

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

St. Matthew Bible Study

In the Old Testament God called the descendants of Abraham to Himself. This Elect or Chosen People were to heed the prophecies of the later prophets and prepare for the coming of the Christ or *messiah* (“anointed one”). As Mary proclaims in her *Magnificat*, God “**has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever**” (Luke 1:54-55).

In the New Testament all is centered upon Jesus, Who is the fulfillment of the prophecies, and upon the Church, the new People of God. Indeed Jesus came so that people of *all* nations would become sons and daughters of God (Ephesians 1: 3-10).

Therefore in God’s plan Jesus is our salvation, “**the Savior of the world**” (John 4:42). Without Him there is no redemption, no forgiveness of sins; for Jesus is the obedient Son Who sacrifices His life to atone for our sins and open the way to life everlasting. This sacrifice, Jesus says, “**is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins**” (Matthew 26:28). Only by Christ’s Blood is the definitive alliance formed anew between God and man. What for centuries Israel lived for in hope is now attained in the Church; for the Church is the New Israel, the successor of the people of the old covenant (Galatians 3:29). Now faith in Jesus Christ is what binds this new people together.

From Jesus to the Gospels: the Oral Tradition of the Good News

“*The most difficult initial problem in the history of literacy is appreciating what preceded it*” (M. T. Clanchy, “From Memory to Written Record”). Indeed what preceded the written word was speech, including the proclamation of the “good news” or *gospel* of Jesus Christ—speech that of course was not immediately transcribed as it was spoken.

In fact for approximately thirty-five years after the Resurrection, word-of-mouth was the only means of spreading the gospel. This was the *kerygma* (Greek, “announcement” or “proclamation”) of Jesus Christ, Savior of the world! In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) the Jews had recorded in their sacred scrolls the Law, the Prophets and the Writings; but in the New Testament, Jesus IS the Word. Effectively, when He spoke the gospel’s oral tradition began. And when He rose from the dead, His Resurrection ignited the proclamation of the “good news” throughout the Roman Empire.



As such, those who heard Jesus and/or the Apostles speak, relied on their memory to repeat what they heard and saw. These sayings, miracle stories, and parables of Jesus were then passed on verbally to others. Of course such recollections and impressions had an even greater impact when the listeners themselves were convicted of the truth.

However a turning point came with Emperor Nero’s persecution of Christians, including the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in A.D. 67. Then, just three years later, Emperor Titus invades and destroys Jerusalem and the Temple. Such violent upheaval shook the Christian consciousness with the stark reminder that Jesus of Nazareth was no longer among them.

Therefore the question became: how much longer can we depend upon oral transmission alone for the spreading of the gospel?

Clearly there was a need to preserve the gospel beyond easygoing storytelling to a fully historical, *documented* account of the life and death of Jesus the Christ. Yet the gospel itself still needed to be *proclaimed*, i.e., read aloud. Thus two competing tendencies emerged in the early Church: 1) gradually moving the gospel beyond its solely oral transmission to written form, and 2) the continued oral proclamation of the eventual written gospel.

An added feature of this evolution from the oral to the written word was that the written word would be permanently open to study and interpretation—especially the parables. As the Church would soon learn, Jesus’ parables often required interpretation if the primary means by which the Lord communicated His message was to continue to connect with listeners and readers.

THE GOSPELS: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John

The four Gospels are primarily accounts of Jesus’ life and words. In most Catholic Bibles the gospels are listed in the traditional order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew is usually listed first because it was simply the most frequently quoted of all the gospels in the early Church. Matthew, the Jewish tax collector and later Apostle, wrote for a largely “Jewish-Christian” audience. Naturally former Jews who are now professing faith in Christ would have appreciated Matthew’s frequent references to the Hebrew Scriptures.

However Mark is actually the oldest gospel, written between A.D. 68-73. Scripture analysis of the three *synoptic* gospels (able to be studied side by side), Mark, Matthew and Luke reveals that both Matthew and Luke copied from Mark. Indeed eighty percent of Mark’s verses are reproduced in Matthew, and sixty-five percent are reproduced in Luke.

The Gospel of Mark (a.k.a. John Mark, Evangelist, companion of Paul and Peter)

Date of composition: A.D. 68-73

Audience: Gentile Christians.

Mark emphasizes the necessity of suffering and the cross, which may reflect the persecution of Christians at the time Mark wrote his gospel. Mark also explains Jewish traditions because his readers were Gentile Christians for whom such Jewish notions and customs would not have been appreciated (Mark 7:3-4).

The Gospel of Matthew (Apostle)

Audience: Jewish Christians

Date of Composition: A.D. 80-90

Matthew serves as a kind of “manual” of Christian life for teachers of the new faith. In Matthew Jesus fulfills God’s will as prophesied in the Old Testament; and the true Israel are the followers of Jesus who receive divine forgiveness and fellowship. Jesus is contrasted with the teachers of Judaism—the scribes—as far superior to them. Jesus is also the New Moses (Sermon on the Mount, Mt. 5-7:28) and New Lawgiver (Mt. 5:17).

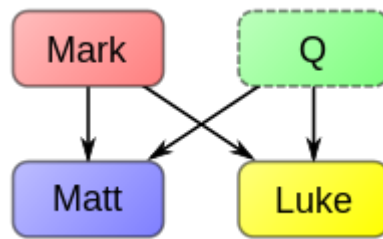
The Gospel of Luke (Evangelist, companion of Paul)

Audience: primarily Gentile Christians

Date of Composition: A.D. 85

Luke’s gospel is actually the first volume of his 2-volume work that was meant to be read as a whole: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. For Luke’s purpose was to show the *continuity* between the historical ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the Apostles begun at

Pentecost (Acts 10:37-42). In this way Luke assures his readers of the fidelity of the Church's teaching and the teaching of Jesus.



“Q” or *quelle* (German, “source”) is a 2nd century collection of words and sayings of Jesus from other sources.

The Gospel of John (Apostle)

Audience: Jewish and Gentile Christians

Date of Composition: A.D. 80-110

The Gospel of John is independent from the other synoptic Gospels because of the differences in style, content, chronology, and theological development. John takes us behind the scenes of Jesus' earthly ministry, letting us glimpse the eternal origin and divine nature of the Word made flesh (John 1:14). John records real events but also interprets and presents Jesus Christ as the object of faith. Overall, John wants to preserve the memory of Jesus for late 1st century readers—a memory that was to continue long after the death of the eyewitnesses.

The Acts of the Apostles (Luke, Evangelist, companion of Paul)

Audience: primarily Gentile Christians

Date of Composition: A.D. 85

The Acts of the Apostles, beginning and ending in Jerusalem, is an account of the evangelization of all peoples beyond Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria to the immediate areas of the Roman empire. The central leaders in this narrative are Peter and Paul.

In Acts the spread of Christianity *is* the narrative, and not the expectation of the Second Coming that characterizes the Letters to the various churches. Acts begins in Jerusalem with the Twelve and ends with Paul, whose last words proclaim that the future of Christianity lies with the Gentiles (Acts 28:25-29). Thus Acts envisions an *enduring* Christianity due to its continuity with Jesus and the Apostles, especially Peter and Paul. In Acts the work of evangelization is not something haphazard but is guided by the Spirit received from Jesus.

The Book of Revelation (John, Apostle)

Audience: the churches of Western Asia Minor: Ephesus (Greece); Smyrna (Greece); Pergamum (Greece); Thyatira (Turkey); Sardis (Turkey); Philadelphia (Turkey); and Laodicia (Turkey).

Date of Composition: A.D. 92-96

The Book of Revelation or “Apocalypse,” is a style of Christian writing that resulted from the persecution of the early Church and the catastrophic fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The Greek noun *apocalypse* means “disclosure” or “revelation.” Its visions encompass what is happening simultaneously in heaven and on earth—visions that can be expressed only in signs. These visions reassured readers that what was happening all around them was yet under the control of God above; and that the struggles between good and evil are a part of Revelation.

Since the apocalyptic message is highly symbolic, it is beyond casual rational interpretation. The message conveyed through letters to specific churches reminds Christians

that the kingdom of God is larger than any particular period in history; that despite or even because of the sufferings of the early Church, God will be victorious in the end. Still, Revelation is not an exact prediction of the future. Rather the grandeur of the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, the first and the last, lies beyond mere human calculation (Revelation 1:8).

THE LETTERS

The first Christian literature that would later become the New Testament was in the form of letters. Such letters were largely written to answer immediate problems facing the early Church, including the urgent message that the “last times” were at hand and that Jesus would soon return: **“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come”** (1 Corinthians 10:11). **“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed”** (Romans 13:11).

Paul wrote the earliest letters to the churches in Rome, Corinth (Greece), Galatia (Turkey), Ephesus (Greece), Philippi (Greece), Colossae (Turkey), and Thessalonica (Greece). Paul also wrote to individual church leaders such as Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.

Generally, Paul’s letters are arranged in the Bible not by date of composition but from longest to shortest.

Letters to established churches

Romans
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 & 2 Thesalonians

Letters to individuals

1 & 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

THE EPISTLES

Epistles are not *letters* in the strict sense. Epistles are later works written to large groups of Christians living in the 1st century Roman empire. Except for **The Letter to the Hebrews** and **The Book of Revelation**, these letters are named after their traditional authors.

1 Peter and **James** are borderline cases, for they have a letter format but actually read more like a *homily*. **The Letter to the Hebrews** is utterly unique because its conclusion may read like a letter but overall it reads more like a theological treatise. Hebrews offers a profound Christology of God’s Son Who is like us in every way but sin; and Who by His sacrificial death replaced Israel’s priesthood and sacrifices. The designation “to the Hebrews” is because it also addresses “Judaizers,” i.e., former Jews now Christians who held that certain Jewish traditions and customs were still necessary for salvation, and so must be followed by all the newly baptized.

The Development of the Scriptures

The development of the oral and written traditions occurred in the following stages:

- People experienced God.
- These experiences were shared orally.
- Inspired authors created a written version.
- The successors of the Apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit, discerned the books to be included in the Scriptures (the canon).

