muir

we know as the Old Testament; it had its law, its traditions and its land. Jesus lived and died at a time when these fundamentals of the Jewish way of life and hope were under threat.

There were different ways of understanding how God would resolve this threat and restore the land, how the law should be observed and how a community that lived by the law and its traditions should act. One way

was known as 'messianism', that is, the hope for a Messiah. But not everyone expected a Messiah. The hopes of a saving figure that God would raise up from among the people fluctuated, depending upon the socio-political situation of Israel at any given time. At the time of Jesus there were hopes for a Messiah who might be a soldier Messiah of the line of David. But there were also hopes for a Messianic Priest. Some hoped for

a combination of both.

Above all, Jewish hope was based on the unshakeable belief that God would intervene at the end of time, destroying all evil and restoring the original glory and beauty of his creation, lost because of human sin and evil. In the end, God will reign over all. We need to keep this in mind when we read, or hear the words 'the Kingdom of God'.

- △ the Sadducees and Pharisees lived Judaism differently?
- Δ there was no such notion as a suffering and dying Messiah until Jesus began to speak in that way?
- △ both Jews and Christians believe that God made all things perfectly, and will restore perfection at the end of time?

THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

he Jewish world described above did not exist in a vacuum. Israel existed as an independent nation for little more than two centuries. The nation was forever under siege,

and conquered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. The people were subjected to the Persians. and Israel was eventually swept into the Hellenistic Empire, which had its origins in Alexander the Great. Alexander was an incredible leader who lived from 356 till 323 BC. He conquered almost the whole of the known world before dying at just 33 years of age! He believed the Greek language and culture of his time (known as Hellenism) were so significant that they should be accepted and used by the whole

Well before the time of Jesus, Greek influence existed in Israel. Already some two centuries before Jesus Christ many Jews no longer understood enough Hebrew to read the sacred books and it was translated into Greek. The Greek Bible is called the Septuagint, based on a legend that it was translated simultaneously by seventy translators. The New Testament itself, most of which was written in the first century, is in Greek.

After Alexander, his generals fought over the Hellenistic Empire, and Israel passed from the Hellenistic rulers in Egypt



Lynne Muir

(known as the Ptolemies) to the Hellenistic rulers in Syria (known as the Seleucids). Greek culture and the Greek language permeated Jewish life. It is most likely Jesus spoke Aramaic and some Greek. After a brief period of independence, due to the victory of Israel over the Hellenistic empire of Syria in the Maccabean wars (early in the second century BC), the growth of the Roman Empire swallowed Israel. The birth and development of Christianity as a world religion owes much to the Roman Empire. Christianity came into existence during the high point

of Roman rule, a period referred to as the Roman peace (the pax Romana). Peaceful conditions dominated the Roman system in so far as local administrations were allowed to continue as long as the Roman dominion was not threatened. This system accompanied the beginnings of a new world religion. The books of the New Testament reflect a believing community moving freely into the world beyond Judaism.

As the Hellenistic powers faded and the Roman Empire took over, new

religions emerged. This was a time when the established religions were losing their attraction.
The classical Greek religions were fading, helped by the fact that the Romans did not come with new religions of their own.

world.



THE BIRTH AND
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They tended to adapt the fading Greek religions and use them as they saw fit. Alexander the Great eventually declared himself to be a son of God, and subsequently the Roman Emperors had themselves proclaimed as gods and demanded emperor worship.

The people hungered for a way to God, for salvation. They

developed miracle stories and miraculous locations. Most important in this 'hunger for God' was the development of the mystery religions and Gnosticism. The New Testament was written in a world where these religions had captured the hearts and minds of many. They were religions into which specially

privileged and enlightened people entered, assured of salvation through contact with, or knowledge of, the gods. Such religious thinking was foreign to Judaism, but very much a part of the world that saw the birth of Christianity and the writing of the New Testament.

- △ although the Roman system of government was often harsh, the peace and order which ensued initially aided the spread of Christianity?
- △ the Gnostics and those who entered the mystery religions sought an answer to the mystery of human longing?

HOW DID THE NEW TESTAMENT COME INTO EXISTENCE?

FIRST THINGS FIRST

ave you ever noticed that we all have an interest in where people and things

come from? When we meet people for the first time, we are interested in discovering the nation they are from, their city, their education, their parents and so on. The question about where the New Testament comes from is a good place for us to start. Let us trace where the twentyseven 'books' that make up the New Testament came from.

The New Testament had its beginnings in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

He was a man like us, who lived across the first thirty years of the Christian era. It is not only Christians who tell us of Jesus' life and teaching. A number of non-Christians from the early centuries mention him in their writings. Some of these writings come from times very close to the time of Jesus and the earliest Church.

From the start, even before Jesus died, those who heard

him remembered what he had said. His parables were especially memorable. They also remembered what he did, and recalled the incredible authority he had over sickness and evil. They remembered

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Jesus had told them that he was bringing in a new era, a time when God would reign in their hearts, minds and lives as their king. They remembered that in both his teaching and in his very personality, there were clear signs that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Not everyone believed in him. Indeed, the Romans and the Jews joined together to crucify him. Crucifixion was a Roman

form of execution. But, the first Christians claimed he had been raised from the dead.

For decades, these 'memories' remained unwritten. The early Christians encouraged one another in difficulty; they

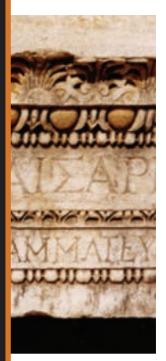
gathered for prayer and remembered things that Jesus had said and done. But there was no need for any 'story' of Jesus. They knew it. They had either been with Jesus (a minority of people, the Twelve, and probably some other followers, including significant women, among them his mother), or had at least known him (the majority of people whose villages and homes he visited). One thing they all knew about was that he had

been crucified!

The crucifixion of Jesus is an event reported in the writings of non-Christians. It was a regular Roman way of eliminating in an excruciatingly cruel way anyone who threatened their authority, or the very worst of criminals. Only about twenty years after the death of Jesus, St Paul described the difficulties of the early Christians. He was especially



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Lynne Muir

concerned with his own task as someone who preached Jesus as the Christ. He writes to the Christians in Corinth: 'We preach a Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and a folly to the Gentiles' (1 Cor 1:23).

No Jew could accept that the expected Christ could have been crucified, and Greeks would regard any such message as quite silly. Many who had originally followed Jesus would have decided that he could not be the Christ, but others remained firm in their faith. How did they overcome the scandal of the cross? This was the very first problem that the earliest Christians had to handle, but they did not have to do it on their own. They had experiences, and accepted a message that the cross was not the end of the story for

Jesus. Jesus had always trusted in his Father, and his Father entered the story after the crucifixion by raising Jesus from the dead. Jesus had died on a Roman cross, but the cross was now empty. First things first: the experience of his death and the accepted message of his resurrection were at the heart of the earliest Christian message.

- A crucifixion was a Roman form of execution used to maintain social order?
- △ Jesus' cruel death on a cross was the most difficult scandal the Christians had to face?
- A without Jesus' death and resurrection, Christianity is an empty religion?

TEACHING BEFORE STORIES - SAINT PAUL

o the best of our knowledge, the first person to begin a tradition of writing about Jesus was Paul of Tarsus. He was also known as Saul, a well-trained and committed believing Jew to the extent that he collaborated in the persecution of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem and the surrounding regions. The Acts of the Apostles tell of a remarkable conversion experience he had while on a journey to Damascus. Paul himself does not mention the journey, but he regularly comes back to a transforming experience. He insists that he has been overcome and transformed by the power of the resurrection' (Phil 3:10).

Like any believing Jew, the idea that Jesus of Nazareth could have been the Christ would have been discounted by Saul of Tarsus.

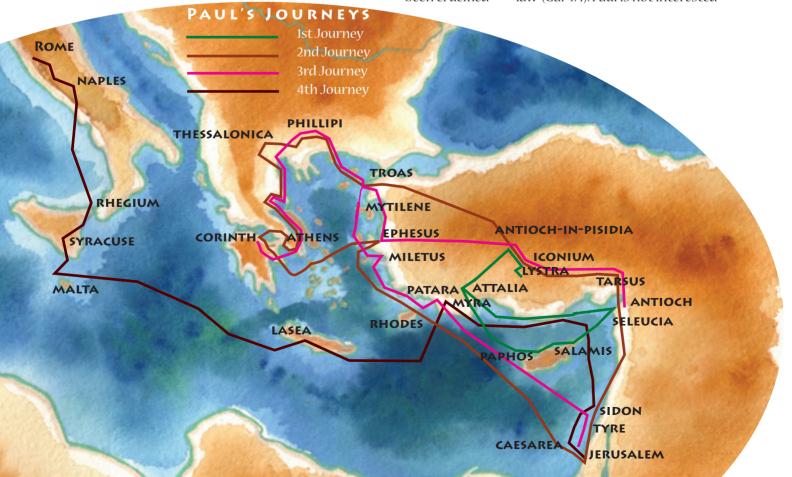
After all, he had been hung upon a tree, and this had already been described in the Old Testament as a curse (Deut 27:26; see Gal 3:13). The message was also abroad that Jesus had been raised from the dead. What these Christians were claiming for a man who had been crucified as a criminal was a stumbling block for any Jew. Saul wanted to ensure that such teaching would not take root and corrupt any of his fellow Jews.

Not everyone had been as well instructed as he had, and they might be tempted to believe that the scandal of the cross had been overcome by God by means of a resurrection. This had never been heard of, and he did not want anyone to be caught up in such fairy tales. A thousand years of Israelite religious history and his expert formation as a Pharisee were under threat with this new teaching. We can easily understand why Paul originally joined the opposition to this new-fangled religion based on a message that the man who had been crucified

by the Romans had been raised, and was in some way 'alive' among those who believed in him and tried to follow his teaching. Paul's passion for the God of Israel could not tolerate this betrayal.

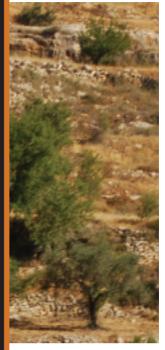
Something happened to Saul of Tarsus that transformed him into the greatest of the early Apostles: the first person to write about Jesus of Nazareth, and what it meant to believe in him and follow him. Paul did not have a 'conversion' as we understand that word. His passion for the God of Israel always drove him. He now found that God had made himself known in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. He never lost his love for his people and their God. He wonders why they cannot see that their God has been made known in and through Jesus Christ (see Romans 9-11).

Paul does not tell us 'the story' about the birth, life and teaching of Jesus. From the Letters of Paul, we know that 'when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law' (Gal 4:4). Paul is not interested





SOMETHING
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THE EARLY APOSTLES.



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in the mother of Jesus. But he wants to insist that Jesus was fully human, born of a woman like all of us, and born under the Law of Moses. In Jewish thought and practice, 'Jewishness' is carried by one's mother. Paul insists, therefore, that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother. But this person, who was born into the world like all of us and shared our humanity with us, was also God's Son.

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul reminds them that they must not be selfish and interested in their own lives while neglecting those less blessed. He reminds them of something he had heard and had passed on to them. The night before Jesus died he celebrated a meal with his disciples that transformed Jewish Passover practices. Jesus told his disciples that he was giving his body and his blood to form a new covenant. They were to give their own bodies and shed their own blood in memory of him. Every time they were to do this, they would be proclaiming Jesus until such time as he came back again (see 1 Cor 11:17–34).

Finally, Paul dwells throughout his letters on the

obedience of Jesus, supremely manifested in Jesus' death, and God's response, manifested in Jesus' resurrection. But Paul tells of those events in another passage in 1 Corinthians where he reminds his readers of another story that he had heard and then passed on to them. Jesus had been crucified and buried, yet raised from the dead and seen by a number of witnesses, even by Paul (see 1 Cor 15:1-8). Jesus crucified and Jesus risen - this is the message that lies at the heart of Paul's teaching.

- A Paul would have always regarded himself as a Jew?
- A Paul's belief in the God of Israel never weakened?
- △ Jesus' death and resurrection shows the 'power' of God's love?