

Introduction to the New Testament: Overview

1. The Content of the New Testament

General historical outline: Jesus of Nazareth begins his preaching activity in Galilee among Palestinian Jews (ca. 30 CE). His Jewish Christian followers continue to preach, confessing Jesus to be the Messiah (= sect within Judaism). Gradually the doors are opened to Gentiles, especially as a result of the missionary activity of Paul. Believers now receive the name 'Christians' (Acts 11:26) rather than 'sect of the Nazoreans' (cf. Acts 24:5; 24:14; 28:22).

All twenty-seven NT books belong to the first century CE (some possibly stem from early in the second century CE); they narrate the events surrounding the life of Jesus and the development of the Church, as well as encouraging and guiding readers/hearers who belong to faith communities in various regions around the Mediterranean. The order in which these books appear in the NT does not accord with the chronological sequence of their composition.

2. How to Explore the New Testament

2.1 From a Historical Perspective: New Testament documents come from times and places belonging to a distant past (different customs, structures and cultures). All documents have been written in Greek for first-century readers (movement from Jewish Palestine to other parts of the Roman Empire). It is therefore necessary to gain some understanding of first-century religious, philosophical and social movements, as well as certain languages, geography and customs presupposed within the texts. New Testament writings are to be read in particular within the context (or 'matrix') of late Second Temple Judaism (up to 70 CE).

Most New Testament letters are occasional in nature (written in order to address specific communities with particular problems). A great deal of knowledge is often shared (and presupposed) by the author and the intended audience; a modern interpreter often resorts to 'reading between the lines'.

2.2 From a Literary Perspective: What are the literary characteristics of the New Testament documents? Four literary types (or 'genres') can be identified:

- a) Gospel (*euangelion*) contains narratives about Jesus and sayings attributed to him. Many gospels were written, but only four are canonical (contained in the NT): Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (others found in the NT Apocrypha).
- b) Acts: a historical narrative (composed by Luke) describing the origins of the early Christian Church and its spread 'to the ends of the earth'.
- c) Letters, of which there are twenty-one, adopt the epistolary style and conventions of Graeco-Roman letters.
- d) Apocalypse ('revelation') contains a disclosure of heavenly mysteries about God and the end of time (the Book of Revelation).

2.3 From a Theological Perspective: NT documents are primarily religious writings; their authors seek to bring their readers to (a fuller) faith and understanding of the significance of Jesus. They comprise the second part of the Church's scriptures, the first part being the 'Old Testament' (testament = covenant; cf. Exod. 19:5; 34:10; Jer. 31:31-33; II Cor. 3:6; Gal. 4:24-26). The core of the early Christian message is that God has established a new covenant through Jesus.