# **Chapter 4: Scriptures and Tradition in Irenaeus and the Canonical New Testament**

## **The New Testament as a construct and constructor of early Christianity**

As the previous chapters have shown, when writing the early history of Christianity, the authors presented thus far approached their so-called sources very differently from modern historians. Above all, they had other narrative intentions and interests. Authors of the first millennium, such as Gregory of Tours, for instance, were interested in consolidating a Roman tradition that took into account their own ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds. Orosius, for example, took pride in Numantia’s resistance to Rome and “in the fact that Spain has supplied Rome with ‘good emperors’ such as Trajan and Theodosius the Great.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And just as Gregory was keen to date the city of Lyon back to the time of Christ’s birth, so too Orosius boasted of the city of Braga, “which lies in Gallaecia [and] has erected a very tall lighthouse looking out towards Britain—a work with which few can be compared.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Orosius, as we have seen, was guided by apologetic motives to highlight the positive impact of Christianization on the Empire. Eusebius and Iulius Africanus, in turn, interpreted history in the framework of pagan resistance to the alternative conduct and beliefs displayed by Christians, while Origen, Tertullian, and Irenaeus had moral and homiletic-catechetical concerns. Indeed, these last three demonstrate little interest in the historical origins of Christianity save when it comes to establishing the authority of the apostles. More importantly, they do not distinguish between the origins of the Church and its later development, a dinstinction made famously and frequently by Franz C. Overbeck (1837 - 1905).[[3]](#footnote-3) Even Irenaeus refrains from tackling the beginnings of Christianity, although he comes close to doing so, as we have seen, and was the first to know and make extensive use of the Acts of the Apostles. Nonetheless, he does it to prove that the central protagonists and authors of early Christianity preached the correct beliefs about God, not to reveal when and under what circumstances this proselytizing occurred. Although he does occasionally mention some details that seem historically sound, these are casual addenda rather than the focus of his narrative.

For this reason, we must approach the New Testament with caution, particularly in the form in which it was apparently compiled at the time of Irenaeus, perhaps even in his milieu, and most likely under his inspiration and guidance. Regardless of who its editor might have been, Irenaeus was among its first readers—if not the first—known to us. He knew it inside and out, pronounced himself on the meaning of the collection, and was certainly its first promoter. It is therefore appropriate to read the New Testament through his eyes and with his help.

We can start with the title—“New Testament”—καινὴ διαθήκη in Greek and *novum testamentum* in Latin. There is a specific problem with this term as in both languages it not only serves as a translation of the title of this collection of writings, and is also influenced by the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible, in which διαθήκη stands for the “covenant” (*berit*) made by God with humankind. What is more, the Greek as well as the Latin “testament” can be used in a more general sense and with considerable specificity in inheritance law,[[4]](#footnote-4) as in Galatians 3:15.17 and Hebrews 9 :16-17. As Theodor Zahn points out, “διαθήκη in the Bible (denotes) the covenant established by God, the order given by God to the people to regulate their relationship to him, καινὴ διαθήκη meaning the eschatological reorganization of this relationship, endowed by Christ, hence not being the document of revelation, but revelation itself.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Therefore, when we read the words “New Testament” in early Christian writings, particularly those of Irenaeus, we must ask ourselves whether “testament” refers to an older covenant or divine order before interpreting it as a technical termfor a collection of writings. It is more likely that in the mid-second century, the term was used to mean either an inheritance arrangement (as in “will and testament”) or God’s covenant—uses that both have a very long history and tradition—than a collection of Christian writings.[[6]](#footnote-6) Naturally, this may seem odd to a contemporary reader, who is not accustomed to reading the term this way.

Indeed we have clear evidence that Irenaeus still means “*testamentum*” in the older sense when he uses διαθήκη (*testamentum*) to indicate a last will or testament, curiously with reference to “gospel/evangelical” and “apostle/apostolic”:[[7]](#footnote-7)

The flesh cannot by itself possess the kingdom of God by inheritance; but it can be taken for an inheritance into the kingdom of God. For a living person inherits the goods of the deceased; and it is one thing to inherit, another to be inherited. The former rules, and exercises power over, and orders the things inherited at his will; but the latter things are in a state of subjection, are under order, and are ruled over by him who has obtained the inheritance. What, therefore, is it that lives? The Spirit of God, doubtless. What, again, are the possessions of the deceased? The various parts of the man, surely, which rot in the earth. But these are inherited by the Spirit when they are translated into the kingdom of heaven.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Thus, when Irenaeus speaks of the two “testaments” or two “wills”[[9]](#footnote-9) in the following passage on the commandment of love, we have to read him on at least two levels:

For the precepts of an absolutely perfect life, since they are the same in each will [testament], have been pointed out [to us] by the same God, who certainly has promulgated particular laws adapted for each; but the more prominent and the greatest [commandments], without which salvation cannot [be attained], He has exhorted [us to observe] the same in both.[[10]](#footnote-10)

and again later, in Book IV of *Adversus haereses*,when he contends

that there were two synagogues in two peoples and that nevertheless it is one and the same God who established them both for the benefit of the people; accordingly, the wills [testaments] were given to those who came to believe in God ... Also, that the first will was neither uselessly given, nor in vain or accidentally.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Strikingly, Irenaeus equates the two wills or testaments here first with “law” (*lex*) and “gospel” (*evangelium*), and then speaks of the “first will” (*prius testamentum*). Thus clearly he understands “testament” to mean not only “covenant,” but also “a transfer of inheritance,” especially with respect to scriptures and the gospel.

There are two passages in *Adversus haereses* in which Irenaeus uses “New Testament” to indicate a compilation of Christian writings. In the first, he makes the case that God’s single will is present in both testaments, and that the two cannot judged in comparison to each other. Irenaeus equates the “first” testament with the law, and the second with the gospel. The opposition of the two testaments as well as their respective alignment with the law and the gospel builds on Paul’s mention of the “Old Testament” (2 Corinthians 3:14),[[12]](#footnote-12) in reference to which Marcion coined the term “New Testament.” That Irenaeus is, in fact, guided here by Marcion can be gleaned from his reaction to his opponent, particularly in his preface to the *Antitheses=contrarietates*, summarized in the following passage: “There are more such commandments. For all these do not contain or imply an opposition (*contrarietas*) to and an overturning of the [precepts] of the past, as Marcion’s followers strenuously maintain.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

In both placesin *Adversus haereses* where “New Testament” denotes a collection of Christian writings, it is used in reference to Marcion and his followers. In the first instance, he mentions the gospel, as well as Paul’s letters, presents the structure of Marcion’s “New Testament,”[[14]](#footnote-14) and argues against him. In the second case, the term “New Testament” appears in Irenaeus’ long quote of a report by an anonymous anti-Marcionite Presbyter,[[15]](#footnote-15) which he explicitly declares to be an examination of “the doctrine of Marcion.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

This overview shows that Irenaeus uses the word “Testament” to denote a “certificate of inheritance/transfer,” that is, the idea of a “will,” or a “covenant.” With the exception of refering to Marcion’s collection and in imitation of him, nowhere else in his works does he ever use the term “New Testament” to mean a collection of Christian writings or refer to his own collection of writings by that title.[[17]](#footnote-17)

From all this, we can draw the same conclusion about Irenaeus that Wolfram Kinzig draws about Tertullian in his study of the term *testamentum*: only when the author refers to Marcion and his position does he borrow the language of his subject and use the term “testament” to mean a collection of writings.[[18]](#footnote-18) While Tertullian uses “New Testament” in the technical sense in his anti-Marcionite writings, Irenaeus remains critical or rejects Marcion’s terminology because it divides God’s will in two and leads to two testaments—an “old” one and a “new” one.

It, therefore, seems improbable that Irenaeus accepted the compilation of scriptures known to us as the “New Testament” by that name.[[19]](#footnote-19) He must have borrowed the terms “Old” and “New Testament” from Marcion. As Kinzig points out, Justin Martyr, who was slightly older than Irenaeus, never uses the term “New Testament” to mean a collection of Christian writings, although “the opposition between the old and the new διαθήκη plays a prominent role” in his work.[[20]](#footnote-20) For this reason, the mere appearance of the term “Old Testament” in the work of a second-century author should not automatically lead us to the conclusion that it is being used in the technical sense, let alone that it stands in opposition to the “New Testament.” Melito of Sardes, a contemporary of Irenaeus, may serve as an example here. Although he speaks of an “Old Testament,” we cannot necessarily infer from this—as scholars often do—that he thought of the Christian collection of writings as the “New Testament.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Given that Irenaeus was able to write of “the Gospel covenant [as] being manifest and known to the whole world,”[[22]](#footnote-22) thereby using *testamentum* (διαθήκη) to mean “covenant,” Melito may too have been thinking of a “covenant.” Similarly, an anonymous anti-Montanist of the late second century may not necessarily have understood the term differently when he spoke of “the word of the new covenant of the gospel…to which he does not want to add anything…since no one who is determined to live according to this gospel is allowed to add or remove anything.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Heilmann provides good reasons for why “gospel” should be understood here as a reference to a written document,[[24]](#footnote-24) to and from which nothing may be added or subtracted. However, the word “covenant” is most likely to be associated with laws, either those of the Torah in the case of the old covenant, or those of the gospel in the case of the new one. A compilation of Christian writings is not necessarily the likeliest connotation here, even if “New Testament” is being used as a title in this case.

These reflections show the complexity of the term “New Testament.” What is clear, notwithstanding, is that the Fathers up to and including Tertullian continued using the language that we first encountered in Marcion, but were extremely reluctant to use the epithet precisely because of its Marcionite resonance.[[25]](#footnote-25) Irenaeus is no exception but merely a representative of a larger trend. By understanding “testament” as “inheritance document” or “covenant” he abides by the term’s traditional usage. Along with “gospel,” the term is understood particularly in the sense of the transfer of a Christian heritage, as in the case of Justin Martyr.

If Trobisch claims that “the uniform testimony of the existing [manuscript and papyrological] tradition clearly indicates that this [“The New Testament”] was the title of the archetype,”[[26]](#footnote-26) then we have reason to believe that this archetype was Marcion’s collection, which was the first to bear the title. Irenaeus’s untitled collection, on the other hand, served as a critical substitute for it and to some extent as a follow-up in that it adopted Marcion’s sequence of gospels and letters. The lasting influence of Marcion’s work is attested to by the fact that Irenaeus’ compilation came down in history not untitled, but rather with the title of the compilation that it was meant to replace.

Thus the title, as reflected in the manuscript’s “uniform” tradition, is not only important to the characterization of the collection, but also a reminder of the difficult process of reception Marcion’s initial collection had undergone. It suggests that even Irenaeus’ revised and expanded version with the four gospels, Acts, the epistles of Paul, the Catholic letters, and Revelation did not immediately become common knowledge and needed the support of important authors, such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen, to win broader support and enter the tradition of the Church.

This novel assessment of key sources, which opposes many of the general assumptions found in textbooks today, has consequences for ancient and contemporary constructions of the beginnings of Christianity. If the revised collection of Christian writings was not universally regarded as a “New Testament” in the early centuries of the Church, but viewed instead as a deliberately created compilation and antithesis to Marcion’s “New Testament,” then it becomes easier to understand why these authors stressed the link between this collection and the writings that they primarily regarded as scriptures, namely, the Torah, the Books of the Prophets and the Writings. This was the “First Testament,” that is, God’s original covenant with humanity and Israel, which they did not wish to see rejected or denied. Instead, they wished to present the Chrisitian writings as a broadening of this original testament, and erase the sharp contrasts that Marcion imposed with the presentation of his Christian “New Testament.” Yet, like Marcion, other authors, such as Ptolemaius, Aristides, Ignatius, and Justin, also had difficulty accepting the “First Testament” in its entirety.[[27]](#footnote-27) The discussion of its standing and the ambivalence toward the validity of its commandments affected the not-yet-crystallized authority of the Christian scriptures, including the gospels and Paul’s epistles. In contrast to Marcion, who believed that the “New Testament” should incorporate the new edict, separate and independent of the one given in the “Old Testament,” Irenaeus advocated that God’s initial covenant with its salvific-historical events be integrated into the story of Christ, whose deeds and teachings were to be understood as the fulfillment of the older prophecies.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The dependence of Irenaeus’ collection of Christian writings on its shorter predecessor—Marcion’s “New Testament” —is supported by the generally accepted hypothesis that Irenaeus followed a “Western” type of text,[[29]](#footnote-29) possibly based on a “vorlage of D or a manuscript of a similar text type,”[[30]](#footnote-30) or one even closer to the Latin Western text type, that is, the tradition of manuscripts (D, d, it, sy), which, as we know, is associated with Marcion’s text type.

Bingham, J. D. and B. R. J. Todd (2012). Irenaeus's Text of the Gospels in *Adversus haereses*. The Early Text of the New Testament. C. E. Hill and M. J. Kruger. Oxford, Oxford University Press**:** 370-392.

Heilmann, J. (2018). Die These einer *editio princeps* des Neuen Testaments im Spiegel der Forschungsdiskussion der letzten zwei Jahrzehnte. Das Neue Testament und sein Text im 2. Jahrhundert. J. Heilmann and M. Klinghardt. Tübingen, Narr Francke Attempto**:** 21-56.

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Orosius, P. and A. T. Fear (2010). Seven books of history against the Pagans. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press.

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1. Orosius and Fear (2010). "Seven books of history against the Pagans." 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Orosius, *Hist.* I 72 (trans. Fear). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Overbeck and Emmelius (2006). "Werke und Nachlass 9. Aus den Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Alten Kirche bis zum Konzil von Nicaea 325 n. Chr." 162-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Kinzig (1994). "Καινὴ διαϑήκη: The title of the New Testament in the second and third centuries." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. „διαθήκη in der Bibel den von Gott gestifteten Bund (bezeichnete), die von Gott der Gemeinde gegebene Ordnung ihres Verhältnisses zu ihm, und καινὴ διαθήκη eine der Endzeit vorbehaltene, durch Christus gestiftete Neuordnung dieses Verhältnisses, also nicht Offenbarungsurkunde, sondern Offenbarung“ (own trans.), Zahn (1888/1892). "Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons und der altkirchlichen Literatur." 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Neither the English nor the German translations of the works of Irenaeus are accurate. Admittedly, there are also cases in which the translation remains disputable. Examples of difficult passages include: Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 17,5 and 28,1-2 where, in the English translation (ANL), „hic et illic“ reads as „both Testaments“ and “in novo testamento“ reads as “New Testament,“ whereas the German translation more sensibly translates both terms as “covenant” („Bund“). Similarly difficult is Iren., *Adv. haer*. V 34,1 and *Epid*. 91. Another case is Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 32, where, within a longer series of arguments on the old and the new covenant, Irenaeus may have wanted to talk about the „two testaments,“ as it is presented in the English and German translations. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Iren., *Adv. haer*. I 3,6; I 27,2 (in an anti-Marcionite context); IV 3,31. See Hoh (1919). "Die Lehre des hl. Irenäus über das Neue Testament (gekrönte Preisschrift)." 3. 80-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Iren., *Adv. haer*. V 9,4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 12,3; 28,1; 32,1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 12,3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 32,2 (own trans.). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ἀλλὰ ἐπωρώθη τὰ νοήματα αὐτῶν ἄχρι γὰρ τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας τὸ αὐτὸ κάλυμμα ἐπὶ τῇ ἀναγνώσει *τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης* μένει μὴ ἀνακαλυπτόμενον ὅτι ἐν Χριστῷ καταργεῖται. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 13,1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 15,2. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The report is given in Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 27-32; see on it with older lit. Vinzent (2014). "Marcion and the dating of the synoptic gospels." 52-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Iren., *Adv. haer*. IV 33,1. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For more on this topic, see my forthcoming study on the development of the New Testament in the second century. Hoh claims that whenever Irenaeus uses “novum testamentum,” he is alluding to the new covenant („neuen Bund“) and states this as a fact („zur Gewißheit erhoben“), whereas Zahn merely suggests („was Zahn vermutete“) that Irenaeus never referred to he two parts of the Bible by these titles („Irenäus niemals die beiden Hälften der Bibel so [A und NT] benannt[e]“), so Hoh (1919). "Die Lehre des hl. Irenäus über das Neue Testament (gekrönte Preisschrift)." 3, Zahn (1888/1892). "Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons und der altkirchlichen Literatur." I 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kinzig (1994). "Καινὴ διαϑήκη: The title of the New Testament in the second and third centuries." [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Pace* Trobisch (1996). "Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments: Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel." 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kinzig (1994). "Καινὴ διαϑήκη: The title of the New Testament in the second and third centuries." 528. With older lit. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. So, for example, even in the critical scholarship by Trobisch (1996). "Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments: Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel." 69, Heilmann (2018). Die These einer *editio princeps* des Neuen Testaments im Spiegel der Forschungsdiskussion der letzten zwei Jahrzehnte. Das Neue Testament und sein Text im 2. Jahrhundert, 39 n. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Iren., *Adv. haer*. V 9,4. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In Euseb. Caes., *Hist. eccl*. V 16,3. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Heilmann (2018). Die These einer *editio princeps* des Neuen Testaments im Spiegel der Forschungsdiskussion der letzten zwei Jahrzehnte. Das Neue Testament und sein Text im 2. Jahrhundert, 40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. A similar case seems to be Clem. Alex., *Strom*. II 2,29,2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Trobisch (2000). "The First Edition of the New Testament." 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Trobisch (1996). "Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments: Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel." 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. With all known scepticism towards the rightly voiced critique of the term and concept of “Western text” in New Testament textual criticism, see for example, with further lit. Bingham and Todd (2012). Irenaeus's Text of the Gospels in *Adversus haereses*. The Early Text of the New Testament, 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Parker (1996). The Palaeographical Debate. Codex Bezae: Studies from the Lunel Colloquium, 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)