

WORLD ALIVE: 6/11/2011 - NT OVERVIEW

1. THE NEW TESTAMENT

GNB: The New Testament
AV: The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
NRSV: The New Covenant commonly called the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

‘Testament’ another word for ‘**covenant**’. The Old Testament tells the story of the ‘covenant’ that God made with his people Israel, the essence of which was “I will be your God, and you shall be my people’ (see Ex 6.7). This covenant was of God’s making, in the sense that God took the initiative; but it depended upon his people keeping their side of the covenant by loving him and obeying his commands.

Alas, God’s people failed to keep the covenant. So God made a new covenant. This covenant was foreshadowed by the prophet Jeremiah: “**The time is coming when I will make a new covenant... I will put my law within them (Israel) and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people... All will know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs**” (Jer 31.31-34).

In a way which Jeremiah could never have dreamt, God made a new covenant, ratified not by the blood of bulls and goats, but through the one-off sacrifice of his son. The superiority of this new covenant is the theme of the Letter to the Hebrews. However, the story of God’s love for us in Jesus is the theme of the New Testament as a whole.

2. THE BOOK

The Old and New Testaments together make up what we call the ‘Bible’.

The word ‘Bible’ simply means ‘**book**’ – *biblion* is the Greek word for a book. The Greek term was actually derived from the Phoenician port of Byblos, an ancient town which I have visited in Lebanon, which used to be a centre for the importation of papyrus from Egypt. Papyrus was a writing material prepared in ancient Egypt from the pithy stem of a water plant.

Traditionally we speak of the Bible as the ‘**Holy Bible**’ – or in the words of the AV: “*The Holy Bible containing Old and New Testaments*’. The term ‘holy’ reminds us that the Bible is no ordinary book – it is in a totally different league. It is God’s book.

The Bible is **God’s book** in double sense.

- In the first place, it is **God’s Word**: i.e. through this book God speaks to us. Eugene Peterson therefore calls his paraphrase, ‘The Message’. In this respect I am reminded of Mark

Twain's comment: *"It is not the parts of Scripture that I don't understand that worry me, it is the parts that I do understand"*.

- In the second place, it is **God's Story**. It tells the story of God's dealings with humankind. We could call it, 'the story of the acts of God'. The Bible is 'His Story'.

The Bible is unlike any other book in that it is 'inspired by God'. **"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of thing"** (2 Tim 3.16). The Apostle Paul was speaking in particular of the Old Testament, but what is true of the OT is even more true of the NT.

At every stage of the composition of the books that together make up the Bible, God was at work. To quote Howard Marshall (Biblical Inspiration 43), *"Just as in the case of the creation and preservation of the universe we can observe points where God intervened in unusual ways for specific purposes, so too we can say that alongside and within this general concursive action of the Spirit in inspiring normal human forms of composition in the biblical books, we can trace special actions of the Spirit in bringing special revelation"*. This is no ordinary book!

3. THE BOOKS

The Bible is not just one book. It is a collection of books. It is a library of books. Indeed, the early church father, when he referred to the Bible, spoke of it as '*ta biblia*', the books.

How many books of the Bible are there?

It all depends on whether you are a Protestant or a Catholic!

In the first instance, there are **39 books** which make up the Old Testament – what the Jews called the 'Scriptures', the writings. All 39 books are written in Hebrew (although part of Daniel was actually written in Aramaic, a form of Hebrew)

Then there are a further **12 books** which make up the Apocrypha ('hidden things'), many of which never had a Hebrew original. These books became attached to the LXX, a famous Greek translation of the OT produced by 70 scholars working in Alexandria. The Roman Catholics include these books in their Bible, because the Council of Trent in 1545 declared them canonical. BUT these books never had a place in the Palestinian Bible which Jesus knew. For this reason they have never been included in the Protestant Bible.

And, of course, there are the 27 books which make up the New Testament.

4. BOOKS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The term 'book' is misleading.

- In the first place, they were not produced in ‘book’ form (codex), but rather written on papyrus rolls. These rolls would have been 8 – 10” high, and up to 35 feet long. Normally they would have only been written on one side, because papyrus is not a very dense material. On each section there would be two columns 2-4” wide with about 25-45 lines per column. In addition, because of the cost and the space needed, normally there would be no punctuation or division of words or sentences or paragraphs; it would all be written in capital letters, and so a line would read something like: JESUSISNOWHERE (Jesus is now here – or Jesus is no where?). Furthermore, there were no chapters & verses in the original NT MSS before the early
- In the second place, they were not mass-produced. Initially only a few copies were likely made due to the time and expense involved, and, in some cases, such as with letters, there may have been only one copy made originally.

In NT times, apart from the main centres of culture like Athens and Rome, the first half of the first Christian century was still a non-literary age. Newspapers and paperbacks were not known. There was no such thing as a book culture – it was primarily an oral culture.

This is not surprising:

- In the first place, most people did not read: the literacy rate was never more than 10%
- In the second place, writing was an expensive business. It took time. To buy a copy of the four Gospels would have cost as much for you and me to buy a complete set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Jewish society in particular was a non-literary society.

The great mass of the Jewish law and tradition (the Mishnah) was passed down by word of mouth, and only put into writing in the third century AD.

What’s more, precisely because there were no books to read, people were very good at learning and passing on stories of one kind another. It has been said that the Oriental memory was ‘*wonderfully retentive*’ (Dennis Nineham).

According to Jewish stands, a good student was a good remembers, who was like ‘*a well-plastered cistern which never loses a drop of water*’

It was said that the rabbis could receive the whole of the Law by heart; they could have re-written the whole of the OT accurately, even if every copy had been destroyed.

Education rested on memory training. This is an important fact to remember when we come to consider the trustworthiness of the Gospels.

5. THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

All the NT books were originally written in Greek.

At first sight this can seem surprising.

- One might have supposed that the Gospels might have been written in Aramaic. After all, Aramaic, a language akin to Hebrew, was the mother-tongue of Jesus; and though Jesus was probably able to speak Greek, it was in Aramaic and not Greek that he preached and taught.

- Alternatively one might have supposed that the letters of Paul might have been written in Latin. After all, Latin was the language of Rome, and the Romans were masters of the civilised world.

But as it is, the Gospel is written in Greek.

Not Classical Greek, but *Koine* Greek – Common Greek.

Common Greek at the time of Jesus was the international language of the day, much as English is today's international language.

6. THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

Long before the New Testament came to be written, people were telling the story of Jesus. Remember, the world into which Jesus was born was a non-literary world.

The earliest preaching was in Aramaic. So too the earliest teaching.

Indeed, within Paul's letters are to be found examples of this teaching. This is particularly true of 1 Corinthians, where Paul quotes from teaching first given in Aramaic:

- The Lord's Supper: 1 Cor 11.23-25: **"I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed...."**
- The Resurrection: 1 Cor 15.3-5: **"I passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures; that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures; that he appeared to Peter (Cephas) and then to all 12 apostles"**

But these are not the only quotations that we find within the writings of Paul. Paul also quotes from early Christian hymns and confessions of faith: to give just three examples:

- The so-called *hymn to the cosmic Christ* found in Col 1.15-20 is almost universally agreed not to be by the hand of the Apostle Paul: it is a carefully written piece of poetry, not prose **"Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the firstborn Son, superior to all created things. For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him..."** These are not the words of Paul, but of some unknown early church theologian.
- The same is true of *the hymn to the servant-king* found in Phil 2.6-11: **"He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness etc"**. Again, generally agreed not to have been written by Paul. Contrary to popular opinion, Paul was not the church's first theologian
- Likewise *the six-line confession of faith* found in 1 Tim 3.16 is not by Paul: **"He appeared in human form, was shown to be right by the Spirit, and was seen by angels. He was preached among the nations, was believed in throughout the world, and was taken up in heaven"**.

If Paul was not the first theologian, neither were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John the first Gospel writers. There were others before them. Listen to Luke's introduction to his Gospel: "**Dear Theophilus: Many people have done their best to write a report of the things that have taken place among us. They wrote what we have been told by those who saw these things from the beginning and who proclaimed the message. And so, your Excellency, because I have carefully studied all these matters from their beginning, I thought it would be good to write an orderly account for you. I do this, so that you will know the full truth about everything which you have been taught**".

Almost certainly there were the teachings of Jesus, the birth stories, and the passion narratives, which we find in our four Gospels circulated in separate collections. Probably one key reason why our four Gospels survived is that each was associated with an apostle. Matthew and John in this respect are self-evident; as for the other two, Mark was associated with Peter, and Luke with Paul. This apostolic connection gave these four Gospels apostolic authority.

7. THE WRITING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

It sometimes comes as a shock to Christians to realise that the earliest of the NT writings were not the Gospels, but the letters of Paul.

- Scholars are divided as to which is the earliest of Paul's letters. Many think that it was Galatians and date it 48-49 AD; others think it was 1 Thessalonians and date it AD 50.
- By contrast, the earliest Gospel was Mark, which is usually dated about AD 65. Matthew & Luke are normally dated in the 70s – so too John's Gospel, although there are some who think it was written earlier.

Why were the Gospels not written earlier?

- As we have already said, writing was not a common practice – it was an era of oral transmission, which was helped by the fact that both Jews and Greeks at that time had developed fantastic memories.
- Another factor was that in the early days the apostles believed that Jesus would return very soon. They were therefore not concerned about making a record for future generations. This belief in the imminence of the end of the world is to be seen in Paul's discussion about marriage in 1 Cor 7: there is no reference to children whatsoever! Similarly it is clear that when Paul was writing 1 Thess he expected to be alive when Jesus returned: "**Those who have died believing in Christ will rise to life first; then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air**" (1 Thess 4.16,17)

Perhaps it is worth saying that the NT does not contain all the important Christian documents of that period. Some of them have been lost. For example, Paul in 1 Cor 5.9 mentions that he had previously written to the church not to associate with immoral people. This means that there was a letter to the Corinthians written prior to our 1 Corinthians. Our 1 Corinthians was in fact 2 Corinthians. Wouldn't it be wonderful if some of Paul's missing letters were found today?

8. THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS

The easiest way to classify the NT documents is to divide the NT into a series of sections:

1. **The Gospels.** Or perhaps we should say: '*four accounts of the Gospel*'. Significantly before the 4th century the whole 4-fold collection was usually called 'the Gospel' – together the first 4 books of the NT formed the one & only Gospel of Christ. So in my Greek New Testament, the heading for what we call Matthew's Gospel is simply "According to Matthew", the heading for Mark's Gospel is simply "According to Mark" – and so on. This approach is present in the GNB. There Matthew's Gospel is actually headed: "The Gospel according to Matthew", and so on. By contrast the NIV simply heads the four Gospels "Matthew", "Mark", "Luke" and "John". I find this misleading. It misses out on the important fact that each of these four books centres on one Gospel, on what Mark termed "**the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God**".
2. **The Acts of the Apostles.** In some ways the ordering of the NT as we have it is unhelpful – for Luke and Acts go together. Or to put it another way Luke-Acts is a two volume historical work, which could be entitled 'The Beginnings of Christianity'.
3. **Paul's letters:** these can be divided into three main classes:
 - Six missionary or travel letters: Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, & Romans. Thessalonica, Corinth and Rome were all cities. Galatia was a Roman province in Asia Minor – so as far as Galatians is concerned, Paul was writing to a group of churches, but there is a debate as to whether these churches were in the north or south of the province. It is possible that Galatians was written in 48 AD; 1 Thessalonians perhaps 50 AD; 1 Corinthians may have been written in AD 55, with 2 Corinthians a year later; Romans the latest, perhaps AD 57.
 - Four prison letters: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon & Philippians. In which prison Paul found himself, however, is open to debate – for at one time he was imprisoned in Caesarea, and at another time in Rome. Ephesus and Colossae were two towns in Asia Minor, Ephesus was a great port, while Colossae was landlocked to the east; Philemon was a slave-owner who almost certainly lived in Colossae; Philippi was a city in Macedonia (Northern Greece) not far from Thessalonica. Of these four letters, Philippians may have been the first to be written – if Paul was in prison in Caesarea, then it was written 59-60; but if in Rome, then 61-62. Colossians & Philemon were written at the same time, with Tychicus acting as postman. If written in Rome, then probably AD 61. Ephesians, which was probably written at the same time, may not have been written to the church at Ephesus: or rather, it may have been a circular letter written to churches in and around Ephesus – the reason for this suggestion is that the words "in Ephesus" found in 1.1 are absent from some of our best MSS.
 - The Pastorals: 1 & 2 Timothy + Titus. These letters were written to two pastors – hence the term. A good deal of debate as whether they were written by Paul – in style they are very different from the other Pauline letters, but there is a possibility that Paul gave more freedom to his secretary than he usually did. The date of the letters is very much dependent upon the authorship: Paul was probably executed around 64 or 65 AD

4. **The Letter to the Hebrews:** originally thought to be by Paul, but clearly by somebody else. Calvin argued that it was written by either Luke or Clement of Rome; Luther proposed Apollos as the author; others have suggested Priscilla, the wife of Aquila. But the honest answer is ‘God only knows’. Most scholars think it was written before AD 70 – but we cannot be certain
5. From as early as the 4th century the seven letters following Hebrews were known as the **General Epistles** – sometimes called the Catholic Epistles, for unlike Paul’s letters they appeared to be addressed to the church in general rather than one single congregation: however modern scholars question this assumption arguing that each of these letters was written, if not to a single congregation, then at least to a group of churches in a particular area. The letters in question = James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude. Dating of the letters is very difficult: however, if James written by the brother of Jesus, then we know that he died in AD 62. Similarly if 1 & 2 Peter were written by Peter, then they had to be written before AD 63 when Peter was martyred in Rome. The letters of John may well have been written in the early 90s! As for Jude, if he was indeed a younger brother of the Lord, then the letter could not have been written after about AD 90 – but some argue that it was written in the mid-to late 60s.
6. **The Book of Revelation.** This is the only example in the NT of an ‘apocalyptic’ writing. The word ‘apocalyptic’ is derived from a word meaning ‘uncovering, revealing’. Indeed, the opening words of the book of Revelation are ‘**The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place**’ (1.1). To us it seems a very strange book. This literary genre was very popular in the period between the two testaments. It is also found in the OT, where the book of Daniel is a good representative. Written in very symbolic language, it can be understood only by those who are part of the community. It gives the assurance that God is in control of history and will ultimately triumph over the forces of evil. Although the author calls himself John, it is unlikely that he was the same John who wrote the Gospel – the style is so very different. It was probably written toward the close of Domitian’s reign, around AD 96.

From this it is clear that the books of the NT are not arranged in chronological order – which can be quite confusing!

9. THE MESSAGE OF THE NT

I like the way in which David da Silva expresses the different message of each NT book:

The Apostolic Writings

1. The Gospel of Mark: Following the way of the Cross
2. The Gospel of Matthew: Following the Words of the Messiah
3. The Gospel of Luke: Following the Heart of the Father
4. The Acts of the Apostles: Following the Leading of the Spirit
5. The Gospel according to John: Following the One from Above
6. The Letters of John: Painful Breaches of the Bond of Unity and Love

Paul's letters

1. The letter to the Galatians: Walking in line with the spirit
2. The Thessalonian correspondence: Living in the light of the 'Day'
3. The Corinthian Correspondence: Valuing oneself and others in the Lord
4. The Letter to the Romans: The God of Jews and Gentile
5. The Letter to the Philippians: Unity in the Face of Adversity
6. The Letter to Philemon: The Slave is our Brother
7. The Letters to the Christians in Colossae & Ephesus: Walking in the light of Christ's victory
8. The letters to Timothy and Titus: Trustworthy management of God's household

Other letters:

1. The Epistle to the 'Hebrews': Living in Trust and Gratitude toward God
2. The Epistle of James: Promoting consistency of belief and behaviour
3. The first Letter of Peter: An ethic for resident aliens awaiting their inheritance
4. Jude and 2 Peter: The dangers of deviant disciples

The Revelation of John: Living in the light of God's triumph

10. THE NT CANON

How did the NT come into being? How did we arrive at having 27 books, and not 26 or 28? It is a complicated story. Suffice it to say, there are two important dates to remember:

- 200 AD: From the so-called Muratorian Fragment which lists the books deemed canonical in the church of Rome about that time, we know by the year 200 the main contents of the NT had been decided. Only 7 of our 27 books still had a question mark over them: viz. Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and the Book of Revelation
- 367: in an Easter letter dated 367 Athanasius, a great champion of Christian orthodoxy, defined a canon of 27 books which corresponds exactly with the NT as we have it today.

What caused the formation of the canon?

1. In the first place, the emergence of a host of Christian writings of dubious value – the so-called apocryphal Gospels and Acts
2. In the second place, the rise of Gnosticism in the second century, which regarded matter as evil and propagated all sorts of heresies

What criteria did the church employ?

1. In the first place 'apostolicity': the belief that the book came from the apostolic circle
2. In the second place, public lection: i.e. that the book was regularly being read with profit in the churches.