

### 3. Literary Background and Interpretation of the New Testament

Left: A fragment of the P<sup>52</sup> papyrus containing John 18:31-33

## Topics

- New Testament gospels
  - Review of what they are
  - Preview of when they were written and what their sources were
- Brief history of the Bible
- Discussion of methods of studying, interpreting, understanding, and correctly applying biblical texts

## What does the term “gospel” mean?

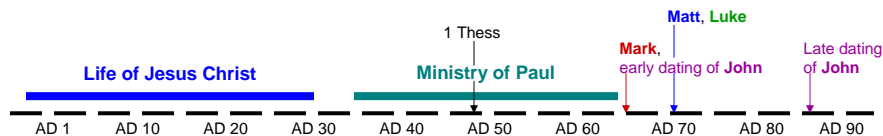
- *Gōdspel*, “good news” or perhaps “God-story”
  - Used to translate the Greek *euangellion*
- New Testament uses
  - During Jesus’ ministry
    - the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand (see Mark 1:14–15)
    - His healing and saving mission (see Matthew 11:2–6, Luke 7:18–23, both echoes of Isaiah 61:1)
  - Early Apostolic Period: *kérygma* or oral tradition of “preaching” about Jesus and salvation
    - Preserved stories of his miracles and deeds as well as sayings and teachings
    - Focused on Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:1–3)
  - Late Apostolic and Canonical: a literary genre
- Broad Restoration use: the sum total of the principles and ordinances that bring the effects of the Atonement into our lives
  - Fourth Article of Faith: “the first principles and ordinances of the gospel...”

## Review: What are the New Testament gospels?

- Part Hellenistic biography, part historiography, part anecdotes and teachings, part theological reflection
- About “the life and teachings” of Jesus?
  - With the exception of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, the gospels only account for 1–3 years of the life of Jesus of Nazareth
  - Even the accounts of the “ministry” are selective
- Mark 14–16 (3/16, almost 20%) and John 13–20 (9/21, about 38%) focus on the Passion and Resurrection narratives
  - Ehrman: “the gospels are Passion Narratives with long introductions”
  - President Hinckley: “This is the wondrous and true story of Christmas. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea is preface. The three-year ministry of the Master is prologue. The magnificent substance of the story is His sacrifice, the totally selfless act of dying in pain on the cross of Calvary to atone for the sins of all of us. The epilogue is the miracle of the Resurrection, bringing the assurance that ‘as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive’ (1 Cor. 15:22). There would be no Christmas if there had not been Easter. The babe Jesus of Bethlehem would be but another baby without the redeeming Christ of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the triumphant fact of the Resurrection.” (“The Wondrous and True Story of Christmas,” *Ensign*, Dec. 2000, 2)

## When were the gospels “written?”

- Only Matthew 2:1 and Luke 1:5, 2:2, and 3:1 give any chronological clues for dating the life and ministry of Jesus
  - This information is sometimes conflicting and not as clear as it seems!
- None of the gospels provide direct, internal evidence as to when they were written or even who wrote them**
  - Contrast with 1 Nephi 1–4, “I, Nephi . . . in the commencements of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah”
- Dating the earliest surviving manuscript copies, some of them originating in the early second century A.D., does not help with the dates of the autographs
- Biblical scholars use “higher criticism” and external evidence from postapostolic Christian sources to make working proposals
  - Mark, perhaps mid 60’s
  - Matthew late 60’s to 70’s
  - Luke 70’s or 80’s
  - John 90’s but perhaps the 60’s and maybe earlier!
- In every case, however, **the gospels were written 30–60 years or more after the events they recorded**
  - Consequently, the writings of Paul are earlier than the gospels



## What were the gospels’ sources?

Early Disciples  
and Witnesses

Jesus Christ

Family Members



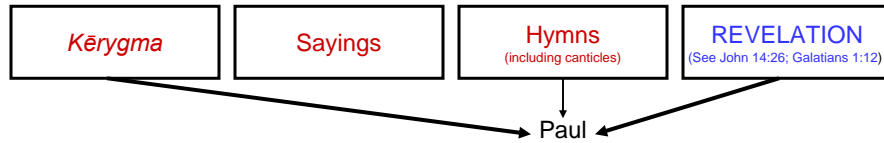
- Material antedating the written documents of the New Testament**
  - The “proclamation” or *kērygma* of **who Jesus was and what he did** (esp. his salvific suffering, death, and resurrection)
    - speeches of Peter and Paul in Acts; much of the teaching of Paul in his letters; Mark
  - The sayings and teachings of Jesus**
    - Discourses and sayings in Matthew and Luke; teachings in James
  - Hymns and prayers of the early church**
    - “Christ hymns,” such as those preserved by Paul in Philippians 2:6–11 and Colossians 1:15–20; canticles in Luke 1-2; John’s *Logos* Hymn (John 1:1–18)
- Spiritual sources**
  - The Comforter “bringing all things to remembrance” (John 14:26)
  - Direct revelation of Christ or his message, as in the case of Paul (Road to Damascus; 1 Corinthians 11:23; Galatians 1:12)

# Gospel Sources: Position of Paul

Early Disciples  
and Witnesses

Jesus Christ

Family Members



- The earliest writings in the New Testament are those of Paul
  - 1 and Thessalonians, perhaps A.D. 51 or 52
  - Galatians, mid A.D. 50's (but perhaps before Jerusalem Council of A.D. 49)
- Hence, the earliest written account of the Last Supper is 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, about A.D. 53–55!
- Likewise, Paul's use—and explanation of the term *euangellion*—is among the earliest in the New Testament

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# How We Got the Bible

See *JCWNT*, 4–13

- A collection of sacred writings (*biblia* in Greek, originally plural for “books”)
  - **Hebrew Bible**: Law, Prophets, Writings (39 books)
    - process of setting the canon began with Ezra, c. 458 B.C.
  - **Greek Testament**: gospels, history (Luke-Acts), epistles, and apocalypse (27 books)
    - writings of evangelists and apostles accepted by 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.
    - most of the letters (epistles) written first, *then* the gospels and Acts
    - Individual books circulated separately, then in collections such as the gospels, the writings of Paul, etc.
    - 27-book NT canon suggested by the festal letter of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in A.D. 367 and formalized by Council of Carthage in A.D. 397
- No original Hebrew or Greek “autographs”
  - We have copies of copies of copies . . .
  - Issues of transmission as well as translation
- **Still, the Bible is a miracle!**
  - the most secure manuscript tradition of any ancient, Old World text

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## Reading Strategies: Approaches to Scriptural Texts

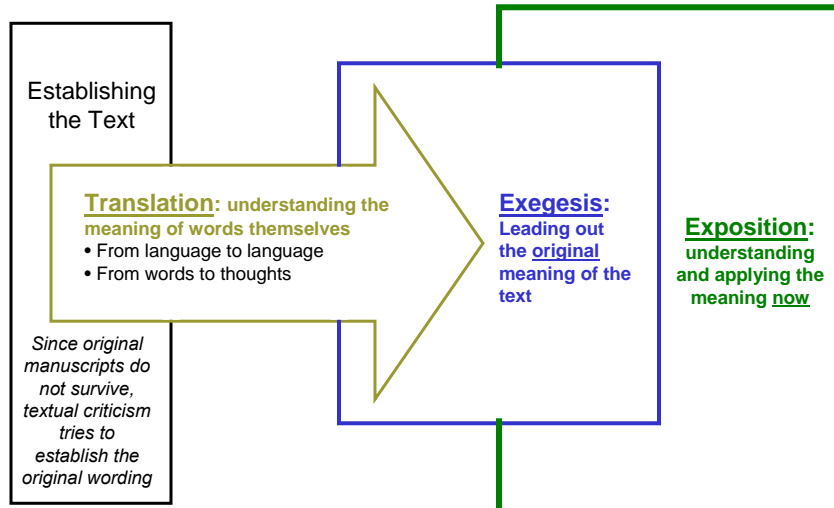
- Establish the **context**
  - Who wrote this, who was the original audience, why was it written, how did the time period and culture affect how it was written?
- Careful **reading**
  - Ask questions—**what** is it saying and **why** was it written this way?
    - Read “Genre Questions: What Kind of Writing is This Passage” in the packet or online
- Prayerful **pondering** of the text
  - **What did it mean** then? > *Them, There, Then*
  - **what does it mean** to us now? > *Us, Here, Now*
  - **Note the order! Knowing what it meant originally helps us interpret and apply it today**
- Consider scholarly contributions
  - From commentaries or reference works (or such material as summarized in class by the instructor)
- **Reread** and **prayerfully ponder** again!

## “Interpreting” the New Testament

- **Hermeneutics**: how to interpret and understand texts
  - From a Greek word meaning “translate” or “interpret”
- **Exegesis**: to understand better the *original* meaning . . .
  - From the Greek “to lead out” or explain
    - **Definition**: “*the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a text*” (Gorman, 8)
    - A close reading and careful examination of a passage, section, or book to understand its meaning in its original context
      - as opposed to “reading into” the text what we think it means—*eisegesis!*
  - “Them, there, then . . .”
- **Exposition**: application of the meaning to contemporary believers
  - “Us, here, now . . .”
    - **What does it mean to us as readers?**
  - 1 Nephi 19:23, “likening” scripture to ourselves
    - Done more properly *after* exegesis!

# Hermeneutics

## Understanding the Meaning of Scripture Then and Now



## Read in Sections and Outline

- Avoid the tendency to take individual verses or passages out of context!
  - “proof-texting” is the process of using verses to prove one’s own point rather than letting the text make its point
- Divide chapters into sections (**pericopes**, literally “a section cut around” or “cut out”)
  - Our verse and chapter divisions are late and not original to the texts
  - A **pericope** will usually describe one particular episode or addresses one theme or topic; often equivalent to a “paragraph” (¶)
- Delineate each section in your scriptures, perhaps dividing sections with a line
- Give each section a **title** or **identifying label**, perhaps writing the title in the margin
- Use outlines to see how the pericope fits into and relates to the entire book or epistle
  - Creating such outlines is called **structural analysis** and it provides a “road map” for your reading
  - See “Outlining Books of Scripture” (handout online)
  - (feel free to use my outlines: see the structural analyses in the packet or go to [erichuntsman.com/Rel211/outlines.htm](http://erichuntsman.com/Rel211/outlines.htm))

## Ask Exegetical Questions

For more detail, see “Teaching through Exegesis: Helping Students Ask Questions of the Text” online

- **Historical Questions**
  - When and where was this text written? Who was its audience? What cultural and historical factors affect our understanding of it?
- **Literary Questions**
  - What is the text’s major themes and purposes? How do they affect our understanding of its content? What kind of writing is it (what is its genre)? How is the book structured and how does what come before and after a passage affect our understanding of it?
- **Theological Questions**
  - **What principles or doctrines does this passage illustrate or teach?**
  - **Keep the focus on the Savior**—what are the gospels teaching us about the person and work of Jesus (**who he is** and **what he did for us**; in New Testament Studies this is called **Christology**)

## Proceeding to Exposition . . .

- Once we know what it meant “**to them, there, then,**” we are prepared to consider what it means “**to us, here, now**”
- **How do other scriptures (particularly restoration scripture) and modern revelation help us understand the passage’s theological implications?**
- **How do we apply it to ourselves?**

## Biblical Criticism

- To help with these kinds of questions, scholars employ various “criticisms”
- Criticism: from the Greek *krino*, meaning “to judge”
  - Not as pejorative as it sounds!—here it is the use of **scholarly tools for careful analysis** (useful if used faithfully!)
- “Lower” or Textual Criticism
  - Original texts, or autographs, do not survive
  - Textual criticism is the comparing and studying of the many Greek manuscripts to establish what the original wording **may** have been
- Higher Criticism
  - Addresses questions of **how the text was originally written and what it was trying to say**
  - See excerpt from Brown, *INT* 20-29 on web page for a basic introduction
  - Includes various “criticisms” or tools that aid in answering exegetical questions regarding the original meaning of the text

## Biblical Criticism (For Familiarity Only)

- **Historical criticism**
  - Establishes authorship, date, and original audience
  - Seeks to find the literal sense (what the author meant to say)
  - takes into account customs and historical context
- **Literary criticism**
  - Analysis of vocabulary, grammar, and style
  - Considers the structure of a work as a whole, how the author employs and structures his material to make his points
- **Source criticism**
  - Attempts to identify the sources of the authors' material
    - e.g., at least two of the four gospel authors were not eyewitnesses; at times Paul seems to quote earlier Christian hymns
  - A subset of this is **redaction criticism**—how an author edited, shortened, expanded, and used his material
- **Form criticism**
  - Considers the genre or type of writing of a passage
  - We read different types of writing differently—e.g., a newspaper, novel, poem, conference talk

## Gospel Genres (see packet, “What Kind of Writing Is This Passage?”)

- **Narrative** (telling a story)
  - introductions and prologues
    - genealogies
  - transition and summary narratives (at the end of narrative sections)
  - miracle stories
  - call stories
  - conflict or controversy narratives
  - vision and dream reports
- **Discourse** (“quoting” speech)
  - teaching saying
  - parables
  - hymns and prayers (often poetic)
    - canticles
  - formula quotations
  - longer speeches: sermons, monologues, etc.
- **Mixed genres**
  - longer narratives that contain extended dialogues and “pronouncement stories”
    - esp. Infancy Narratives, Passion Narratives, Resurrection Narratives
  - Dramatic episodes

## On the King James Version

Huntsman, “The *Textus Receptus*” and “Greek Manuscripts and Later English Translations?” (packet)

- **The King James Version (KJV) has been and remains the official version of the LDS Church, and it is the one that will regularly be used in class and study**
  - Although this is less of a problem for the gospels than it is for the rest of the New Testament (particularly the writings of Paul), **for some of our readings this semester at times the language of the KJV is difficult**
- **The Joseph Smith Translation (JST) is extremely useful to understand passages doctrinally**
  - Small changes appear in the footnotes of the LDS edition of the Bible
  - Longer passages are given in the appendix
- **More recent translations are sometimes useful for two reasons**
  - First, many difficulties in the KJV are a result of its **archaic English diction and usage**, not its translation per se.
  - Second, newer versions often reflect **textual discoveries since the KJV was produced**

## On the KJV and Other Translations

- Students should consider obtaining a good study Bible with an alternate translation to supplement (not replace) their study of the New Testament
  - Translations included New Revised Version (NRSV), the New King James Version (NKJV) the New International Version (NIV), or the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)
  - Some recommended editions: *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, *NIV Study Bible*, and *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*
    - These have helpful **historical, linguistic, and literary notes**
- **Suggested study strategy**
  - **Always read a chapter or smaller passage ( pericope) in the KJV**
  - Then, if it seems at all difficult or obscure, read the same passage in the New Revised Version (NRSV), the New King James Version (NKJV) the New International Version (NIV), or the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)
  - Finally, **return to the passage in the KJV, checking the footnotes and helps in the LDS edition and annotating your text by explaining unclear words or phrases in the margin**

## For Next Lecture

- **Gospel Beginnings — Infancy Narratives and John's Logos Hymn**
- **Readings**
  - Matthew 1–2, Luke 1–2, John 1:1–14
  - *JCWNT*, 68 (handout to be posted on Blackboard)
  - See also: Hall and Welch, charts 8.4, 8.6–8.7 (packet)
- **Topics**
  - Points of Departure—Why the Differences?
  - Christmas and Easter
  - Formula Quotations in Matthew
  - Matthew's Genealogy
  - Matthean Themes and Images
  - Canticles in Luke
  - Lucan Themes and Images
  - Preview of John's *Logos* Hymn