

Introduction to the New Testament

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Introduction

How do you introduce a book the size of the New Testament in a period of 40-45 minutes? Without question this is a difficult assignment. Nevertheless, I will attempt to provide an introduction to the New Testament that will enhance your understanding of the individual books that make it up.

Literary Genres of the New Testament

Gospels

These compositions focus on the ministry and teachings of Jesus. They do not properly correspond to any genre of contemporary Greco-Roman literature.¹

Matthew

Mark

Luke

John

History

Acts [Author: Luke]

Letters (Epistles)

The New Testament letters, especially Paul's epistles, reflect the typical structure of first-century Roman letters. The Roman letter usually included the following elements:²

Salutation
Thanksgiving
Body
Ethical instruction
Closing

Letters to Churches (Church Epistles) [all authored by Paul]

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

Letters to Individuals (Pastoral Epistles) [all authored by Paul]

1 Timothy

¹ Larry W. Hurtado, "Gospel (Genre)," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 282.

² Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 4th ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

Letters to All Christians (General Epistles)

Hebrews [Author: Unknown]
James
1 Peter
2 Peter
1 John
2 John
3 John
Jude

Prophecy (Apocalyptic)

Revelation [Author: John]

Authors of the New Testament

A number of different authors contributed to the New Testament. The whole process was supervised by the Holy Spirit, thus ensuring its complete accuracy and trustworthiness. The following chart illustrates the extent to which the various human authors were responsible for the content of the New Testament:

Author	Percentage of NT
Luke	27.1%
Paul	25.6%
John	17.8%
Matthew	13.5%
Mark	8.5%
Others	7.6%

Why Four Gospels?

Abundance of Data

It is quite reasonable that we have four distinct biographies of Jesus. Jesus performed many more works and taught many more sayings than have been recorded for us by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Jn 21:25; cf. 20:30-31).

Difference of Scope

The four gospels differ somewhat in scope. There are particularly obvious differences between the Synoptics--Matthew, Mark, and Luke--and John's gospel. While the Synoptics survey the entirety of Jesus' ministry (and some even discuss his birth), John seems more concerned with the Passion Week and the events that followed it.

Difference of Perspective

The following chart shows how each gospel identifies Jesus in a specific, distinct way:

Gospel	Perspective
Matthew	King
Mark	Servant
Luke	Son of Man
John	Son of God

Difference of Emphasis

The gospels convey different emphases. Matthew's emphasis on Jesus's Messianic qualifications appears to cater to Jewish readers. Mark is a gospel of action, depicting Jesus as an obedient servant. Luke's account is largely historical-biographical; he emphasizes Jesus's humanity. John presents the words and works of Jesus that identify Him as divine; his explicit purpose is to lead others to faith.

The Effect of Repetition

The fact that some of Jesus's words and works appear in more than one gospel serves to reinforce the most important aspects of his ministry. The gospel writers emphasize their major points through repetition. For example, the core of the gospel message, Jesus's death and resurrection, is narrated in all four gospels. On the other hand, many parables and miracles appear in only one, two, or three gospels.

Overview of New Testament History

The Anticipation of the Old Testament

The New Testament bears a very special relationship to the Old Testament. The New contains some 300 direct uses (quotations, etc.) from the Old. In addition to these direct uses one finds numerous allusions and other indirect uses.³ The New repeatedly explains, fulfills, or expands on the Old. The relationship between the Testaments is captured well in the following statements:

*"The New is in the Old contained; the Old is in the New explained."
"The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed."*

The Life & Ministry of Jesus

The gospels' narrative of Jesus's life and ministry can be summarized in the following seven stages:

Stage	Major Events/Teachings
<i>Introduction</i>	Preexistence, genealogies, birth, childhood
<i>Early ministry</i>	Baptism, temptation, wedding at Cana, ministry to Samaritan woman
<i>Ministry in Galilee</i>	Ministry in Nazareth and Capernaum, Sermon on the Mount, parables
<i>Training of the twelve</i>	Feeding of 5,000, walking on water, Peter's confession, transfiguration
<i>Ministry in Judea</i>	Woman taken in adultery, parables of good shepherd and good Samaritan
<i>Ministry in Perea</i>	Teaching in Perea, raising of Lazarus, teaching concerning divorce
<i>Ministry in Jerusalem</i>	Olivet Discourse, betrayal, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension

The Jews' Rejection of the Kingdom

Jesus presented Himself as Messiah--King of the Jews--in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. However, the Jewish nation repeatedly rejected Him and the kingdom He would have established. His message was too radical; they could not reconcile the predictions of His death with their hope for release from Roman domination. The Jews' rejection of Jesus and the kingdom culminated in their appeal to Pilate to crucify Him. However, the seeds of this rejection could be found much earlier in Jesus's ministry.

The Institution of the Church

Baptist interpreters of the Bible differ as to the exact point at which the church was instituted. The church is first mentioned in the Bible in Matthew 16:18. The church was empowered by the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. It seems clear that the church had to be founded between these two points. Some would suggest that the founding of the church was a process rather than an event. In any case, the church is unique to the New Testament. It is unforeseen in the Old Testament and was introduced following Israel's rejection of the offer of the kingdom.

³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 3.

Expansion to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, & the Uttermost Part of the Earth

The church's expansion, as narrated in the book of Acts is summarized in the following chart:

Chapters	Place	Lead Character
1-7	Jerusalem	Peter
8-9	Judea and Samaria	Philip
10-28	The uttermost part of the earth	Paul

Correlation between Acts & Epistles

The book of Acts and the epistles should be interpreted in light of each other. Consider the following examples:

- ❖ To understand the life and ministry of Timothy, we must not only study the epistles Paul wrote to him. We must, in addition, read the book of Acts and the various epistles that mention him.
- ❖ To understand Paul's ministry in Corinth, we must do more than read the letters to the Corinthians. In fact, we should discover the connections between the epistles and references to Corinth in Acts.

What's New about the New Testament?

The New Covenant

The New Testament derives its name from the new covenant. The key features of the new covenant are described below:

The New Covenant

The new covenant, which is consistently identified with the blood of Christ (e.g., Matt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 9:13-15), is new in comparison to the first covenant, the law of Moses. While both provided a way for mankind to enjoy the blessings of a relationship with God, there are sharp contrasts between the two (2 Cor 3:6-11; Heb 8:6-13; 9:11-15; 12:18-24). [. . .] The new covenant is founded on better promises than the old (Heb 8:6). Its atonement is not ceremonial but spiritual, purifying the conscience rather than the body (Heb 9:11-14). Its focus is not on earthly things, but on heavenly things (Heb 12:18-24).

The core of the Christian message is God offering mankind a new and final means of relating to him. Based in the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus's blood on the cross, the new covenant supersedes the old. It truly satisfies the judgment of God towards sin. It frees us to render acceptable service to God through the Holy Spirit. It allows us to experience personal renewal through the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:28).⁴

The Two Comings of Christ

The Old Testament predicts both the suffering and exaltation of Messiah. However, it is only in the New Testament that these conflicting images of Messiah are brought into focus. The Messianic prophecies are to be fulfilled in the person of Jesus through two separate appearances on the earthly scene. In the New Testament this pattern becomes clear as Jesus predicts his departure to His Father and subsequent return to establish His kingdom on earth. The rapture of the church is also new to the New Testament.

The Holy Spirit's Indwelling of Every Believer

The New Testament ushers in a new relationship between the believer and the Holy Spirit. Christ's teachings concerning the Comforter (Jn 14-16) imply that the Spirit was not active in and among Old Testament believers in precisely the same way as He now is. References to the Holy Spirit in Acts show that the power His presence brings to Christians is dramatically new. In Christ believers enjoy a

⁴ Gregory A. Smith, "Preaching: A Ministry of Newness," *Preaching* July-August 2000: 30.

fellowship with the Spirit that was not experienced by Old Testament saints at large.

The Church

As noted above, the church is one of the new elements of the New Testament. In the Old Testament God dealt with mankind through the nation of Israel. In the present age of grace, He deals with mankind through the church. The most outstanding feature of the church is the fact that it crosses all sociological boundaries: All identity is lost in Christ. The church is not composed of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, or any other set of classes. Rather, it is made up of believers in Jesus Christ. The uniting of diverse people--particularly Jews and Gentiles--in a single body is a radical change from the Old Testament (Eph 3:4-6; cf. Eph 2:11-22; Gal 3:28).

A Look into the Future

The New Testament concludes with the book of Revelation, a prophetic view of the events that will usher in Christ's earthly kingdom and ultimately issue in the condemnation of evildoers to eternal punishment in the lake of fire. Revelation shows that God's purpose will not be frustrated. History is the scene of God's sovereign work; He has predicted it before it comes to pass. As Christians we can take courage in the realization that God will bring all of life's injustices to ultimate resolution. We will reign with Christ and enjoy the glory of His presence forever.

Summary & Conclusions

The New Testament is a fascinating book. Its literary character is diverse. While it builds on the foundation of the Old Testament, it reveals much that is indeed new. Its central message--the gospel--is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. Through faith in Him we enjoy the blessing of full justification before God; the grace to persevere through difficulty and be reformed in His image; and the promise of eternal life. The New Testament collection, while not long by literary standards, is truly unfathomable. A lifetime of study cannot exhaust its riches, for its riches are indeed "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8).