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I. Introduction

Welcome to a survey of the New Testament.

A. Why Read the New Testament?

There are many reasons why people today are interested in this collection of books that is nearly 2,000 years old. For some, they recognize its literary artistry and appreciate the ways in which the Scriptures have influenced much of the world's great literature over the past two millennia. For others, the reason is more academic or historical, recognizing the importance of the person of Jesus over the course of human history, and particularly for history in Europe and North America, as Christianity grew from a tiny sect to a worldwide religion. Other people's interest in studying the New Testament is of a more personal, or even professional nature as they seek to become better students of those documents they believe to be God's Word and serve Him, perhaps in a full-time Christian capacity.

B. Goal of This Series

Our goal in this series is to present a survey of the New Testament that is aimed particularly at those who have some familiarity and acquaintance with the contents of the New Testament, but perhaps have never studied all of the books in a complete, systematic way. We also reflect a broadly based evangelical perspective. We are believers who take God's Word seriously. And those commitments of that faith position will influence the remarks that we make at many points along our way. However, we will try to be very conscious and conscientious of dissenting scholarly opinions on crucial issues.



ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΥ

“Gospel” means “Good News”

The Four Gospels

- Matthew
- Mark
- Luke
- John

II. Organization of the New Testament

Before we get started, however, it is important to ask the question, “What is the New Testament?” We perhaps today think of it as a book, when in fact it originated as a collection of twenty-seven different books, or more precisely scrolls—the papyrus and parchment on which these documents were first penned. The New Testament begins, in the canonical sequence in which we have it today, with four books that are identified as the Gospels—the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

A. Gospels

The word gospel comes from a Greek word that means “good news.” These four books were called “good news” by the early Christians who first collected them together because they believed that Jesus, the primary character who features in these stories, brought the greatest good news to humanity that this world has ever known. As a literary form or genre, the Gospels resemble works of history and works of biography, while not perfectly matching any other known documents from the ancient world. They are written in the style and the form that leads us to expect that their authors were trying to communicate truth about the events and the people they narrated and described.

The four Gospels are put in the order that we have them in—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—probably because that was approximately the order that the early church thought they were written in, with one exception. The gospel of Matthew probably was not first; that seems to have been Mark. But the gospel of Matthew was placed first because it provided the greatest link with the Old Testament, the body of literature that Christians, like the Jews, from when they first emerged already believed was sacred and authoritative and inspired by God. So Matthew, the most Jewish of the four Gospels, comes first; then Mark, Luke and John, probably in that order because that was the sequence in which they were written.

B. Acts of the Apostles

The fifth book of the New Testament is traditionally entitled the Acts of the Apostles. It reflects selected events of the first

Acts 2:47b
And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

- Romans
- 1 & 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Ephesians
- Philippians
- Colossians
- 1 & 2 Thessalonians
- 1 & 2 Timothy
- Titus
- Philemon



generation of Christianity after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, it tells us very little about most of the twelve apostles and centers its attention instead on two particular characters—Peter, who was one of the Twelve, and Paul, who was not, but who came to have a vision of the risen Christ and who numbered himself as equal to the apostles.

C. Pauline Epistles

After the book of Acts come thirteen epistles or letters, all attributed to the apostle Paul. These are: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The order here is not a particularly theological or religious one. It seems that these letters have been grouped together starting with the longest and proceeding to the shortest. First we have the letters written to Christian congregations, and then we have the letters written to Christian individuals—Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. And where two letters appear written to the same church or individual, then they are grouped together, slightly breaking the decreasing sequence of length.

D. General Epistles

After the letters that are attributed to Paul come eight other epistles. The first of these is the letter to the Hebrews, which does not claim to have been written by a specific person in the text that has been preserved. The early church was divided between those particularly in the Latin West or the emerging Roman Catholic Church, who thought it was from the apostle Paul. Those in the Eastern or more Greek Orthodox wing of the church thought it was from someone else; but of the many suggestions that were made, all were close followers or companions of Paul. Because of this uncertainty, the letter to the Hebrews was placed immediately following the collection of letters that were attributed to Paul. It was not placed in the order and the sequence of the letters that its length would have otherwise suggested.

The remaining seven epistles are often called the Catholic or General Epistles. Catholic, here, simply means universal or that which was written to a wide, diverse area or region;

James | The brother of our Lord

Peter | The first bishop of the church in Rome

John | Portrayed in the Gospels and the Acts as the “companion”

Jude | The half-brother of our Lord and the least well-known of the four

REVELATION

The Greek word means more than contents being revealed.

APOCALYPSE

or it was also understood as a group of Christian churches rather than just a single church or individual. These letters include: James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. Why in this order—James, Peter, John, and Jude? Here we are less sure, but the answer seems to have to do with the order of prominence of the four authors of these General Epistles in the earliest years of Christianity.

James, we learn about from the first half of the book of Acts, the half-brother of our Lord, was the chief elder or leader of the church in Jerusalem in its earliest days. Peter, who becomes much more prominent not long afterwards, eventually becomes the first bishop of the church in Rome. John is frequently portrayed in the Gospels and the Acts as the “companion,” though slightly less prominent than Peter. And Jude, another half-brother of our Lord, is clearly the least well-known of the four. So it may simply be that they were arranged in this decreasing order of prominence, accounting for the sequence: James, Peter, John, and Jude.

E. Revelation

The final book, the twenty-seventh in the New Testament, is Revelation, sometimes popularly called the book of Revelations—although no text in Greek or any of the modern translations uses the plural and probably for a reason. Although John received many visions from Jesus about what he describes in this book, they are all seen as comprising a unity—one unified revelation of Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated “revelation,” however, is the word from which we get in English the term “apocalypse,” and it means something much more than contents being revealed. It refers to a literary form that was well-known in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world, often a highly symbolic description of past, present, or future events. These concepts were all brought together from the perspective of those who believe that God would bring human history to a climax and that He would decisively intervene at times in a cosmic or even supernatural way to wind up or bring about a close to human history as we know it—to vindicate His people, His faithful followers, and to bring judgment upon His enemies.

III. Questions to Ask the Text

We will have much more to say about each of these literary forms and each of these parts of the New Testament as we look at each book, one at a time. But we need to make one other introductory set of comments at this point; that is, to briefly rehearse the kinds of questions that we will be asking of the texts as we survey them. Primarily, we are thinking in terms of four kinds of questions of the many that could be brought to documents such as those found in the New Testament.

A. Historical Background

The first are types of questions of introduction or historical background. Along the way, we will be asking questions in more detail and trying to provide the answers as to who wrote each of these books, under what circumstances, the question of what time, what date, to what specific audiences facing what unique set of problems. These questions will be crucial as we try to move from then, 2,000 years ago in a culture far away and very removed from many modern cultures, to applying the text to our Christian lives today. Early on, we will spend a couple of lessons setting the stage for the historical background to the entire New Testament period. Without this kind of context, it is very easy to take texts out of their original context and make them mean something that their original authors could never have intended, or that the original readers could never have understood.

B. Interpretation

The second type of question is a question of interpretation or exegesis, leading out of the text what the main ideas are in the sequence and in the structure, trying to understand a little bit of the outline or the narrative flow of the author's thoughts in each book. Then, commenting on a more difficult task, exegesis concentrates particularly on some of the more difficult problems for interpreters that have taxed commentators throughout church history.

C. Theology

The third type of question is a question of theology. This is a more synthetic question: Having worked through a book sequentially, having pointed out its main contents, having

1 | Historical Background



2 | Interpretation or exegesis



3 | Theology

Sequential Process
Context
Interpretation

Central
Lessons

1. Social or political developments
2. Religious components of the New Testament



The Bible

stopped perhaps briefly to speak about some interpretative problems, what then emerges as the central lessons that the original author wanted to communicate? Some additional questions to ask: What were the original tasks, what types of commands to be obeyed, what kinds of examples to be followed or to be avoided? In short, what does this book teach about the major doctrines of the Christian faith? These are questions of theology.

D. Contemporary Application

Fourth and finally, we will try to deal with questions of contemporary application. In some ways, this is the hardest to cover in a brief survey because every culture, every audience, every individual interpreter will find him or herself in unique circumstances, and therefore applications will vary. There may be as many applications as there are listeners or watchers of this series, but the meaning remains the same in the text even as the applications vary.

IV. Intertestamental Period

With those preliminary comments, we are ready to begin with several sections of historical background, first of all, to the entire New Testament. Here we want to divide our comments into two major categories: first, the broader socio or political developments, the types of things you would expect to read about in a history book of the ancient world of any culture; and secondly we want to look at those more distinctively religious components that make up important background to a study of the New Testament. With the remaining time, we are going to limit ourselves to the more socio-political developments of the history of the centuries, leading immediately up to the writing of the New Testament and the events that the New Testament narrates.

The New Testament did not emerge in a vacuum, nor was Christianity birthed following its founder, Jesus, without many significant events that led up to its formation. All the first Christians and all the writers of the New Testament believed that they already had sacred Scriptures, what in those days were simply called “the Scriptures,” or even “the writings,” but which Christians eventually came to call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures to distinguish them from these twenty-

| TIME | 430 B.C. | | | | | 5 B.C. |
|-----------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------|--|----------------|
| PERIOD | Between the testaments | | | | | |
| EVENTS | Persian control | Greek empire | Ptolemies | Seleucids | Maccabean revolt and hasmonean dynasty | Roman empire |
| PEOPLE | Darius the Mede | Alexander the Great | | | Judas Maccabeus | Julius Casesar |
| SCRIPTURE | | | | | | |

seven new books, newer writings known as the New Testament. The New Testament, therefore, must be seen as self-consciously claiming to be the culmination of the history that was described in the Old Testament, and the fulfillment of many of the promises found in those earlier thirty-nine books.

But the Old Testament was complete sometime in the fifth century B.C. The last book chronologically to be written was probably also the book that appears at the end of the English sequence of the Old Testament canon, namely the writing of the prophet Malachi. Conservative scholars usually date the prophecy of Malachi to approximately 425 B.C. That leaves more than four complete centuries for history to continue. This is often called the intertestamental period, leading up to the time of Jesus and the events that created and birthed the New Testament.

A. Persian Empire

Now when Malachi died, nothing particularly changed in Jewish history that would have led secular historians to mark off a new era in the history of the world. Those who are familiar with the last books of the Old Testament will recall that the Jews had been languishing in exile under several foreign oppressors; but the Persian government allowed, particularly the ruler, those who wanted to return to the land of Israel. Then under successive rulers, they began to rebuild the temple and the entire city, the capital city—the holy city of Jerusalem. This was underway during the period of the latest writing prophets, and for roughly another century things continued relatively unchanged under various Persian emperors.

B. Greece

But a decisive new period of Middle Eastern history begins with the rise of Alexander the Great, a Macedonian or Greek general, who in a very short period of time, perhaps roughly thirteen years, conquered almost all of what Persia had previously held under its control—a wide swath of the land of the Middle East, and eventually amassed the greatest empire known in the ancient Near Eastern times.

Alexander died in the year 323 B.C., not before including Israel as part of his subjugated lands. But his generals, among whom his empire was divided, continued the process which we may call the beginning of a period of Hellenism or Hellenization that comes from the Greek word *Hellas*, which simply was the name in Greek for the country of Greece. Hellenization was the process that spread the influence of Greek language, Greek culture, and Greek religion throughout all of the ancient Middle East, leaving it forever changed in its wake.

C. Seleucid and Ptolemy Rule

After Alexander died and his generals competed for his empire, things settled down, so that largely the northern half of his empire came under the command of the Seleucids—after the name of one of Alexander’s generals, Seleucus I. The southern half of his empire came under the command of the Ptolemies. And unfortunately, if one looks at a map one sees that Israel is caught smack-dab in the middle area that was disputed between these two empires. For the first half of the period of Hellenistic influence, Israel remained under Ptolemaic control. For the second half, it came increasingly under Seleucid control. The Seleucids were less benign than the Ptolemaic overlords, and increasingly put taxation on their subjugated people. They tried to influence them away from their ancestral religions and encourage them to adopt Greek religion and practices, many of which were anathema to the Jews of that day.

Things came particularly to a head in the 160s B.C., after nearly a century and a half of first Ptolemaic and then Seleucid control. A Seleucid emperor by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes, Antiochus IV, took the name Epiphanes upon himself, meaning “the God manifest,” and claimed all kinds of things that were outrageous from a Jewish perspective. Not only did he claim to be God, but he tried to forbid all of the fundamental practices of Jewish religions such as reading the scrolls of Scripture, the Torah, or practicing circumcision. The worst feature of all of Antiochus’ evil deeds came in 167 B.C., when he desecrated the temple by slaughtering a pig on the altar in the holy place. This led to a guerrilla revolt as we would describe it today.



D. Maccabees / Hasmonean Dynasty

An aged priest by the name Mattathias and his sons—spearheaded by one named Judas, nicknamed Maccabeus, the “Hammerer,”—led an insurgence. This today would be considered a terrorist revolt, as he and a small band of greatly outnumbered Jewish freedom fighters headed for the hills, adopted unknown guerrilla tactics, and were able to overthrow the invading Syrian or Seleucid forces. This took place within a three-year period of time and liberated the temple. This liberation is still celebrated today with the Jewish ceremony or festival known as Hanukkah.

This then inaugurated a second major new period of intertestamental history that could be called the period of Hasidism, from a Jewish word meaning “the pious one.” It has also been known as the Hasmonean Dynasty, because this was the period in which Mattathias, Judas, and their successors, who all came from a family of an ancestor by the name of Hasmoneus, ruled. In short, it was roughly a century-long period of Jewish independence and a golden age in Jewish history.

However, there were negative side effects from this period. Because of all the warfare, because of the years of exile, Jews became increasingly polarized against the Gentiles or non-Jewish people who surrounded them and at times lived with them. They became, in many cases, more and more intractably opposed to false religions and cultural influences. Much of the hatred and animosity that we sense in reading the New Testament between Jews and Gentiles, an animosity that Christianity claims to be able to break down, is a result of this period of a hundred years or so of Jewish independence.

E. Roman Influence

While all good things have to come to an end, and while the Jews were celebrating their new-found freedom in Israel, a new power was emerging from the West—the Roman Empire—which increasingly conquered Greek territory and eventually, by the year 63 B.C., was knocking on Israel’s door. In essence, Israel invited Rome to come in to solve an internal succession squabble. But what it amounted to

was the end of freedom and the third and final period of intertestamental history that would carry right through the entire first century and the writing of all of the New Testament documents, namely the period of Romanization or Roman Rule.

Now at first, this was not a bad thing for the emerging church after the time of Christ and the first apostles. Thanks to Roman unification, the Greek language that had spread everywhere throughout previous centuries continued to be a common language, so the New Testament was written in Greek, read and understood by almost everyone. Excellent transportation and communication systems; the famous Pax Romana or “Roman peace”; the fact that Christians, like Jews before them were allowed limited self-government—all were boons to the spread of early Christianity. That was true during the time of the life of Christ and for about one generation later, but with the coming of Nero in the 60s A.D. we see the first instance of Roman persecution of Christians. Particularly, this persecution was tied to the fact that they began to recognize that Christians were not just another Jewish sect, and, therefore, they did not automatically enjoy the freedoms that the Jews had been granted.

In A.D. 70, however, Jews came under the target of Rome, as well as a rebellion by the zealot wing of the Jewish people in Jerusalem. This led to the Roman general Titus invading Jerusalem, burning the temple, destroying it almost to the ground and putting an end to a Jewish state in Israel as well. The year A.D. 70, from a secular point of view, is probably the most significant date for first-century history. There was one more brief Jewish uprising in the early second century, in the 130s, that was even more decisively squelched, but Judaism would never again be an independent nation until the 1940s.

Those brief comments, then, trace the political events that set the stage for the coming of Jesus and the events that will turn into the development of the New Testament.