THE NEW TESTAMENT

The word TESTAMENT is a technical term with a long history. Strictly speaking, the English word, like the Latin word from which it is derived, means a legal arrangement, a 'will'; and the same was true of the Greek word, *diathēkē*, of which 'testament' is a translation. But it is obvious that what has been known since the early centuries of the church as the New Testament is not a legal document and has little in common with a will. That it bears this name is the result of a particular turn in the fortunes of the Greek word.

When, in the third century BCE, a group of Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek for the use of Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria and elsewhere, they found themselves confronted by a number of words in the original which had no equivalent in the Greek language. One of these was the Hebrew word *berith*, of which the usual English translation is 'covenant'. This word was an important one in the history and religion of the Jewish people: it expressed one of their fundamental convictions about the relationship between God and human beings. God, they believed, had shown in the distant past his readiness to protect and care for his own people. He had miraculously rescued them from slavery in Egypt and settled them in a land of their own. He had undertaken to continue this relationship of commitment towards them, and demanded that they, for their part, should observe in their lives and their worship those principles that he had revealed to them on Sinai and which were known to them as 'the law'. All this was described in the Jewish scriptures as the 'covenant' into which God had entered with his people. Indeed, the Jews' conception of this covenant embraced their deepest convictions about the faithfulness, the justice and the mercy of God. It was not like a legal contract: the fact that Israel failed to fulfil its obligations did not mean that God was released from his undertaking. Rather, it was an expression of the absolute commitment of God to his people despite all the faithlessness they showed in return. In rendering this important word by the Greek word *diathēkē*, the translators virtually gave a new meaning to a familiar legal term. Thereafter, any Greek-speaking person who was familiar with the scriptures knew that *diathēkē*, though it normally meant 'will' or 'testament', was also a technical term for that 'covenant' which the Jews believed God had made with his own people.

The documentary evidence, so to speak, for this covenant consisted in a collection of sacred books which had been formed gradually over the centuries and which, by the time of Christ, had already been complete for about two hundred years. The collection was not homogeneous. It consisted of books written at different times for different purposes, and it was some time before an agreed text was established for all of them. The Jews distinguished

three broad divisions: first, the law (the five books attributed to Moses); then the prophets (which included most of the historical books); and finally the remaining books, which they called simply 'the writings'. The first of these divisions, since it included the code of religious and civil laws under which they lived, they regarded as the most important. Consequently, when they wished to refer to the whole collection, they sometimes called it simply 'the law'. Otherwise they called it 'the writing' or 'the writings', that is, 'scripture' or 'the scriptures'. These scriptures were regarded with the greatest reverence. Elaborate precautions were taken to prevent the smallest alteration to the text, and the leather scrolls on which they were written were reverently preserved in the temple and the synagogues. It was not just that they were more important, or more authoritative, than other books. They were in a class by themselves. They were believed to have been inspired by God, and they formed the basis of all worship, all education and all justice in every Jewish community.

The first Christians, being Jews, inherited the same reverence towards the scriptures. When they referred to them, it was sufficient to call them simply 'scripture' or 'the scriptures'. No other writings had any importance for them, even if they occasionally made use of some that were believed to be inspired but that were not generally accepted into the canon of the Hebrew Bible. It would not have occurred to them to think that these scriptures had in any way lost their unique authority merely because a new way of understanding them had been made possible by Christ. On the contrary, they continued to take it for granted that these scriptures contained the authentic record of God's dealings with his people, and (following the example of Jesus himself) they soon began to find in them numerous prophecies and oracles which seemed to have come alive for the first time in the light of their faith in Christ. In Christ, God had done something absolutely new for humankind, yet it was something that fulfilled and complemented, rather than superseded, the historic faith of Israel. Only in matters of worship and detailed observances did they come to believe that certain parts of the law no longer applied to them. The matter was neatly expressed by Paul in one of his letters. God's previous covenant with his people should be called no longer 'the covenant', but 'the old covenant'. For now God (as was promised even in the Hebrew scriptures) had made a new covenant through Christ (2 Corinthians 3). The documents of the old covenant were the scriptures – indeed on one occasion Paul actually called them 'the old covenant' (2 Corinthians 3.14), in order to help Christians, who now had a 'new covenant', to place them in the right perspective. And the terminology seems to have stuck. By the end of the second century CE the church seems to have got used to calling the original Jewish scriptures 'the old covenant' (the Old Testament), in contrast to which the formative writings of the Christian faith inevitably began to be known as 'the new covenant' (the New Testament).

For Paul, of course, no authoritative Christian writings existed. Indeed, he made much of the contrast between the old covenant, which was expressed in written documents, and the new covenant, which was "not of letter but of spirit" (2 Corinthians 3.6). The first generation of Christians drew their faith, not from a book, but from a living experience. Nevertheless circumstances made them into writers. Paul himself kept in touch with the widely scattered churches he had founded by writing them letters in which he strengthened their faith and discussed important points of doctrine and conduct. These letters are the earliest Christian writings we possess, and they were followed by others from other Christian leaders, who may or may not always have been in Paul's position of needing to communicate with a distant church, but who adopted the form of an apostolic letter in order to consolidate the faith of their fellow Christians. Meanwhile it seems that the need began to be felt to preserve in written form the sayings of Jesus and the events of his life. To meet this need several Christians, probably in different parts of the church, composed the books which have been known, since they were written, as 'gospels'. These relate the story of Christianity from its very beginning in the life and work of Jesus and are the source of virtually all our knowledge about him; but they appear to have been composed later than Paul's letters, during the second half of the first century CE. One of them was followed by a second volume (the Acts of the Apostles), which carried the story on into the history of the early church.

Thus the first Christian writings were the result of particular circumstances and particular needs encountered during the early decades of the church's existence. At first, Christians did not need a new set of scriptures; their faith was sustained by the spirit active among them, and their teaching was based partly on the Old Testament as interpreted in the light of their new experience, and partly on facts and traditions which were remembered by their elders and which could be traced back to Jesus or his immediate followers. But, as living contact with this first age of Christianity began to die out, it became necessary to assemble whatever writings still survived from that period in order to provide a solid and authentic basis for Christian teaching and also to have a standard of Christian truth to appeal to against the attacks and innovations of heretical thinkers. The task was complicated by the fact that there were already books in circulation which purported to have been written by one or another of the original apostles but which were in fact the work of later imitators. The church had to decide which of these writings were authentic. In theory it had a simple criterion: only those which had been written by an apostle could be accepted. In practice the matter was not so easy, since some of the generally accepted books were originally anonymous, and some which bore the name of an apostle were suspected of being the work of the next generation. It was not enough that a writing claimed to be 'apostolic'; it must be known to have been written in the first seventy

years or so of the church's existence and to have held a firm place in the esteem of the majority of Christians. In essentials, the selection was settled by the end of the second century, though the inclusion or exclusion of a few books continued to be debated for much longer. On the evidence available, it can be said that the church did its work well. Almost all the writings now included in the New Testament belong unmistakably to the first generations of Christians – roughly the first century CE – and have a note of authenticity which is lacking from other surviving documents which the church might have been tempted to include.

As soon as the selection was established, it inevitably changed its character. By the end of the second century the New Testament came to be regarded, like the Old, as 'scripture'. Its various writings, regardless of the original differences between them, were all treated as inspired documents of the Christian faith. Christianity became, like Judaism, a religion of a book. The methods which had long been used to discern the Word of God in any verse of the Old Testament began to be used on the New. The New Testament, along with the Old, began to be called 'the Bible', which means simply 'the Books'. This Bible, like the Old Testament before it (which it still included), became in turn a book different from all other books, to be interpreted in a special way and possessing in every part a unique degree of authority and truth.

It was only in comparatively recent times that it began to be realized that this approach does violence to the original diversity and vitality of the individual writings which make up the Old and New Testaments. However strongly it is believed that they owe their place in scripture to the fact that their writers wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to regard them all as equally authoritative in every detail is to do an injustice to their original diversity. This *Companion* is written in the conviction that the New Testament gains in cogency and intelligibility when it is taken for what it originally was, that is, a collection of writings each of which was produced under particular circumstances. Sometimes these circumstances are lost beyond recall; but often it is possible to reconstruct them with reasonable certainty and so to recapture something of the urgency and authority which these writings possessed for their first Christian readers.

All the books of the New Testament have come down to us in Greek. It is possible that some of them, or some small parts of them, originally existed in Aramaic, which was Jesus' first, if not only, language, and were translated within a few years into Greek; but as we have it the New Testament is written in the language which was understood (if only as a second language) by the majority of people in the eastern half of the Roman empire in the first centuries of our era. Our best evidence for this language is the mass of letters and documents – many of them written in colloquial Greek – which began to be discovered in the nineteenth century, written on papyrus and preserved in

the sands of Egypt. Many passages in the New Testament that were formerly thought to have been written in a form of Greek without parallel elsewhere have been found to conform with the style and idioms of those who were using Greek to conduct their daily business. But the New Testament writers were also capable of writing in a more literary style, as well as owing a debt to the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. To understand their work, we need to know something of the culture of what is loosely called the Hellenistic world, that is, the civilization which, since the imperial ventures of Alexander the Great, had come progressively under the influence of Greek ideas and Greek institutions, even though the political centre had passed to Rome. But Christianity was born in the one part of the Roman empire where there had been determined resistance to the influence of Greek civilization. Though the great majority of Jews in the world lived outside Palestine and spoke Greek, their culture remained essentially Jewish. In Palestine itself they spoke mainly Aramaic, a language which had spread over much of the Middle East since the days of the Persian empire, and their lives were still regulated by observances laid down in their scriptures. Even in the Dispersion they kept themselves at a certain distance from the ideals and institutions of Greek culture, and were the one race allowed to dissociate themselves completely from the official religion of Rome. The society of which we read in the New Testament is therefore not that of the Greco-Roman world in general but of that particular part of it which jealously retained its national religion and culture and way of life.

It happens that not many documents have survived which are evidence for this particular region of the Roman empire. Very few non-Jewish writers had any interest in it; and the Jews in Palestine were far from being prolific writers. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls after the Second World War did something to dispel the darkness. They reveal in considerable detail the life and beliefs of a particular religious movement that was flourishing in Palestine in the time of Jesus. Our only other contemporary record is that of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish aristocrat who was involved in the Jewish War of 66–70 and who subsequently wrote both a history of that war and a complete history of the Jewish people in the hope of gaining sympathy at Rome for the Jewish cause. Another Greek-speaking Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, was meanwhile devoting his life to interpreting the Jewish scriptures in terms that would make sense to people educated in Greek philosophy. By temperament and circumstances Philo was remote from the concerns of the Jews in Palestine. Yet his writings were intended for readers of similar background to those addressed by early Christian writers, and they can occasionally be usefully compared with passages in the New Testament.

Apart from this there is very little indeed. A few Jewish writings of a visionary and symbolic character (known in modern times as 'apocalyptic') were preserved in translation by the Christian church (which also had its own 'apocalypse' among the writings of the New Testament). Otherwise

the characteristic Jewish distrust of any authoritative writings apart from the scriptures continued right into the second century, and it was only in about the middle of that century that the Jewish rabbis began to write down and codify the traditions which had been handed down to them. These rabbinic writings became voluminous in the centuries that followed, and often contain genuine recollections of customs, events and doctrines of first-century Palestinian Judaism. But their evidence is always fragmentary and often misleading. The picture they present of life in Jerusalem before its destruction in 70 CE is frequently idealized beyond recognition.

In this respect the New Testament stands very much by itself. Much of it is first-hand evidence for conditions and events of which we would otherwise know nothing. Where we can check it against independent sources of information it is usually reasonably faithful to the facts. Where we cannot, we have to judge its historical reliability on its merits. On the whole, the historical evidence it provides is consistent and plausible, and for reconstructing the circumstances in which any part of it was written the most important information is usually to be found within the New Testament itself. Yet it is still necessary (and this is one of the purposes of this *Companion*) to supplement this information so far as possible from the little we know about the history, religion and culture of the Jewish people in Palestine and in the Dispersion during the first century CE.

Not that the Christians were ever merely Jews, or Christianity simply a form of Judaism. The Christian religion and the Christian church represented something new and unique in the ancient world. Yet Jesus was a Jew, and so were all his first followers and all the founders of the first churches. Christianity stood closer to Judaism than to any other religion or philosophy of life, and its history and beliefs were written in predominantly Jewish terms for the first century of its existence. The clearest instance of this is the constant use of the Old Testament which is made by nearly every New Testament writer. Sometimes whole passages are quoted, sometimes just a word or a sentence; sometimes there are subtle allusions and sometimes a writer seems deliberately to imitate the style of the Old Testament without actually quoting it. There is nothing surprising in this. The only form of literature with which most of these writers were familiar was either scripture itself or else some kind of commentary on it; and it was natural that they should see their own work in the same light, however new the message was that they had to convey. To us their use of scripture, and the interpretation they placed on particular passages, often seems recondite and artificial. It presupposes a long tradition of Jewish scholarly interpretation which was based on principles very different from those which would be acceptable today. But this does not alter the fact that the Old Testament was the most important single element in the background shared by all the New Testament writers.

Like most editions of the New Testament, the NRSV does not make it possible for the reader to recognize every quotation of or allusion to a passage of

the Hebrew scriptures. But even if it did, it would not always be easy to turn up the relevant passage of the Old Testament and identify it with the reference in the New. Most modern English translations of the Old Testament are based on a Hebrew text which did not become fully standardized until the early centuries of our era. In the time of Christ it is unlikely that every synagogue and religious group in Palestine used an identical text of the scriptures. Moreover, although in Palestine they were read in Hebrew, the reading was usually followed by a translation into Aramaic; and throughout the Dispersion the Jews read and listened to the scriptures in a Greek translation. The most famous of these Greek translations, the Septuagint (so called because of the tradition that it was compiled by a team of seventy translators), was made in Egypt in the third century BCE and had a wide circulation. It still exists, and by comparing it with the quotations that occur in the New Testament we can tell that this was the translation most frequently used by most Christian writers. But they did not always use exactly the version which we now possess. Sometimes their Greek translation seems to have been slightly different from that of the Septuagint, sometimes they seem to have quoted a version based on an Aramaic translation, and occasionally they may have made their own translation from the Hebrew. If all these translations had been strictly accurate by modern standards this would not greatly matter. But in fact they show striking variations from each other – sometimes the translators seem to have misunderstood the original, sometimes they rephrased it to make it (as they thought) more comprehensible to their readers. In addition to this, the Septuagint contained more books than were subsequently admitted into the Hebrew text that has survived. These books, having been 'hidden away' by the Jewish scholars of Palestine on the grounds that they were not sufficiently important or authoritative to be included in scripture, have, since the Reformation, been printed separately in Protestant Bibles under the title 'Apocrypha' (literally, 'hidden books'). In the NRSV they are placed under the heading APOCRYPHAL/DEUTERO-CANONICAL BOOKS.

For all these reasons, the use of the Old Testament in the New is not always easy to recognize and its function in the argument is often difficult to follow. In this matter as in others, this *Companion* attempts to elucidate the writers' usage and so to bring out the tremendous importance which the Old Testament had for them as a prime source of inspiration and truth. Even the title, THE NEW TESTAMENT, can hardly be understood apart from that other term, 'the Old Testament', from which it was ultimately derived.

THE GOSPELS

To the modern reader, the word GOSPEL denotes the kind of book that has come down to us under the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But in the early church it was some time before the word took on this meaning. It is clear from the letters of Paul that 'the gospel' existed before any of the 'gospels' came to be written. *Euangelion*, 'gospel', was the name given by the first generation of Christians to the message they had to impart. Literally, it meant 'good news'.

If we are to judge by the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles, when this message was first preached it consisted of a fairly brief summary of those facts about Jesus of Nazareth which had caused his followers to believe that he was the promised Messiah, or Christ. For the purpose of convincing their Jewish hearers, it was doubtless on these facts that the first preachers needed to concentrate, along with the consequences of those facts for faith and conduct. But Jesus, though he wrote nothing himself, had also been a teacher, a prophet, a healer and exorcist, a miracle-worker and a controversial expositor of law and scripture. Many of his acts and sayings must have been reverently preserved in the memories of his followers and were available to give flesh to the bare bones of the original proclamation. Moreover, new questions soon began to be asked. For example, the Christians found themselves in controversy with the Jews over such matters as sabbath observance and food laws: what had been Jesus' attitude? They were liable to be under threat from the Roman authorities if their religion seemed in any way to invite sedition: had Jesus said and done things to provoke the hostility of the occupying power in Palestine? Problems were arising about moral conduct and discipline within the Christian communities: had Jesus left any instructions that were relevant? These and many other questions inevitably arose in the course of the early decades of the church's existence and may have provided an additional incentive to recall and preserve the details of the life and teaching of Jesus.

We do not know how soon these details began to be written down in collections of sayings or connected narratives. But between about 65 and 100 CE four books were written in Greek which gathered together much of what was already recorded or was still remembered about the life and work of Jesus. The form of these books was unlike anything that had been written before. To a certain extent they could be called 'biographies' (for ancient biographies omitted much that would be obligatory today); but they also had a clear religious and missionary purpose. What they contained was the original 'gospel' proclaimed by the church, though cast in extended narrative form. They were known by the title of the message they embodied

(THE GOSPEL) and were distinguished from one another by being ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

These four names do not tell us much. They were almost certainly intended to stand for the four men who appear in the New Testament under the names of 'Matthew', 'John Mark', 'Luke the beloved physician' and 'John'. But it is no more than a tradition of the church, going back to the second century CE, that attributes the gospels to these men; the books themselves are anonymous, only two of them make any claims for their authors, and the environment they reflect is not, for the most part, that which one would have expected if they had been written by men who were among the earliest followers of Jesus. Nevertheless, there must have been some reason for preserving these names: two of them (Mark and Luke) are not even the names of apostles. It may well be that at some stage the tradition contained in the gospels passed through the hands of the men whose names they bear, even if not all of them were the actual authors.

More significant is the relationship between the four written gospels, and particularly between the first three. The gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell what is essentially the same story. Sometimes they tell it in almost identical language; at other times they diverge substantially from each other. Usually they agree, sometimes they disagree; and each of the three preserves material that is absent from both the others. Mark is the shortest, and contains very little which does not appear in Matthew or Luke or both. On the other hand, Matthew and Luke have a number of passages in common which do not appear in Mark. In short, the relationship between the three is close, but very complicated. They appear to have originated in different places for use in different Christian congregations: no church would have needed a second or third so similar to the first, and it can have been only when they began to be circulated more widely (and when the methods of book production made longer books possible) that they were bound up in the same volume. On the other hand, they cannot have been written quite independently of each other. The occurrence of almost identical passages in two or even three gospels is explicable only if one writer had access to the work of another.

There is no completely convincing explanation of all these facts. In modern times the most popular hypothesis has been that Mark was composed first and was used by both Matthew and Luke; that Matthew and Luke also used another source, now lost, consisting mainly of sayings of Jesus (hence the appearance of passages common to both of them but absent from Mark); and that each of them had access to traditions not available to either of the others, which they worked as best they could into the narrative framework provided by Mark. To account for all the facts this explanation needs considerable refinement and cannot be said to have been proved correct: some scholars continue to use a different model. But as a working hypothesis it has probably aided the study of

the first three gospels more than any of the other possible combinations, and it is adopted in this *Companion*, not because it can be proved to be true, but because it is impossible to make sense of the evidence without some explanation of this kind. Moreover, it would have been a waste of space and of the reader's time to provide as full a commentary on the same passage each time it appears in different gospels. It was therefore a matter of practical convenience, as well as a deliberate exploitation of the most widely held hypothesis, to make the commentary on Mark more detailed than either of the other two. Any passage which occurs in Mark and in one or more of the other gospels is fully discussed only in its context in Mark. The commentary on the parallel passage in another gospel is confined to pointing out significant differences. Further, where a passage occurs in both Matthew and Luke (but not Mark), the discussion will normally be found under Matthew – though this again is merely for the reader's convenience: it is not intended to suggest that Luke had read Matthew (although theoretically this is also possible).

More important consequences follow from adopting this hypothesis, however, than the arrangement of this *Companion*. If Matthew and Luke used Mark, then Mark must have been written first. It seems unlikely, for various reasons, that any of the gospels was written earlier than the death of Paul or later than the end of the first century of our era. To allow time for Mark to have been circulated and then rewritten by Matthew and Luke, it seems sensible to place Mark near the beginning of that period – say between 65 and 70 – and the other two a decade or two later. John's gospel is usually thought to reflect external conditions and a stage in the development of Christianity which are somewhat later than those reflected in the other three, and is therefore dated between 90 and 100. But all these assumptions are open to challenge, and there is virtually nothing against which to check the proposed dates. Even the catastrophic event of the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE is not certainly alluded to in any New Testament writing.

There is another consequence of accepting this hypothesis which bears more directly on the interpretation of each gospel. When a passage occurs in Mark and in one or both of the other 'synoptic' gospels, there are often notable changes, sometimes slight, sometimes quite substantial, which have been made in Matthew and Luke. If one studies these changes one can often see a pattern beginning to emerge: it is as if each gospel writer had a particular approach of his own to the material he was recording, an approach which he expressed by subtle editorial changes or rearrangements. Whereas the selection of sayings and episodes he was working on may have been the result of the particular concerns of the churches which originally preserved them, he appears to have had a literary and theological strategy for enabling the reader to see the significance of the story he was telling. The case is still clearer when we come to John, whose gospel tells a story notably different from the others and in a new and distinctive style. It has usually been assumed that