

With some very sage outside advice, I have decided to add a new feature to the blog. Once or twice a week (at least that's the *plan*) I will create a kind of "general introduction" post, dealing with some broad and basic matter connected with the New Testament, the Historical Jesus, the apostle Paul, the role of women in the church, persecution and martyrdom, heresy and orthodoxy, the development of theology, the Christianization of the empire, etc. etc. Broad overviews, of the BIG matters, at the introductory level.

The idea is to make, say, three or four related posts on each issue, and then, when they're completed, edit them all together into one massive post (say 4000-5000) words, and have that post well indexed with lots of links to other posts on the blog. That way, we can maximize its wide availability throughout the internet. When someone googles "What Is The New Testament," they will find this particular post; the post will link to other posts on the blog. People go to these other posts. They decide to join the blog. The blog grows. It makes billions of dollars. And it all goes to charity. How good can it get?

So, today I start, at the beginning. This is the first post of a projected three (but we'll see what happens) on What Is The New Testament? For some of you this will be helpful (new) information; for many of the rest of you, it will put in concise summary form much of what you already know, but hopefully would like to see in a succinct presentation.

MOST IMPORTANT: If you have suggestions about how to improve any of these posts — whether you're a novice, a dilettante, or a professed expert — do let me know. I want to make them as good as I can. And as well as I can....

What Is The New Testament?

In the simplest terms, the New Testament is the Christian Scripture, the foundation of the Christian religion, revered by Christians as the Word of God for nearly two thousand years, throughout the world today accepted as the authoritative account of who Jesus is, how he brought salvation, what people should believe, and how they should live.

Even those who are not Christian can recognize that the New Testament is immensely important socially, culturally, and historically. Given its impact on world affairs, from the fourth century through the Middle Ages, into the Reformation and early modernity, and on till today is the most important book in the history of Western civilization, without a close rival.

In this article we will explore the various books that make up the New Testament: what they are, how they are organized, who wrote them and when, how they came to be gathered together into a "canon" of Scripture, how they were copied over the years until the invention of printing, what each of the books is about, what their major teachings are, and the issues they have raised for modern scholars.

The Make-Up of the New Testament: A Broad Overview

The New Testament is ...

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The New Testament is made up of twenty-seven different books written by over a dozen Christian authors. All of them are written in ancient Greek. As a whole, they are our earliest surviving Christian writings.

In terms of broad chronology, Jesus was crucified sometime around the year 30 CE (CE stands for the “Common Era,” the term widely used now for “A.D.”). The first books of the New Testament were by the apostle Paul, dating roughly to 50-64 CE. The Gospels and the book of Acts were written later, probably from around 70-95 CE. The other books are notoriously difficult to date, but they are usually placed near the end of the first century. Normally 2 Peter is understood to be the final book of the New Testament to be written, around 120 CE.

The New Testament is therefore not arranged chronologically, but in sections corresponding to what kind of writings they are: Gospels, Acts, Epistles (or Letters), and Apocalypse.

The Organization of the New Testament

In modern translations the New Testament comes to us in four sections:

Gospels

There are four Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of them is an account of Jesus’ life. Two of them begin with stories of his birth and infancy (Matthew and Luke); one begins with his baptism by John the Baptist when he was an adult (Mark); the other begins with a poem describing his pre-existence with God before he came into the world (John).

All of the accounts describe Jesus’ life, ministry, miracles, teachings, death, and resurrection. The first three — Matthew, Mark, and Luke - are particularly similar to one another, telling many of the same stories, usually in the same sequence, and often in the very same words. They can therefore be placed next to each other and read side by side; for that reason they are called the “Synoptic” Gospels, from a Greek term that means “seen together” (syn - optic). John tells a number of different stories, with a different style.

As a whole, the Gospels then tell the story of the beginnings of Christianity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Acts

The second section of the New Testament consists of a single book, the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. Acts picks up the narrative after Jesus’ resurrection, and describes how his disciples began a mission to spread the “good news” (the technical meaning of the word “gospel”) throughout the world, by doing miracles and preaching about his death and resurrection.

The main character in Acts is the apostle Paul, who converts from being an enemy and

persecutor of the church to becoming its greatest missionary a third of the way into the book. Most of the rest of the account narrates Paul's missionary activities, emphasizing his importance in preaching that faith in Jesus was not for Jews only, but for gentiles as well, who could be saved without having to keep the Jewish law.

This section of the New Testament, then, tells the story of the spread of Christianity.

Epistles

The third section of the New Testament contains twenty-one epistles written by various Christian leaders to other Christian communities. Most of these are actual pieces of correspondence, letters sent through the ancient equivalent of the Postal Service. In them the authors discuss important issues that had arisen in the Christian communities, dealing with problems these Christians were encountering, particularly about what to believe and how to live.

The epistles are divided into two subsections: the thirteen Pauline epistles and the General (or "Catholic," a word that means "universal") epistles. Paul's letters are not arranged chronologically but according to length, the longest, Romans, coming first and the shortest, Philemon, last. Four of the letters are addressed to important church leaders (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon); the others are addressed to church communities (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians). Scholars debate whether all of these letters were actually written by Paul.

The eight "General" epistles are sometimes said to address broad, universal problems of the church, rather than those of specific communities. One of them, Hebrews, is anonymous (though later church fathers concluded it was written by Paul); the others have names of apostles attached to them: James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; Jude. Again, scholars debate who the actual authors were.

If the Gospels discuss the beginnings of Christianity, and Acts its spread, the General epistles discuss its ethics and beliefs.

Apocalypse

The final section of the New Testament is again a single book, the Revelation of John (note: it is not called "Revelations"), sometimes called the Apocalypse of John (the Greek equivalent of the Latin "Revelation"). By far the most mysterious and puzzling book of the New Testament, Revelation describes a set of visions the prophet John experiences about the heavenly realm and the future course of history, leading up to the destruction of the current heavens and earth and all the evil forces and wicked people who inhabit it.

The book describes numerous divinely caused disasters on earth, the coming of Christ in judgment, and the new world God will create for his followers. The book ends by inspiring its readers with the hope that all this is coming "soon."

As an appropriate conclusion to the New Testament, the book of Revelation, then discusses the culmination of Christianity.

Summary

And so the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are arranged as follows:

Gospels

- Matthew
- Mark
- Luke
- John

Acts of the Apostles

Epistles

- **Pauline**
 - Romans
 - 1 Corinthians
 - 2 Corinthians
 - Galatians
 - Ephesians
 - Philippians
 - Colossians
 - 1 Thessalonians
 - 2 Thessalonians
 - 1 Timothy
 - 2 Timothy
 - Titus
 - Philemon
- **General (= “Catholic”)**
 - Hebrews
 - James
 - 1 Peter
 - 2 Peter
 - 1 John
 - 2 John
 - 3 John
 - Jude
 - **The Revelation of John**



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Sex and Gender in the Ancient World](#)