

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT
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"Testament" / "Covenant"

The New Testament, like the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, was composed in Greek. The word "testament" (Latin, testamentum) is a translation of a Greek term, diatheke, which means "covenant."

Relationship between the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament"

The Old Testament tells of the "old covenant" between God and ancient Israel, and the New Testament is a proclamation of a "new covenant" between God and the "new Israel," which is the Christian Church. The prophets of ancient Israel looked forward to the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of a new covenant between God and his people. According to the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah (or Christ) – the divine-human king in whom the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament have been "summed up, confirmed, and transcended."

Terms of the new covenant: Salvation is available to all who acknowledge Jesus as Christ and Savior and who submit to him as Lord of their lives.

The central message of the New Testament: Christ "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Heb 1:3). In him, the divine promise of salvation, first revealed in the Old Testament, is fulfilled. Christ is the incarnate Son of God, "the mediator of . . . [the] new covenant" (Heb 9:15), who brings salvation to the world; and by the grace of God, the human race is called to respond to Christ in faith and obedience. Those who do so respond are "the heirs of salvation, the covenant people . . . the Israel of God, the Church" (Bruce).

The Making of the New Testament

The New Testament contains twenty-seven books:

- The four gospels of SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- The book of Acts (Acts of the Apostles), a history of the early Church written by St. Luke; originally an extension (2d volume) of the gospel of Luke but detached and treated as a separate book during the 2d century AD, when the gospels were compiled and circulated as a single volume containing a fourfold record of Christ's ministry.
- Twenty-one letters or "epistles" by St. Paul and other writers (SS. James, Peter, John, Jude).
- The Apocalypse or book of Revelation, a vision of the final fulfillment of God's cosmic purpose, attributed to St. John.

All written in the common Greek (koine) of the Hellenistic age (not the same as classical Greek).

What motivated the Church to form a "New Testament" canon?

While the apostles and other immediate disciples of Christ still lived, the Bible of the Church was the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint). The Old Testament revelation was interpreted by the Church in the light of the apostolic message concerning the person and work of Christ.

The major events of Christ's life, as well as his teachings, were remembered by the apostles and were incorporated into their preaching during the mid-1st century AD. This oral tradition was received by the apostles from the Lord and delivered by them in turn to their converts. In time, the "apostolic tradition" began to be set down in writing – in early collections of the sayings of Jesus, in catechisms used for doctrinal instruction, in liturgical texts employed in the conduct of Christian worship, and in letters written by major figures in the apostolic Church.

As the apostles began to grow old and die, the Church's need for a written expression of the apostolic witness became more and more apparent. This perceived need gave impetus to the writing of the four gospels and other documents during the later 1st century and led to the collection of the corpus of St. Paul's letters (excluding Hebrews) between 80 and 85 AD.

In seeking to preserve the apostolic tradition in written form, the Church did not, at first, intend to establish a definitive canon of scripture. However, with the late 1st and early 2d-century proliferation of Christian and quasi-Christian literature, and with the rise of heretical movements claiming apostolic authority, many early fathers of the Church began to call for the formation of a canonical collection of "New Testament" scriptures.

Three tests of canonicity:

- Written by an apostle or by an immediate disciple of an apostle.
- Recognized as authentic by at least one leading ecclesiastical community in the ancient Church.
- Consistent with apostolic doctrine – that is, with the rule of faith preserved in the living tradition of the Church.

The formation of the NT canon:

2d and 3d centuries: The idea of a New Testament canon was developed (largely through the efforts of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Hippolytus of Rome, Tertullian, St. Clement of Alexandria, and Origen).

Disputes as to the constitution of the canon:

Agreement on the four gospels, the book of Acts, the (13) letters of St. Paul, 1 Peter, and 1 John

Disagreements: Some leading authorities of the day doubted the canonicity of Hebrews, James, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

Early inclusions that were later excluded: the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Apocalypse of Peter (which were accepted as canonical by a few ecclesiastical writers).

The 4th century resolution: In his Paschal Letter of 367 AD, St. Athanasius of Alexandria declared the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we know it to be "exclusively canonical." Then a synodal decree in conformity with the declaration of St. Athanasius, prompted by the arguments of St. Augustine of Hippo, was issued at Carthage in 397 AD. Thenceforth, the New Testament – as the divinely inspired, written expression of the apostolic witness – was accepted by all Orthodox Christians as a central and normative feature of the holy tradition of the Church.

The Books of the New Testament

Biblical Order

The Four Gospels

The Gospel of Matthew – Matthew, a tax-collector and apostle
The Gospel of Mark – Mark, a follower of Peter and also of Paul
The Gospel of Luke – Luke, a follower of Paul
The Gospel of John – John, a fisherman and apostle

The Acts of the Apostles – Luke, a follower of Paul (2d volume of L's Gospel)

The Epistles (Letters)

The Epistles of Paul

Epistle to the Romans
First Epistle to the Corinthians
Second Epistle to the Corinthians
Epistle to the Galatians
Epistle to the Ephesians
Epistle to the Philippians
Epistle to the Colossians
First Epistle to the Thessalonians
Second Epistle to the Thessalonians
First Epistle to Timothy
Second Epistle to Timothy
Epistle to Titus
Epistle to Philemon

Epistle to the Hebrews – Anonymous, traditionally attributed to Paul

The Catholic Epistles

Epistle of James – James, "the brother of the Lord"
First Epistle of Peter – Peter the Apostle
Second Epistle of Peter – Peter the Apostle (?)
First Epistle of John – John the Apostle
Second Epistle of John – John the Apostle
Third Epistle of John – John the Apostle
Epistle of Jude – Jude, brother of James

The Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) – John "the Divine," traditionally identified with John the Apostle

Chronological Order

James – c. 45 or c. 60 AD
1 Thessalonians – c. 48-51 AD
2 Thessalonians – 51 AD
Galatians – c. 52 AD

1 Corinthians – 55 AD
2 Corinthians – 55 AD
Romans – c. 55-57 AD

Ephesians – c. 61-63 AD
Philippians – c. 61-63 AD
Colossians – c. 61-63 AD
Philemon – c. 61-63 AD
The Gospel of Mark – c. 60-65 AD
Titus – c. 63-65 AD
1 Timothy – c. 64-65 AD
1 Peter – c. 50-67 AD
2 Peter – c. 63-67 AD (or later?)
2 Timothy – c. 65-67 AD

Hebrews – c. 70 AD

The Gospel of Matthew – c. 70 AD
The Gospel of Luke – c. 70-80 AD
Acts – c. 70-80 AD
Jude – c. 60-80 AD (or later?)

The Gospel of John – c. 85-90 AD
1 John – c. 90 AD
2 John – c. 90 AD
3 John – c. 90 AD

The Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) – c. 95 AD