CREATING the CANON

Composition, Controversy, and the Authority of the New Testament

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THE COMPOSITION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

How would the New Testament authors have gone about the task of composing their writings?

The New Testament is a gift from the East. We are accustomed to read it under our Northern sky, and though it is by origin an Eastern book, it is so essentially a book of humanity that we comprehend its spirit even in the countries of the West and North. But details here and there, and the historical setting, would be better understood by a son of the East, especially a contemporary of the evangelists and apostles, than by us.

Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*

When we think about the composition of the New Testament writings, we often envision an aged man with a large white beard hovering over a wooden table carefully dipping his quill in a bottle of ink as he pensively writes by candlelight. Such is the image portrayed by several prominent artists such as Rembrandt and Jan Lievens in their portraits of the apostle Paul, one of the more well-known writers of Scripture. Behind these depictions is the underlying assumption that writing in the ancient world typically took place in quiet and isolated places, and that it was fairly similar to writing in the modern age, apart, of course, from the more primitive materials that

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were used. If Paul were writing today, we might expect him to flip a light switch before settling in at his desk to work from his computer, but the solitary nature of the work would remain unchanged. It is certainly understandable why this assumption of writing in the ancient world remains common. The study of ancient book culture and literary conventions are heavily specialized academic fields that are largely unfamiliar to contemporary readers of the Bible. Other than a small handful of postgraduate students and academics who have the patience and inclination to study technical works that address obscure literary practices from antiquity, few contemporary readers are familiar with the basic process by which ancient works were commonly composed, assembled, and distributed.

While our knowledge of ancient literary practices is far from complete, a number of significant discoveries of ancient manuscripts over the last few centuries have yielded fresh insights on a host of issues related to writing in the Greco-Roman world. We now have a much greater understanding of the features and characteristics of various literary genres, the materials that were often used to produce literary works, the manner in which writings were often disseminated and preserved, and the role that written texts played in society. The material discovered at sites such as Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi include several early biblical manuscripts (e.g., the Bodmer Papyri and Chester Beatty Papyri)[1] and other early Christian writings (e.g., early noncanonical works such as the *Gospel of Thomas*), as well as a large trove of personal letters, business documents, and religious texts that were used throughout the Mediterranean world. Naturally, much of the attention has focused on what these writings may reveal about the culture in which they were written, though they also provide significant insight about the role of literary works and documents in ancient society, the physical features and characteristics of ancient writings, and a host of related matters. Despite the significant attention that has been given to

[1]For background regarding the discovery of several biblical papyri, see Brent Nongbri, *God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

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what people were reading and the role of literature in ancient society, surprisingly little attention has been given to the simple question of how writers went about their work. There cannot be a simple answer to this question, of course, as each literary genre is unique, as were the circumstances facing each individual author. A letter to a colleague about a particular matter of business or a personal letter between a husband and a wife was typically a more straightforward process than the production of a philosophical or religious treatise, a historical work, or other types of literature that were intended to circulate among larger audiences.

The study of how writings were composed and produced in the Greco-Roman world is of particular interest to the study of the background of the New Testament. While Christians were certainly not the only members of ancient society who made significant use of literature, their affinity for written texts was one of their defining characteristics. As Larry Hurtado explains, "Reading, writing, copying, and dissemination of texts had a major place—indeed, a prominence—in early Christianity that, except for ancient Jewish circles, was unusual for religious groups of the Roman era."[2] There were certainly a number of written accounts that describe the origin and exploits of various deities or address one aspect or another of ancient worship. For the most part, however, written texts appear to have played a less foundational role in Greco-Roman religion than in Jewish and Christian circles. Most people did not attend a weekly study on writings about Poseidon, for example, or carefully scrutinize a collection of religious texts for instruction pertaining to the proper worship of a Roman emperor. In many contexts, religious activity appears to have been largely cultic in nature with a focus on external acts of worship, with most people simply paying their respects to various deities when, where, and how it was deemed appropriate in their particular environment.

In light of the unique role that written texts have played in Christianity for two millennia, it will be helpful to briefly consider what may

[2]Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 105-6.

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be determined regarding the manner in which the biblical authors composed and distributed their works.[3] Our concern in this volume, after all, is not limited to how and why certain writings were recognized as part of New Testament. These matters are certainly of great importance and will be taken up more directly in subsequent chapters. Ultimately, we are interested in the broader story that began with the composition of individual texts and ultimately culminated with the establishment of a widely recognized collection of canonical works. Before we entertain questions relating to the formation and authority of the canon, it will be beneficial to briefly consider how the biblical authors likely went about the task of composition, and even how they "published" their completed material. Although it is important to carefully assess and evaluate *what* the biblical authors wrote and *why* they wrote it, it is also helpful to consider *how* the biblical authors went about their work. When Luke set out to compose his Gospel, for example, what would have been involved in the process of creating his unique account of Christ's life, teaching, and salvific work? Did he simply patch together existing traditions that had circulated orally or in a number of existing literary sources, perhaps adding his own literary touch and historical insights along the way? What were the sources of the unique material contained in his Gospel? Did he rely on works that are no longer extant for this information? What about the apostle Paul and those responsible for the Epistles contained in the New Testament? Did they simply receive reports about a particular situation

[3]For further background relating to the composition of the New Testament writings, see George W. Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); David E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, LEC 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Context and Exegesis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, LEC 5 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); M. Luther Stirewalt, *Paul, the Letter Writer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Richards, "Reading, Writing, and Manuscripts," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 345-66; David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Pieter J. J. Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*, BPC 5 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

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and then retreat to their private quarters to compose written instructions and admonitions in response to the matters at hand? In short, what can we conclude about the actual composition of the New Testament writings and their initial distribution?

A fundamental characteristic of the composition of the New Testament writings that is often overlooked is its collaborative nature. As the content and features of ancient writings are examined, it becomes increasingly apparent that writing in the Greco-Roman world often involved significant collaboration between an author and a number of individuals, each of whom served a specific role during the compositional process. While the biblical writers were ultimately responsible for the content of their writings, the evidence would suggest that they worked directly with a number of individuals who contributed in one way or another to the composition, publication, and distribution of their writings. In what follows, we will briefly consider some of the primary ways in which individuals appear to have assisted the New Testament authors. We will begin with a brief overview of the role of secretaries and letter carriers before looking into some of the ways that the canonical authors may have benefited from their collaboration with their partners and colleagues.

Secretaries

For many individuals living during the first century, the composition of a personal letter, business or legal document, or virtually any type of literary work involved direct collaboration with a trained secretary, or amanuensis, as they are often called.[4] Those who were illiterate—the majority of the population by most estimates—had no practical means of communicating with others from a distance other than to hire a

[4]For background relating to the role of secretaries in the compositional process of the New Testament writings, see Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*; Steve Reece, *Paul's Large Letters: Paul's Autographic Subscriptions in the Light of Ancient Epistolary Conventions*, LNTS 561 (London: T&T Clark, 2017); Richard N. Longenecker, "Ancient Amanuenses and the Pauline Epistles," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 281-97; Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New* Testament, 55-60; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter Writer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), 1-41.

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secretary to produce a letter or to request assistance from a friend or acquaintance who possessed the skills and means to do this for them.[5] Many of the letters that were discovered at Oxyrhynchus, for example, were everyday letters and business documents that were composed by secretaries on behalf of their clients.[6] It was not just the illiterate who made use of secretaries, however. In addition to the fact that writing in the ancient world was less convenient than it is for modern writers who benefit from the use of computers and other electronic devices, many authors preferred to work directly with a secretary because of their expertise and convenience. In addition to maintaining the necessary writing materials, secretaries were capable of composing documents in a variety of literary genres and in a style that was typically more efficient, rhetorically effective, and pleasing to the eye.

Composing documents by hand was not something that most people engaged in on a frequent basis. Those who were literate might jot notes on a *tabula* (wax tablet) or write short pieces for their personal use. However, when it came to the production of official documents, literary pieces, letters, or other types of literature that were of any significant length or designed to be read by multiple readers, enlisting the services of a secretary was the widely preferred practice. We might compare the services offered by a secretary to those today who mow grass, change the oil of a car, or file taxes on behalf of their clients. Many individuals are capable of completing these tasks on their own

[5]A wide range of estimates have been offered regarding the literacy rates during the first century, though scholars generally agree that it was very low. As Craig Evans explains, "Most agree that literacy rates were somewhere between 5 and 10 percent (and that most of the literate were males), with perhaps somewhat higher rates among the Jewish people." *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 66. Some such as William Harris have suggested a higher literacy, while others such as Catherine Hezser have concluded that literacy rates were likely even lower. William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, TSAJ 81 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001). The low literacy rate would have necessitated the need for the oral proclamation of the New Testament writings. We find evidence for this in passages such as Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27; 1 Tim 4:13. Also of interest is Jesus' interaction with various individuals. In the Sermon on Mount, for example, the phrase "you have heard" is recorded five times (Mt 5:21, 27, 33, 38, and 43). When speaking to the religious authorities, however, Jesus questioned if they had read (Mt 12:3; 21:16; 22:31; Lk 10:26).

[6]For further insight regarding the scribal features of this literature, see William A. Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

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but prefer to hire someone for the sake of convenience or because of the known quality of an individual's work. Those of the upper classes were even known to enlist a trained slave to serve as their personal secretary. A famous example of a slave who possessed considerable literary abilities and training was Tiro, who served the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero. When Cicero determine to write a letter, he did not sit down with pen and ink and compose the document by hand as he worked in solitude. Instead, it appears to have been his common practice to dictate his writings to Tiro or one of his other trained secretaries. From Cicero's large corpus of extant writings we learn not only that he commonly dictated his writings to secretaries such as Tiro, but that he often maintained copies of his writings (see, e.g., *Att.* 16.5.5 and *Fam.* 7.25.1).[7] As will be seen later in our study, the fact that secretaries often produced copies of the documents they composed for both their client and the intended recipient(s) is of special relevance to our understanding of the early formation of the Pauline letter corpus.

When composing letters, individuals would often stipulate key items to a secretary that he or she wished to communicate to their intended reader(s). The secretary would then craft the document according to this instruction. In many cases, we might suspect that the secretary would have recorded various notes from his conversation with the author on a tablet and would then use this information to compose the written work. On other occasions, individuals may have taken a more involved role, working carefully with the secretary throughout the process. Authors were known, for example, to dictate their writings directly to a scribe. On one occasion Cicero explains that his practice was to dictate his work to his slave Tiro, who, "usually takes down whole periods at a breath." He also refers to another assistant named Spintharus who was apparently not as skilled. When working with him, Cicero explains that he was forced to dictate his work "syllable by

[7]This also appears to have been the case with Pliny the Younger. In his letter to Septittus (*Ep*. 1.1), Pliny refers to copies of his letters that were in his possession and suggests that he had marked some of these for public circulation.

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syllable."[8] Regardless of whether an author carefully dictated a text to his secretary or simply delineated the most pertinent information that was to be included in the document, it appears to have been a common practice for secretaries to present the completed work to the author for his or her approval prior to dispatch. If the client was literate, this might involve a careful reading of the written document. On other occasions, the scribe might simply read the completed text back to the individual. Once the author was satisfied, a note of authentication was often placed at the end of the writing, and arrangements were then made for its dispatch and/or public circulation.

Although it does not appear to be the case that the New Testament authors were independently wealthy or that they enjoyed the conveniences afforded to figures such as Cicero, it is unnecessary to assume that they composed each of their writings on their own or without the use of a trained secretary. In light of the fact that Paul and the other New Testament writers were well connected to Christian communities throughout the Roman world, it may have very well been the case that a number of individuals offered their time and expertise to assist them with the composition of their writings. In fact, we learn in Romans 16:22 that an individual by the name of Tertius served as Paul's secretary. It is unclear if he assisted Paul with other writings, but we can be certain that he served as Paul's secretary during the composition of Romans, an event that most likely took place during Paul's stay in Corinth near the end of the third missionary journey. Because the word order of the Greek text is flexible, it is possible for his greeting to be understood in different ways. Translations such as "I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord" are common in modern English versions as most scholars understand the prepositional phrase ἐν κυρίῳ (*en Kyriō*) as modifying ἀσπάζομαι ὑμᾶς (*aspazomai hymas*) rather than ὁ γράψας (*ho grapsas*). Understood in this sense, it was Tertius's greeting that was "in the Lord." It is possible, however, to understand the phrase "in the Lord" in connection to the writing itself, resulting in a translation such

[8]Cicero, *Att*. 13.25. Translation from *Letters of Cicero: The Whole Extant Correspondence in Chronological Order*, trans. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908–1909).

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as "I, Tertius, who wrote this epistle in the Lord, greet you." If this was indeed the sense in which the greeting was intended to be understood, Tertius's brief interjection may offer a subtle hint that he offered his services to Paul free of charge in order to order to advance his mission.

Letter Carriers

In a world that did not have an organized postal system available to the general public or an electronic means of communication, authors often had little option but to entrust their associates or personal slaves with the task of delivering their writings.[9] While there is evidence that letters were commonly delivered by strangers traveling from one location to another, this mode of delivery was certainly not ideal. Who could ensure that the letter would actually make its way to the intended readers and not be tampered with or read? Considering the amount of time and resources that went into the composition of their writings and the importance of the content they contained, we may safely assume that authors such as Paul relied primarily and possibly even exclusively on trusted colleagues and associates to deliver their writings to their intended recipients. M. Luther Stirewalt is likely correct in his conclusion that Paul "did not depend on hired carriers or slaves, nor upon the chance journeying of friends or strangers" and that he instead "relied on people who shared his work and therefore had an investment in the communications necessitated by his circuit-riding ministry."[10] At times the letter carrier may have been a trusted companion who

[9]Recent studies of the role of letter carriers in the Greco-Roman world include Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing,* 171-209; Stirewalt, *Paul, the Letter Writer*, 9-19; Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter Writer*, 37-41; Margaret M. Mitchell, "The New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: the Example of Timothy and Titus," *JBL* 111 (1992): 641-62; Eldon J. Epp, "New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. B. A. Pearson, et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991): 35-56; Klauck, *Ancient Letters*, 43-66; Peter M. Head, "Letter Carriers in the Ancient Jewish Epistolary Material," in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and* Canon, ed. Craig A. Evans and H. D. Zacharias, SSEJC 13 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 203-19; Head, "Named Letter-Carriers Among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri," *JSNT* 31 (2009): 279-99; Matthew S. Harmon, "Letter Carriers and Paul's Use of Scripture," *JSPL* 4 (2014): 129-48; Stephen Llewelyn, "Sending Letters in the Ancient World: Paul and the Philippians," *TynBul* 46 (1995): 337-56.

[10]Stirewalt, *Paul, the Letter Writer*, 19.

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ministered alongside the author in a given location, while on other occasions the author may have entrusted this task to an individual from the community in which he wrote. Epaphroditus, for example, may have been entrusted to deliver the epistle to the Philippians on his return to Philippi after ministering to Paul.

Because illiteracy was rather high in the first century and access to written texts was often limited, we can safely assume that it was customary for the New Testament writings to be publicly read to the original recipients and other audiences shortly after their initial composition. In fact, instruction for the public reading of Paul's writings or Scripture in general may be found in passages such as Colossians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:27, and 1 Timothy 4:13. Similarly, Luke 4:14-30, Acts 15:21, and 2 Corinthians 3:15 refer to the traditional Jewish practice of the reading of Scripture in the synagogue. The public reading of texts was not limited to the works of Scripture, however. As several scholars have noted, public-reading events were quite common in the Greco-Roman world.[11] Brian Wright has recently observed that the works of a variety of ancient authors such as Josephus, Philo, Celsus, Seneca, Strabo, Ovid, Quintilian, and Dio Chrysostom were often read in this fashion. These public-reading events enabled individuals to become familiar with a variety of writings even if they were illiterate or did not have access to a copy. This might be compared to the modern practice of listening to audiobooks, albeit these readings took place in public gatherings. It has also been noted that the public reading of a text often played a role in preserving a reliable textual tradition. As people became familiar with a writing through public reading, faulty and heavily redacted readings could more easily be identified and eliminated.[12]

[11]For background related to the practice of public reading of texts in the Roman world, see T. P. Wiseman, *The Roman Audience: Classical Literature as Social History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); William A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Brian Wright, *Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017).

[12]For further discussion, see Timothy Mitchell, "Exposing Textual Corruption: Community as a Stabilizing Aspect in the Circulation of the New Testament Writings during the Greco-Roman Era," *JSNT* 43 (2020): 266-98.

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Based on what may be established regarding the literary culture of the first-century Roman world and the role that public-reading events served, we might conclude that a significant number of early Christians would have encountered Scripture primarily through public-reading events rather than from reading texts in private settings. With regard to the New Testament writings, we may safely assume that in many cases the dispatched copy would have been read to the intended audience soon after it was delivered. While it is unclear how often letter carriers were charged with publicly reading the letters to the intended recipients, a number of extant writings from around the first century indicate that letter carriers often provided additional clarification and supplemental information regarding the content of the writings they delivered.[13] In many cases, an elder of a church or other designated individual may have read the text during a public gathering, though there may have also been occasions in which the letter carrier personally read the text to the intended audience. Regardless of who read the letter, the letter carrier would have often been available to offer clarification on key points and to offer additional insight on various subjects addressed in the text. We might imagine Tychicus (see Col 4:7-9), for example, offering clarification on certain topics addressed in Paul's epistle to the Colossians that may have been initially unclear after the initial reading in Colossae. In light of the reality that "some things [in Paul's letters are] hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16), it is possible that Paul's letter carriers often provided the original readers with clarity and additional insight when needed. As Peter Head observes, Paul's letter carriers appear to have served "as personal mediators of Paul's authoritative instruction to his churches, and as the earliest interpreters of the individual letters."[14] This particular responsibility would have necessitated that letter carriers work closely with the author prior to setting off on their journey. We might

[13]See Head, "Named Letter-Carriers," for a number of primary sources which refer to the role which letter carriers played in providing readers with clarity and additional insight.

[14]Head, "Named Letter-Carriers," 298. See also, William Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1973), 45-46; Stirewalt, *Paul, the Letter Writer*, 13-18.

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speculate, for example, that Paul discussed several of the major themes addressed in his epistle to the Colossians with Tychicus prior to the dispatch of the writing in order to ensure that Tychicus correctly understood Paul's primary concerns and the arguments he sought to make.

The Biblical Writers and Their Colleagues

As we examine the New Testament writings and other extant literature from this general period, it becomes apparent that the New Testament authors worked closely not only with those who served as secretaries and letter carriers but also with a number of colleagues and acquaintances who could offer valuable guidance, suggestions, and useful information during the compositional process. Information was obviously much more difficult to acquire in the first century, a reality that often necessitated collaboration with those who possessed firsthand testimony about past events (e.g., a miracle of Jesus) or recent developments that took place in a particular community (e.g., the factions and controversies in Corinth). On other occasions, writers may have simply sought the advice of colleagues on how to address a particular situation or subject matter most effectively. Several of the writings in the New Testament contain accounts of events that the author did not personally witness or instruction relating to situations in communities that were a considerable distance from the author. There are reasons to assume, therefore, that regardless of their literary abilities, the authors of the New Testament are likely to have worked closely with a number of individuals during the compositional process. While a full discussion of this subject cannot be taken up here, it will be helpful to make a few observations regarding the background of the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles and the extent to which the authors of the canonical writings may have collaborated with various colleagues.

The composition of the Gospels. Much attention has been placed in recent scholarship—Gospel studies in particular—on the various sources that may have been familiar to the canonical authors. For many years, scholars have carefully scrutinized and compared the text of each Gospel in order to establish what sources may have been available to

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each evangelist (source criticism), the original form of the literary units contained in the Gospels (form criticism), and how the evangelists may have adopted, used, and arranged their existing sources to fulfill their particular objectives (redaction criticism). What has not been as widely discussed is the manner in which the Gospel writers may have gone about the daunting task of composing their written accounts of the life and teaching of Christ. This subject is relevant to the study of the Gospels given that our understanding of this process will naturally inform our perception of foundational subjects such as authorship, the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts, and the particular objectives of each author.

We might first observe that the study of the sources available to each Gospel writer and the process by which each of the Gospel writers went about their task are not entirely unrelated. If the sources available to a given author were primarily literary accounts, a case could be made that the Gospel writers worked independently throughout much of the compositional process, working with no more than a secretary and perhaps a few colleagues who may have provided assistance with the acquisition of sources and other practical tasks. However, if the author drew from eyewitness testimony, it would have been necessary to consult with one or more individuals who could provide firsthand information regarding the events that were recorded. In light of the practical implications of our understanding of the background of the Gospels, it will be helpful to briefly outline some of the traditional theories regarding the sources available to the Gospel writers. This will enable us to better assess how they may have gone about their work of compiling reliable accounts about the life of Christ and some of the ways that they may have been assisted by their colleagues.

A mere casual reading of the four canonical Gospels reveals a number of similarities between each writing, particularly among the Synoptic Gospels. While there is certainly unique content in each Gospel, it is clear that they record a number of the same events and conversations, that these accounts are often presented in a similar manner and described with similar language, and that the Gospel writers often arrange

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their material in a similar fashion. For some, these similarities are the inevitable result of the overlapping objectives of each writer or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If each of the Gospel writers wrote under the Spirit's guidance and sought to describe several of the major events that took place in the life of Christ, should we not expect a significant degree of similarity? While this type of explanation may seem reasonable, biblical scholars from a variety of backgrounds have concluded that the large number of similarities between the Gospel accounts are best explained by one theory or another that involves literary dependence—that is, the viewpoint that the Gospel writers were familiar with one or more previously written accounts of the life of Christ.[15] As Francis Watson explains, the "Gospels are interconnected, with later ones always directly or indirectly dependent on their predecessors, and this dependence may be expressed in a variety of ways: word-for-word copying, minor interpretive clarifications, stylistic improvements, changes of sequence, insertion of new narrative material to fill perceived gaps, and so on."[16] While we might quibble with Watson's portrayal of certain differences between the Gospels as "improvements," it is certainly the case that compelling arguments have been made for the conclusion that the Gospel writers wrote with an awareness of other sources when they produced their written accounts of the life and teaching of Christ.[17]

Although there are convincing reasons to affirm that the Gospel writers were familiar with previously written accounts about the life and teaching of Jesus, a case could be made that it was not written

[15]The question of the so-called Synoptic problem and the background of the canonical writings are typically discussed in graduate-level introductions to the New Testament and the Gospels. In addition to introductory volumes, readers may find it beneficial to consult the following multi-view volumes that provide a defense of various positions: Stanley E. Porter and Bryan Dyer, eds., *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016); Robert Thomas, ed., *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002).

[16]Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 604.

[17]It should be observed that the writing style of each individual is unique, that there are often a variety of ways to express a single thought in the Greek language, and that our estimation of literary style tends to be quite subjective in nature. We might have a greater appreciation for one style over another, but it would be unfounded in my view to conclude that each of the differences between the canonical Gospels point to corrections or improvements.

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sources alone that were consulted by the Gospel writers. Scholars such as Martin Dibelius (1883–1947) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) have famously argued that a large number of sayings of Jesus and traditions related to Jesus' life and ministry circulated for many decades in oral form before they were collated by the Gospel writers and incorporated into their written accounts.[18] Dibelius and Bultmann were pioneers of what has come to be referred to as form criticism, a method originally applied to the study of the Old Testament before it was later adopted by New Testament scholars during the early twentieth century. According to proponents of this method, the traditions that eventually found their way into the Gospels would have included accounts of Jesus' miracles, his encounters with various individuals, and key events such as his birth, baptism, and resurrection. In addition to several oral traditions about Jesus' life and ministry, a body of *logia*—that is, sayings of Jesus—are also thought to have circulated independently for some time in oral form. This would have included pronouncements against his opponents as well as several prophecies, parables, teaching discourses, and other types of speech material. Many biblical scholars assume that these early sayings and traditions about the life of Christ were quite malleable and that they were subject to frequent modification as various communities adopted them for their own purposes and as early Christians became increasingly drawn to the Christ of faith rather than the Jesus of history, to use the language of Martin Kähler and others.

Although many scholars remain convinced that oral accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus served as a foundational source of information for the Gospel writers, some scholars have begun to emphasize the value that ancient writers appear to have placed on eyewitness testimony. Rather than a patchwork of uncorroborated oral traditions that were later reworked by the authors for their purposes, it has become more widely accepted that the Gospel writers often relied on

[18]Two of the primary works in the early history of the movement included Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangelium*, 3d ed., ed. Günter Bornkamm (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1919), and Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, rev. ed. (Peabody: MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

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living eyewitness testimony.[19] As Richard Bauckham concludes in his well-known study of the subject, the abundance of specific details in the Gospel accounts is consistent with what one would expect of eyewitness testimony. The writers share intimate firsthand knowledge of the political and cultural landscape of the land of Israel and often record specific information such as particular topological features, the names of individuals, and other details that would have been unfamiliar to those who did not observe the events themselves or consult directly with living eyewitnesses. As a matter of observation, many of the specific details contained in the canonical Gospels are absent from the later noncanonical writings. The *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, contains a collection of 114 *logia* while offering very few descriptions of particular events and historical details that might be expected of a work that derived directly from eyewitness testimony.[20]

For those who recognize the traditional authors of the Gospels, it is only natural to conclude that Matthew and John would have included a significant amount of firsthand testimony in their accounts. As disciples of Jesus, Matthew and John would have personally witnessed many of the events they recorded. While it is unnecessary to conclude that they relied solely on their own experiences, it is certainly reasonable to assume that they drew on their own recollections when describing the events which they personally witnessed. On the other hand, Mark and Luke were relatively obscure figures in the early Christian movement and did not personally witness the majority of the events they described. What might we assume about their sources of information? Did they simply compile various traditions of unknown origin about Jesus that had circulated in Christian communities or draw on various written accounts that fit their purposes?

According to early tradition, Mark's Gospel was based on the eyewitness testimony that Peter recounted prior to his martyrdom in

[19]Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

[20]For further comparison of the noncanonical and canonical Gospels, see Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel and the Gospels: Christian Proclamation and Early Jesus Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022); Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

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Rome.[21] If these early traditions provide reliable information, Mark would not have been limited to an eclectic assortment of written and oral accounts about the life of Jesus. He would have served, rather, as the "interpreter" (ἑρμηνευτής; *hermēneutēs*) of the apostle Peter. This would indicate that Mark was not simply a close colleague of Peter but that he was responsible for recording summaries of Peter's teaching, which he then compiled, arranged, and edited in a manner he deemed to be appropriate for his intended audience.

In addition to Mark, we might also question how Luke acquired the information that became the basis for his two major works. Fortunately, the Prologue of his Gospel (Lk 1:1-4) provides a basic picture of how he understood his role as a writer. From this brief passage, we find evidence that Luke regarded himself as a responsible historian who sought to provide reliable testimony about the life and teaching of Christ.[22] Of interest is his reference to "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses" (οἱ ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται; *hoi ap archēs autoptai*). The term αὐτόπτης (*autoptēs*) is particularly significant. Although this word does not appear in the New Testament outside of this passage, its meaning is not difficult to discern. Etymologically, the term is a compound of αὐτός (*autos*) and ὁράω (*horaō*) and thus carries the sense of one who has seen something with his own eyes, hence one with firsthand knowledge of an event.[23] A number of those who had personally witnessed the events related to the life of Christ, Luke notes, "handed down" (Lk 1:2) their firsthand knowledge regarding "the things accomplished among us" (Lk 1:1).[24] The implication is that the story of Jesus was not lost to history, and that many who had personally encountered

[21]See, for example, the early testimony of Papias recorded by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl*. 3.39.15) and other early sources such as Justin Martyr (*Dial*. 106) and Irenaeus (*Haer.* 3.1.1).

[22]In addition to technical commentaries on Luke's Gospel, additional insight regarding the Prologue of Luke and what it reveals about the historical nature of Luke-Acts include Osvaldo Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles: Interpretation, History and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 76-88; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 116-24; and Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel*, SNTSMS 78 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[23]The word is used in this sense by ancient authors such as Polybius (*Polyb*. 3.4; 10.11; 12.4, 28) and Josephus (*Ant*. 18.9.5; 19.1.15; *J.W.* 3.9.5; 6.2.5; *Ag. Ap.* 1.10).

[24]Luke uses the verb παραδίδωμι (*paradidōmi*) to describe the "handing down" of eyewitness tradition. This verb appears frequently in the New Testament in reference to the handing down of

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Jesus and were familiar with his life and ministry had passed along their testimony to others. From the very beginning of the Christian movement, believers were convinced that God had performed miraculous acts of eschatological significance in time and space and that these events could be corroborated by those who witnessed them. Paul, for example, refers to "more than five hundred brethren" who observed the resurrected Christ (1 Cor 15:6), while John frequently makes use of language that is reflective of eyewitness testimony, referring, for example, to "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands" (1 Jn 1:1). The language used by Luke likewise indicates that the events he describes were based on the firsthand testimony of eyewitnesses. As Bauckham explains, Luke's assertion should be understood as "a claim that the eyewitnesses had been present throughout the events from the appropriate commencement of the author's history onward."[25]

Some may object that it would be a stretch to conclude that Luke consulted living eyewitnesses given that he does not specify the sources that served as the basis for his Gospel. The language of "handing down," for example, might be taken as a reference to various oral traditions or written accounts rather than direct eyewitness testimony. Even if we were to grant that many of these traditions originated with eyewitnesses, what is there to indicate that the content that was handed down from one individual to the next did not evolve in significant ways by the time Luke composed his Gospel?

Many students have at one time or another participated in the so-called telephone game. After many years, I can still vividly recall one of my elementary school teachers whispering a short story in the ear of a student and directing the class to circulate the story from one student to the next as we sat together in a circle. Needless to say, once the message had made its way around the circle and returned to the student who originally received the message, the story was drastically different.

tradition or doctrine from one party to another (see, for example, Mk 7:13; Acts 6:14; Rom 6:17; 1 Cor 11:2; 15:3; 2 Pet 2:21; Jude 3).

[25]Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 119.

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Naturally, we were all humored and a bit surprised by how many of the details of the story were lost at some point along the way and how even the basic plot had been significantly distorted. While we might find the results of a game such as this to be amusing, what it suggests about the nature of communication often becomes etched in our minds. The impression is given that oral communication between individuals is inherently unreliable. It certainly does not take much reflection to recognize how negative perceptions of oral transmission might cause individuals to question the reliability of the New Testament writings. The stories and accounts contained in the Bible may certainly be based on actual events that occurred, it might be reasoned, but how confident can we be in their accuracy if they are the product of unknown accounts that were passed down from one community or individual to the next before they were eventually adopted by later authors who wrote with particular theological objectives?[26]

Obviously, the telephone game is hardly a scientific method of assessing the accuracy of the transmission of information in predominantly oral cultures. Even though there are reasons to assume that the transmission of oral traditions in ancient cultures was more reliable than is typically imagined, it is important to note that Luke seems to suggest that he was able to personally consult a number of the *autoptai* (αὐτόπται). This would have clearly been the most reliable way for him to investigate the events that occurred "from the beginning" (Lk 1:3). If he came across a tradition regarding an encounter between Jesus and another individual, for example, how might he confirm that the event actually took place and that the various details of the tradition were accurate? He could certainly compare and assess the available accounts

[26]The degree to which oral transmission was reliable cannot be taken up in this chapter. Readers interested in pursuing the subject in greater detail may wish to consult recent works such as Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, WUNT 123 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); James D. G. Dunn, *The Oral Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013); Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014); Werner Kelber and Samuel Byrskog, eds., *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

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that describe the same incident in order to establish common features and points of agreement, but the most reliable method of validating the accuracy of these accounts would be to personally consult with those who experienced the events firsthand, something that in many cases would have still been possible during his lifetime.

In light of the value that was placed on eyewitness testimony in the ancient world and what Luke reveals about his approach and objectives, a plausible case could be made that he interacted directly with a number of individuals who personally heard Jesus' teaching and witnessed his miracles. As a close associate of Paul, we may infer that he had opportunities to interact directly with the living apostles, though we need not limit Luke's interaction to the apostolic circle. It is certainly possible that he interacted with a number of witnesses, some well-known and some who were more obscure or who are unknown to us today. We may suspect, for example, that many of the unique details and accounts in Luke's birth narrative (Lk 1:5–2:52) derived from Mary, the mother of Jesus. Who better to provide information about the events surrounding Jesus' birth than her? The unique material relating to the life and ministry of Jesus is unlikely to have been limited to the first few chapters of his Gospel, of course. In addition to consulting with Mary, it is possible that Luke personally interviewed individuals such as Zaccheus (Lk 19:1-10) and one or both of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-49), just to name a few. For a writer such as Luke, composition appears to have involved much more than simply compiling written sources and providing supplemental information from various traditions that had circulated orally. While Luke was clearly familiar with a number of sources, it does not appear that he relied solely on secondhand information. He appears, rather, to have personally interacted with a number of individuals who were capable of providing eyewitness testimony related to the events he described.

In addition to consulting with various eyewitnesses, it is also possible that the Gospel writers, and perhaps some of the other New Testament authors, consulted with other colleagues and acquaintances during the time leading up to the initial circulation of their works.

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Among other things, ancient authors were known to make all or a portion of their completed work available to close friends and acquaintances who could offer suggestions for improvement prior to the public release of the writing. Raymond Starr's description of this process is helpful:

> Once a work was drafted, authors commonly sent a copy to a close friend for comments and criticism. . . . Once the author had received his friend's comments and initially revised the draft, he slightly widened the circle to which his work was accessible. This could be done by sending draft copies, again made in his home by slaves at his expense, to several more friends. He could also invite a few friends to his home and recite the work to them in order to elicit their comments and reactions. . . . These first readings were entirely closed. The audience would naturally discuss the work during and after the recitation, but the text itself did not circulate. . . . The work remained entirely in the control of the author, who could decide whether it would ever reach a wider public either in further recitations or in written form.[27]

Although there were surely variations in the precise manner in which ancient writings were prepared (e.g., slaves producing copies and the public reading offered in one's own home), Starr's description helpfully identifies several of the important steps that often took place prior to the public release of a literary work. As he observes, an author might provide a close circle of his friends with an initial draft of his work for them to review, or he could offer a public reading (*recitatio*) of all or a portion of his work to a small number of trusted friends and family.[28] In both cases, authors tended to welcome recommendations for improvement and honest reflections. This often led to a period of revision that eventually culminated in the work's public release—what we might describe as its "publication."

What we mean by "publication" today is much different in several respects to the process that led to the dissemination of literary works

[27]Raymond J. Starr, "The Circulation of Literary Texts in the Roman World," *ClQ* 37 (1987), 213-14.
[28]Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 83-84.

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during the first century. Rather than submit a finished manuscript to a publisher, who then makes arrangements for the work to be printed in large quantities and sold to various venders, literary works produced during the first century were produced exclusively by hand. Making matters even more challenging, there were no copyright laws to protect individuals from reproducing the work or from making changes to the text. As Eric Turner explains, the ancient equivalent of publication took place when "the work in question was available for consultation and presumably for copying." It was "'published' in the sense that its existence became known and that it was 'issued' to readers."[29]

With regard to the collaborative nature of disseminating ancient writings, Timothy Mitchell observes that the process leading to a work's publication often "involved some of the author's closest associates, who gave constructive criticism, suggested changes, and at times used the services of a scribe or secretary to copy down dictation." After this process was completed, "the piece was finished by releasing the work to be copied and circulated through networks of friends and acquaintances, sending the work to a dedicatee, reciting the piece to the community, or by sending a copy to a bookseller or library."[30] Once the work was released to the public, it became very difficult for revisions to take place, especially if numerous copies were already produced. Consequently, authors often sought feedback from a number of individuals prior to the public distribution of their work.

One of the better-known examples of this process is the famous Roman poet Virgil's personal reading of portions of the *Aeneid* to a live audience before it was released to the public. According to a later work on the life of Virgil by the fourth-century grammarian Aelius Donatus, Virgil spent considerable time refining his work before personally reading three of its books to Augustus and members of the royal family. If the account of Donatus is to be trusted, the reading left quite an

[29]Eric G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 112-13.

[30]Timothy Mitchell, "Myths about Autographs: What They Were and How Long They May Have Survived," in *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. Elijah Hixson and Peter Gurry (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 35.

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impact on the family. In fact, Octavia, the sister of Augustus, is said to have become so overcome by a reference to her son Marcellus that she fainted! Additional readings to larger audiences later took place as Virgil continued to refine and revise his monumental work.[31]

Although certain conclusions are difficult to maintain, we might speculate that a similar process took place during the composition of several of the biblical writings. In addition to consulting with various eyewitnesses, it is possible that one or more of the four evangelists may have read their work before a smaller audience prior to the public release of their finished work, inviting feedback on specific ways in which they might present a more effective and memorable presentation of their material. It is helpful to remember that the New Testament writings were designed to be heard by the intended recipients.[32] Reading a completed work to a live audience would have been particularly helpful as it would have provided the authors an opportunity to receive honest reflections about the rhetorical effectiveness of their work. Perhaps John offered a personal reading of his Gospel to those in Ephesus before it began to circulate. Another possibility is that Luke offered a reading of some or all of his Gospel before Theophilus and a small audience of friends and family members at some point before it was released to the public.

Finally, we should not overlook the fact that the distribution of a work such as one of the four Gospels would have been a substantial undertaking. Following the initial publication of the Gospels, there would have been a significant need for additional manuscripts to be copied, without which the writings would have had only a limited influence and would have ultimately been lost to history, much like several of the noncanonical gospels. The reproduction of Christian texts would have likely been accomplished in a number of ways. As a consequence of the popularity of the New Testament writings and the expense associated with reproducing writings and acquiring personal

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[31] Aelius Donatus, *Life of Virgil* 31-34.

[32] This topic is explored in the recent work, Paul Borgman and Kelly James Clark, *Written to be Heard: Recovering the Messages of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

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copies, we might assume that a number of early Christians took part in reproducing these works. In some cases, individuals may have reproduced texts for their own use, while on other occasions wealthy Christians may have instructed their slaves or hired professional scribes to duplicate writings. These were not uncommon practices in antiquity. As George Houston observes, Galen and individuals known to Fronto personally reproduced writings for their own use while Cicero and his friend Atticus are known to have instructed their slaves to make copies of certain works.[33] The number of wealthy Christian slave owners in the first century does not appear to have been great, but it is certainly possible that some of the early canonical writings were reproduced by those who served in Christian households in major cities such as Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and Thessalonica. We may also assume that individuals who were experienced in reproducing texts occasionally volunteered their services on a pro bono basis, assisting authors with either the original composition of the writings or with the early production of copies. As noted above, Tertius may have served Paul in both of these ways.

Another possibility is that individuals such as Theophilus (Lk 1:3; Acts 1:1) served as what might be described as literary patrons. In this role, individuals may have used their wealth and influence to promote and finance the production of the canonical writings in the period immediately following their composition. In some cases, they may have provided the necessary funds to hire professionally trained scribes to assist with the reproduction of texts or instructed their slaves to produce copies. A writer's colleagues—especially those who were affluent and well connected—might also assist with the distribution of the finished work. As Loveday Alexander explains, wealthy and influential patrons "could offer a social framework for scholarly communication" while also offering "an author an entree into a different social network of the patron's own peers, whether by oral performance within the patron's house, or by the deposition of a

[33]Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries*, 14-16.

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presentation copy of a book in the patron's private library." Once the author was satisfied with his work and was prepared for its release, it would often be made "available to any of the patron's friends who wished to read or copy it."[34] It is certainly possible, therefore, that Theophilus arranged for his copy of Luke's Gospel to be available to his circle of friends, who could then take part in its wider distribution. If Theophilus was an official of some type—a plausible deduction given Luke's reference to him as "most excellent"—he and members of his social network may have had the means to ensure that numerous copies were produced. Those who served in this type of role might be compared to those today who donate a large sum of money to a particular ministry in order for certain materials to be produced and disseminated around the world.

The composition of the Epistles. Having discussed a number of literary practices that relate primarily to the composition of the Gospels, we may also briefly address a few matters that relate more specifically to the Epistles of the New Testament. Our brief comments in this section will focus primarily on the Pauline writings, though the practices that will be addressed may also relate to the composition of the Catholic Epistles. As his own writings and the various narratives contained in Acts make evident, Paul worked closely with dozens of individuals throughout his years as an apostle and missionary. In his effort to advance the gospel message and establish vibrant local churches, Paul traveled and ministered alongside a large number of individuals and maintained contact with Christians throughout the Roman world.[35] As F. F. Bruce observes, "there are about seventy people mentioned by name in the New Testament of whom we should never have heard were

[34]Loveday Alexander, "Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 98.

[35]Paul's missionary strategies have been helpfully explored in a number of recent studies. See, for example, Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry, eds., *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012). These works build on the earlier publication of works such as Ronald Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962).

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it not for their association with Paul, and over and above these there is a host of unnamed friends."[36]

Paul's collaboration with his colleagues and believers throughout the Roman world was not limited to his work of evangelism, teaching, and other ministries that took place in local communities. In addition to this, it would appear that he often worked closely with a number of individuals when composing his epistles, a conclusion that is consistent with what is known of ancient letter writing in general as well as the fact that his epistles are occasional in nature. Even his most sophisticated and theologically developed epistles (e.g., Romans and 1–2 Corinthians) were written not as theological treatises for general audiences or as comprehensive treatments of Christian doctrine but in response to the particular concerns and challenges facing those in specific communities.

When writing to churches that he was unable to personally visit, Paul would have had need of reliable sources of information about the recent developments that had taken place in their communities and the nature of the conflicts, struggles, and questions that had become a cause of controversy or confusion. We find evidence in his writings that communities often contacted him with specific concerns and questions about a host of subjects. Much of the content in 1 Corinthians, for example, appears to have been written in response to questions that the Corinthians had sent to Paul either in written form or through various emissaries. We find that members of Chloe's household provided information to Paul while he was in Ephesus (1 Cor 1:11). Perhaps one or more members of the family, broadly defined in the first century to include one's slaves, were sent to Ephesus by Chloe to complete some type of business. While in the city, they may have met up with Paul and provided him with news regarding the recent developments in Corinth.[37] On other occasions,

[36]F. F. Bruce, *The Pauline Circle* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 9.

[37]The fact that these individuals may have been slaves is not surprising in light of the large number of slaves in the first-century Roman world. It may even be possible that Chloe was not a believer but that some of her slaves had converted to the faith.

Paul appears to have sent his own trusted associates to minister to believers in specific locations. On their return, they would have then provided a report to Paul on recent developments.

Evidence that Paul regularly collaborated with various individuals during the composition of his epistles may be observed in the greetings and other locations of his writings. In fact, the opening greeting of eight of Paul's epistles includes a reference to one or more of his associates:

- 1 Corinthians — Our brother Sosthenes
- 2 Corinthians — Timothy our brother
- Galatians — All the brothers with me
- Philippians — Timothy
- Colossians — Timothy our brother
- 1 Thessalonians — Silvanus and Timothy
- 2 Thessalonians — Silvanus and Timothy
- Philemon — Timothy our brother

It is sometimes assumed that on certain occasions Paul included the names of his associates in the greetings of his letters simply as a polite gesture or for the purpose of strengthening the authority of his instruction. This understanding, however, has been challenged in recent decades.[38] Harry Gamble, for example, has concluded that this practice "was probably not a formality but a reflection of the involvement of his associates in the conception, if not in the composition, of many of the letters."[39] Gamble's conclusion is consistent with none other than

[38]See, for example, Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 33-34. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor provides examples from Cicero's writings of family members who were in fact included in the opening greeting of his epistles. He is correct in his conclusion that "the relevance of these parallels to Paul's epistles is severely diminished by the fact that both recipients are especially significant members of Cicero's household. The Pauline letters are addressed to communities. They belong to a different category from Cicero's highly personal letters to his wife and valued associate." He also observes that Cicero "mentions *all* those with him who have a relationship to the recipient." See "Co-Authorship in the Corinthian Correspondence," *RB* 100 (1993), 563.

[39]Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 99.

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Origen, who many centuries ago made passing reference to Paul's associates in his commentary on Matthew's Gospel. In his remarks, Origen referred to the composition of Paul's epistles to the Corinthians, writing, "Two made a symphony [συνεφώνησαν; *synephōnēsan*], Paul and Sosthenes, when writing the first epistle to the Corinthians; and after this Paul and Timothy when sending the second epistle to the same. And even three made a symphony when Paul and Silvanus and Timothy gave instruction by letter to the Thessalonians."[40] For Origen, the reference to Sosthenes and Timothy in the greetings of the Corinthian epistles was not the simple equivalent of a modern "hello" but an acknowledgment of their involvement in one form or another in the epistle's composition.

In his research on first-century letter writing, E. Randolph Richards observed that there were only rare occasions in antiquity in which more than one author was cited in the greeting of an epistle.[41] Occasionally, a formal grievance or appeal to an individual of high authority was sent from a specific group or party. In such cases, a collective title or description of the group may have been used to identify the senders. In addition, there were also instances in which a husband's and wife's names were mentioned together in the greeting. This use, however, typically took place in private letters between individuals rather than in material written to an entire community. Richards notes that while Paul's letters differed in certain respects from other letters in antiquity, no coauthors can be found in the works of notable writers as Seneca or Pliny the Younger. In addition, only six of the 645 private letters from Oxyrhynchus include coauthors in the greeting.[42]

Because of the fact that names were not typically placed in the greetings of letters simply as a kind gesture, we may assume that each of the individuals who appear in the greetings of Paul's writings were

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[40]Origen, *Comm. Matt.* (*ANF* 9:495).

[41]See Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 33-36. For additional treatment, see Sean A. Adams, "Paul's Letter Opening and Greek Epistolography: A Matter of Relationship," in *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams, PAST 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 40-44.

[42]Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 34.

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well positioned to provide Paul with relevant insight or information that enabled him to provide timely and appropriate instruction. They may have recently ministered in the communities to which Paul wrote or had at least acquired reliable information that made them helpful conversation partners during the composition process. One can imagine, for example, Paul discussing the concerns of the Corinthians with Sosthenes as they walked the city streets of Ephesus or shared a meal together.[43] Paul clearly recognized his apostolic authority, but this did not preclude him from working closely with other believers, many of whom he seems to have regarded as close partners in his apostolic ministry. Missionary activity for Paul was a collaborative effort, not an independent venture.

In addition to working closely with Sosthenes on at least one occasion, we may assume that Paul often collaborated with close companions such as Timothy and Silas as he corresponded with various communities. We know from Luke's account that after Paul was forced to abruptly leave Thessalonica, that Timothy and Silas remained in the nearby town of Berea for some time before making the journey south where they eventually reunited with Paul in Corinth (Acts 17:14; 18:5). We may infer that Paul spent considerable time with Timothy and Silas discussing the situation in Thessalonica during his lengthy stay in Corinth and that they offered him several suggestions and insights as he composed his epistles to the Thessalonians. Having recently departed from Macedonia, they would have had a keen understanding of a number of practical matters that needed to be addressed in Paul's written instruction as well as several theological subjects that continued to trouble or confuse those in Thessalonica and the surrounding region.

[43]According to Acts, an individual named Sosthenes served as the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth and was beaten by an angry crowd following Paul's appearance before the proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:17). If this is indeed the same individual referred to in the greeting of 1 Corinthians, it may be possible that he converted to the faith during Paul's ministry in the city and later traveled to Ephesus where he met of up with Paul. As a former leader of a Jewish synagogue in Corinth, he certainly would have been familiar with the recent events that had transpired in the city and would have been well-known to the Corinthian believers.

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The use of first-person plural verbs and pronouns in some of the Pauline writings is occasionally taken as evidence that Paul was not the sole author of certain works.[44] For some, these plural forms would be unexpected or unnatural if Paul wrote independently or if he was the lone author. In some of Paul's writings such as the epistles to the Corinthians, Philippians, and Philemon, there is little evidence outside of the greeting that the work is the product of joint authorship. On the other hand, epistles such as 1 and 2 Thessalonians include a considerable number of first-person plural pronouns and verbs, an indication to some that Timothy and Silas may have played a significant role in the composition of these writings. References such as a letter "from *us*" (2 Thess 2:2, 15) and "*our* instruction" (2 Thess 3:14) might be taken as evidence for some type of mutual effort in the letter-writing process. In response, it might be observed that singular verbs and pronouns appear frequently throughout the Pauline writings and that there are several literary features that may often be observed in multiple epistles. The fact that there is a discernible style that may often be observed throughout the Pauline writings would suggest that Paul was the primary mind and authority behind each of the writings that bore his name. Although the evidence is not particularly compelling that Paul's companions served as coauthors in the sense that they personally penned portions of the epistles, it would seem plausible that they provided him with useful information that enabled him to address specific matters in his writings with greater insight and effectiveness.

Conclusions

Our brief survey of the literary environment of the first century has revealed that the composition of the New Testament writings was likely a much more collaborative process than is often assumed. The circumstances facing each author would have naturally differed, though it

[44]Several articles were written during the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century on the alternation between the first-person singular and plural pronouns in Paul's epistles. For a more recent treatment of this subject, see Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter Writer*, 16-31.

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appears likely that the production of many of the biblical writings involved collaboration between the author and a number of individuals who served in various capacities. In light of what may be determined about the manner in which ancient writings were composed and how authors acquired relevant information, it is plausible that many of the biblical writers consulted with those who could provide eyewitness testimony of certain events or insight related to recent developments or subjects that needed to be addressed. It would also seem that writers such as Paul worked closely with secretaries who could assist with the actual production of the writing, letter carriers who were responsible for delivering the writings to their intended destination, and several friends and colleagues who could assist in one way or another with the early transmission and distribution of their works.

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