

“Introducing the Bible—How the New Testament Came to Be”

Today we continue in the series we started two weeks ago. It’s called “Introducing the Bible”. My first goal in this series is to demystify the Bible. In other words, to see how it came to be, what it is, what it’s not, take away our fears so that it becomes approachable, understandable. I want to demystify the Bible.

At the same time I want to re-mystify the Bible. To help us to see this as a holy book. A very, very important way that the God of the universe chose to speak to humanity. And a way that God continues to speak to humanity. I want us to reclaim the supernatural nature of the Bible—to re-mystify it.

So far we looked at the Bible in general, and then we looked at the Old Testament more specifically. And today we begin a look at the New Testament. How the New Testament came to be, the historical context of New Testament, and why it’s so important to the Christian faith.

First let’s look at what was going on that set the stage for the events in the New Testament and for the writing of it.

It’s important for us to remember that the Old Testament is full of references to a time when God would set foot on the earth, appear himself, to make it crystal clear who he is. These prophecies are all throughout scripture. One example is in the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel.

Look at 34:22-35. This was written over 600 years before the birth of Christ and God is explaining why the Jewish people are in trouble. It’s because they have been unfaithful, they didn’t search for the lost sheep and help them. God speaks through this prophet saying, **“I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken. I will make a covenant of peace with them...”** (Ezek 34:22-25, NIV).

That’s a passage that’s typical of dozens and dozens of passages in the Old Testament that say the day is coming when one like David, a prince from his line, an anointed one, will come and rule over God’s people. God promises this over and over. The Old Testament ends on that note.

Let’s look at that end. Open up your Bibles to the last book in the Old Testament, the book of Malachi. This book of the Old Testament was written about 430 BC. Malachi the prophet was speaking about the complacency of the Jews. They were living in a good time, a stable time, life was good, but they had started to get complacent about their lives and faith. They had begun to offer lame sacrifices to God that were not from their hearts. I mean literally lame! They were giving God their animals that were sick, or blind, or deformed. People weren’t bringing their full tithes to God, just their leftovers. So Malachi chastises them and tells them that the day of the Lord is coming.

Look at chapter 4. Malachi says that a day is coming when God will appear to his people, to bring a cleansing, a clarity, an awakening. But before that day Elijah will come. Elijah lived hundreds of years earlier, so it will be someone like him who will prepare the way for the Lord.

400 years go by and during that time, the Romans take control in the 60’s BC. The people begin saying, “Surely God will send us a king now. Surely he will send the prince of David, surely he will send Elijah to prepare the way, surely he will come and deliver us.” There is this building sense of hope in a Messiah. Messiah in Hebrew means anointed one. When a king was crowned, part of acknowledging that king was that anointing oil was poured over his head. The people were awaiting the arrival of this king who would deliver the people from oppression.

This hope builds and builds and builds, and it’s at its height during the Roman occupation of Israel. The Jews knew these prophecies of a king coming from the line of David. This was the time of peak expectancy. The people were looking, searching, praying for this new king. Some thought the promised king would be one who would build an army and overthrow the Romans and create a peace. Some of those people were called Zealots and were ready to join that king’s army. Other so-called Messiahs came and raised up small armies, but they were quickly crushed by the Romans. Lots of people were looking for this military and political messiah and king.

Other people had a different idea of what this Messiah would look like. They were very pious and they believed that the Messiah would be a priest and he would restore ritual purity to the land and restore a passion

for the Jewish law. They saw how people were wandering away from living out their faith and they thought the need was for the people to repent. There were these two very different expectations of a king. One group saw this messiah as a warrior king; the others saw the messiah as needing to be a priestly king.

The prophecies had been made in the Old Testament, the people are expecting a king, a messiah, they're looking for Elijah to show back up and prepare the way and point to that new king. The world is ready and waiting.

That's what is going on in the culture when Jesus is born. Mary is of the line of David. She's told that her child would be the awaited Messiah. The New Testament begins with the story of Jesus' birth and it is all about how that birth is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. John the Baptist is in that picture early on. He's quickly identified as the Elijah figure who prepares the way of the Messiah.

The Gospel of Mark of Mark begins by pointing out that John is the one like Elijah sent to prepare the way. **"It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'—'a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"** **And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:2-4, NIV).** Jesus came to John to be baptized and that is how the New Testament begins, with the story of the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises that God would send a Messiah, a king, he would come to earth himself.

The problem was that Jesus didn't fit anybody's expectations. The ones waiting for a military leader and king (the majority of people) were confused about Jesus. They saw his power, his miracles, his wisdom, but he didn't seem to be interested in raising up an army. He didn't even carry a sword! How could he be the Messiah? Some say that Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was a zealot and betrayed Jesus to either force Jesus to show himself as king, or out of anger because Jesus wasn't who he'd hoped.

Lots of people, including some of Jesus' disciples, who were waiting for the military messiah. Jesus was frustrating to them because he healed the children of Roman centurions. He talked about the Romans as if they weren't really the enemy. He said, "It's not about political and military power. It's not about ousting the Romans. It's about God being our king and us living like his subjects whether the Romans are here or not." Well, that didn't sit very well with people who were expecting a political messiah.

The people expecting a priest were disappointed too. They wondered if Jesus was the one. They saw his miracles, they saw his power, they saw his wisdom, but then they saw Jesus hanging around with prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors! They believed that the messiah king would come to restore ritual purity to the land. That's not purity! That's not bringing holiness to the land! Jesus ate with people who were clearly sinners. That was unheard of for a Jew, especially a Rabbi, to do! People said, "Why's he doing that?! Surely the Messiah would make himself unclean with people like that!"

So Jesus didn't fit anybody's idea of a Messiah. Some wanted him to either get on with it or get out of the way! Others called him a false Messiah who needed to be destroyed. Religious leaders were threatened by Jesus' popularity, so they collaborated with the Romans to put him to death.

Jesus was put to death on Friday and buried in a borrowed tomb, on Saturday he was in the tomb, on the third day, Sunday, they went to the tomb and it was empty, he was raised.

From then on the disciples begin get it. Prior to that, they were partly in it for the power. They argue among each other about who is greatest, they ask Jesus if they can be his right-hand man when he comes to power. Jesus gets down on his knees and washes their feet to tell them it's not about power.

After the resurrection they begin to get it. They start to see the Old Testament in a different light. They looked back a passage like Isaiah 53 where it says, **"Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone**

astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:1-6, NIV).

The early Christians read this passage and others like it and said, “How could we have missed that this was the kind of Messiah he would be?” They would see Jesus on the cross and understand that God was in this man. That’s what they started to teach and proclaim. They were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the church was born and they started to go into the entire world. Jesus final words in Matthew were the marching orders. **“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20, NIV).** The rest of the New Testament is about what happens in the lives of those who choose to follow him. It’s about a revolution of power and compassion. It’s about an awakening that would spread around the world.

Let’s look at the overall structure of the New Testament. It contains **27 books by 9 authors**. These books were **written down between 50 AD and 96 AD**. All of the New Testament was **written in Greek**. You can divide the New Testament into 5 sections. The first section is made up of **The Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John)**. Gospel means good news and each of the four Gospels tell the story of Jesus. His life, his teachings, his actions, his death and resurrection. Each of the gospels tell the story in a slightly different way with a different audience in mind. Matthew is aimed at Jewish readers and it connects Jesus to Moses. Mark is the oldest Gospel and it is very action oriented. Luke is aimed at Gentile readers and focuses on Jesus’ concern for the lost. John is often called the “Spiritual Gospel” because it looks more at the deeper, spiritual side of Jesus and his words and actions. Having 4 Gospels helps us to have a more complete picture of Jesus and his teachings.

The next section of the New Testament is just one book, **the books of Acts (the story of the early church)**. This was written by Luke and it tells the story of what happens after Jesus’ resurrection. It’s the story of the early church and the spread of Christianity early on. One of the main characters is the Apostle Paul—our church is named after him. He started off persecuting Christians and then became one! And not only that he started a large number of the first churches.

Then next section is made up of **the letters of Paul to churches (Romans through 2 Thessalonians)**. This is Romans through 2 Thessalonians. Paul would start a church, stay there a while and then move on. But he’d write letters to those churches to encourage them, correct them, even discipline them.

Then next section is made up of **the letters of Paul to individuals (1 Timothy through Philemon)**. These are letters that Paul wrote to people to encourage them or teach them. They’re the books of 1 Timothy through Philemon.

Then last section is made up of **the general epistles (Hebrews through Revelation)**. These are letters from other apostles or writers. These go from Hebrews to Revelation.

These 27 books were chosen early on in the Christians faith; the first lists were made up in the 2nd century. A common question is why these books? Why were some ancient writings included and some excluded. **Criteria for choosing the books of the New Testament:** **1. Common and early usage.** These books were circulated and read in the churches from a very early time. The earliest book of New Testament is the book of Galatians written about 50 AD. Early versions of the Gospels were written down starting about 40 AD. **2. Reflected faith of the original apostles,** these 27 books were chosen because they reflected the faith that had been passed down by the original apostles. **3. Apostolic connection,** they were deemed to be either written by an apostle (as in the case of Paul’s letters) or written by those who were associated with the apostles— as is the case with Mark and Luke.

Yes, there are other ancient Christian writings and they are still valuable to read. But we read them in light of the core scriptures in our New Testament today. We look at these 27 books as special, as the standard against we measure all other teachings on the faith.

Today we’ve learned about the New Testament, but knowing **about** something is different than knowing something. Studying **about** something is different that studying something. Please, please don’t be satisfied walking away today with what little we’ve covered. Now it’s time to open it and read it so that whatever it is that the God of the universe wants to say to you, he can say. And those will be words of life.

What if God wanted to share message of hope with you through his word, but you never opened it to find that out? What if God wanted to speak a word of challenge to you through his word, but you never opened it to hear that word? What if God wanted to speak a word of healing to you through his word, but you never opened it to hear that? What if God wanted to speak a word of encouragement, or power, or direction, or mind-blowing revelation?

All of that is in here, don't be afraid of opening it up. Don't be afraid of exploring. Don't be afraid of listening. Make the time. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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