

New Testament Overview





The New Testament: Meaning and Content

The designation "New Testament" comes from the Latin *Novum Testamentum*, a translation of the Greek *Hê Kainê Diathêke*. This Greek expression typically meant "a last will or testament," though this translation doesn't capture its full significance.

The term actually referred to a disposition made by one party that another could accept or reject but never alter. Once received, it bound both parties to its clauses. The best example of such a document is a legacy, hence the Latin *testamentum* meaning "testament."

Covenant vs. Contract

Covenant (Pacto)

An agreement or contract that binds both parties in an accord. It obligates both parties who enter into it, going beyond a simple promise.

Testament (Diathêke)

A disposition where one party sets conditions that another can accept or reject but never modify. When accepted, both parties are bound by its terms.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the nature of God's relationship with humanity through Christ, as demonstrated in Luke 22:14-20, where the old covenant is contrasted with the new covenant established at the Last Supper.

The New Covenant Revealed

The New Testament is the book recording the establishment and character of God's new negotiations with humanity through Christ. God sets the conditions, which humans can accept or reject but never alter.

The Old Covenant revealed God's holiness through law. The New Covenant embodies God's revelation in a completely righteous Son who gives those who receive this revelation the power to become children of God, making them righteous (John 1:12).



Authors of the New Testament



Jewish Background

All New Testament authors were Jewish except Luke. This Jewish foundation provides essential context for understanding the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.



Apostolic Authority

Matthew, Peter, and John were part of the Twelve Apostles. Mark, Jude, and James worked in the early church or were in contact with the apostolic group before Jesus' death.



Eyewitness Testimony

Luke and Paul, though not eyewitnesses of Christ's life, were well-acquainted with those who were and could verify their writings with them when necessary.

New Testament Content Overview

The New Testament comprises twenty-seven distinct works from nine different authors (eight if Paul wrote Hebrews). These documents were written over slightly more than half a century, probably from early 45 AD to around 100 AD.

Historical allusions span the entire first century, while the cultural thought background reaches back to the fourth or fifth century BC. This extensive timeline demonstrates the comprehensive nature of the New Testament's historical foundation.



Literary Classification

01

Historical Books

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts narrate the story of Jesus and the early church, providing foundational historical accounts.

02

Doctrinal Writings

Romans through Jude contain theological instruction, written as letters to churches to establish Christian faith and moral practice.

03

Personal Letters

1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and 2-3 John were written to individuals, addressing specific personal and ministerial concerns.

Three Periods of New Testament History

The Beginning Period

4-6 BC to 29 AD: The life of Christ, described by the four Gospels with varying degrees of detail about Jesus' significant career events.

The Consolidation Period

60 AD to 100 AD: A period of mystery with limited historical narrative, reconstructed through indirect references in various writings.

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The Expansion Period

29 AD to 60 AD: Missionary development as preachers traveled Roman roads, evangelizing and founding churches in major centers.



Historical Background Context

Understanding the New Testament requires awareness of the dramatic political, cultural, and religious changes during the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments.

Key developments include Roman domination, Jewish dispersion, urban society emergence, language shifts (Greek and Aramaic), exclusive Judaism, Torah emphasis, synagogue establishment, religious-political sects, and extensive extra-canonical literature.

The Persian Period (538-331 BC)

1

Babylonian Exile Context

The northern kingdom fell to Assyrians (722 BC), while Judah fell to Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar (605 BC). The exile wasn't captivity but displacement with relative freedom.

2

Cyrus's Policy

Cyrus captured Babylon (538 BC) and allowed displaced peoples to return to their homelands. Only about 50,000 Jews returned under three leaders across different periods.

3

Synagogue Development

Away from Jerusalem and the Temple, Jews established gathering places for worship, Torah reading, and prayer - the origins of the synagogue system.



Temple Reconstruction

Zerubbabel led the first return (535 BC) and initiated Temple reconstruction. Under Haggai and Zechariah's preaching, Zerubbabel's Temple was completed and dedicated in 516 BC.

Though inferior to Solomon's Temple in splendor, this structure existed until Herod the Great began construction of a greater temple in 19 BC. Opposition came from Samaritans - descendants of mixed marriages between those left after deportations and imported peoples.



The Greek Period (331-167 BC)

When Philip II of Macedonia was assassinated (336 BC), his 20-year-old son Alexander succeeded him. Alexander united Macedonia and Greece, then crossed the Hellespont (334 BC) with 35,000 men to liberate Greek colonies from Persian rule.

Alexander's greatest achievement wasn't military genius but statesmanship. He fused East and West, opening trade barriers and establishing Greek as the lingua franca, enabling worldwide communication and cultural exchange.

Division of Alexander's Empire

Ptolemies in Egypt

Ptolemy Lagus (Soter) received Egypt, making Alexandria the leading center of Greek culture with its famous library.

Seleucids in Syria

Seleucus took Babylon and later gained portions of Syria, consistently coveting Palestine's mineral wealth.

Palestinian Control

Palestine fell under Ptolemaic control, experiencing gradual and peaceful Hellenization with equal civil rights for Jews.

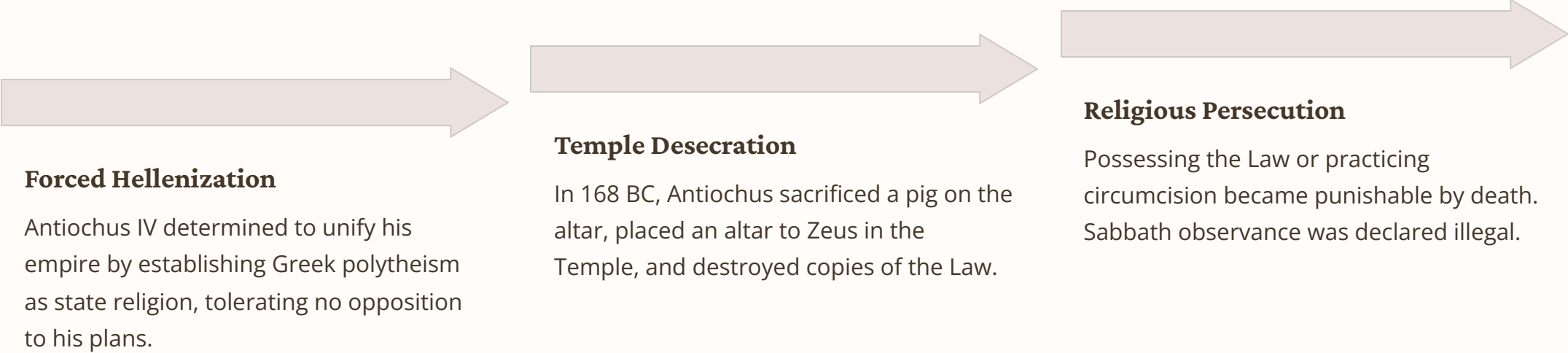


The Septuagint Translation

Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-277 BC) requested High Priest Eleazar to provide a Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures for his library. The resulting Septuagint (LXX) became the Scriptures for Greek-speaking Jewish communities.

This translation proved crucial for the spread of Christianity, as it made Hebrew Scriptures accessible to the Greek-speaking world and provided the textual foundation for New Testament quotations of the Old Testament.

Antiochus Epiphanes' Persecution



Forced Hellenization

Antiochus IV determined to unify his empire by establishing Greek polytheism as state religion, tolerating no opposition to his plans.

Temple Desecration

In 168 BC, Antiochus sacrificed a pig on the altar, placed an altar to Zeus in the Temple, and destroyed copies of the Law.

Religious Persecution

Possessing the Law or practicing circumcision became punishable by death. Sabbath observance was declared illegal.



The Maccabean Revolt

Resistance began with Mattathias, a priest in Modin, from the Hasmonean lineage. After his death, leadership passed to his son Judas, nicknamed "Maccabeus" (The Hammer) for his military prowess.

After brilliant victories, Judas entered Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple on December 25, 165 BC. However, his ambition for political freedom cost him the support of the Hasidim (zealous ones), and he died in battle at Elasa in 161 BC.

Hasmonean Independence

Jonathan's Diplomacy

Through brilliant political maneuvering, Jonathan became high priest and secured religious freedom for the Jews.

1

2

3

Decline and Fall

Later Hasmonean princes lacked their predecessors' patriotism, degenerating into political intrigue until Roman intervention.

Simon's Achievement

Simon's diplomatic policy was rewarded with complete political independence in 142 BC, lasting until 63 BC.



The Roman Period (63 BC - 135 AD)

When Queen Alexandra Salome died (69 BC), power passed to her weak son John Hyrcanus II. His ambitious brother Aristobulus II coveted both political and religious positions.

Antipater, an Idumean and advisor to Hyrcanus, exploited this brotherly conflict. His appeal to Roman general Pompey resulted in Roman control over Judea in 63 BC, with Antipater as procurator and Hyrcanus as high priest.

Herod the Great (63-4 BC)



Rise to Power

After Antipater and Phasael's deaths, Herod received the title "King of the Jews" from Antony and Octavius in 40 BC.



Construction Projects

Herod embarked on ambitious building programs, including Temple reconstruction beginning in 19 BC, still in progress 46 years later.



Family Troubles

His family life was unhappy, marked by intrigue among ten wives and their children. He killed several sons and his beloved Mariamne.



The Procurators (4 BC - 70 AD)

Unable to control Judea through Herod's heirs, Rome instituted direct rule through hated procurators. From 6 to 66 AD, no fewer than 14 men were sent to govern Judean affairs.

These positions were lucrative rewards for those to whom the Roman emperor owed debts. More interested in wealth than good governance, their harsh policies eventually led to open revolt in 66 AD, resulting in the devastating Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 AD.

Religious Developments

Synagogue Institution

Worship and instruction centers that began during Babylonian exile, requiring minimum ten men for organization.



Temple Reconstruction

Zerubbabel's Temple (516 BC) was replaced by Herod's magnificent structure, completed just five years before its destruction.

Sanhedrin Council

Supreme court of Jews with seventy-one members, led by the high priest, exercising great authority except in Roman jurisdictional matters.



Synagogue Organization and Worship

Administration belonged to elders (Zeqenim), with one elected as president (Sheliach). An assistant (Chazzam) managed the building and handled Scriptures, gradually assuming teaching responsibilities.

Worship followed Temple patterns at the same hours on Sabbaths: third, sixth, and ninth hours. Services included prayers, psalm singing, Scripture reading, and exhortation based on the passages read.

Religious Groups: The Pharisees

Origins and Meaning

The "Separatists" emerged during John Hyrcanus I's time, likely successors to the Hasidim who separated from sin and interpreted Scriptures during Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms.

Popular Influence

Though less wealthy than Sadducees, they controlled synagogues and had greater influence over the people. They alone survived the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70.

Theological Emphasis

They developed dormant Old Testament ideas including resurrection, demons, angels, and messianic hope, emphasizing oral tradition over written law.

Religious Groups: The Sadducees

Possibly derived from Zadok (Solomon's high priest) or Hebrew "zoddikim" (the righteous). This party represented aristocracy and wealthy priests, controlling the Sanhedrin and remaining political power.

Theologically conservative, they limited the canon to Torah, rejected doctrines of resurrection, demons, and angels, and advocated free will over divine providence. This group didn't survive the Jewish-Roman War.



Other Religious Groups



Zealots

Extreme left development among Pharisees, founded by Judas of Gamala (6 AD), interested in national independence and precipitating the revolt in 66 AD.



Essenes

Extreme right Pharisee development, forming ascetic communities around the Dead Sea with strict law observance and rigorous devotion.



Herodians

Extreme left Sadducees who based national hopes on Herod's family, looking to them for Messianic fulfillment.

Oral Tradition Development

01

Origins with Ezra

Began with renewed emphasis on the Law by Ezra the scribe around 458 BC, though Jews claimed it originated with Moses himself.

03

Schools of Hillel and Shammai

Liberal Hillel and strict Shammai represented opposite theological extremes, with 316 recorded controversies between their schools.

02

Haggadah to Halachah

First-generation interpretations (haggadah) became binding tradition (halachah) when questions recurred and interpretations were remembered.

04

Codification Process

After Jerusalem's destruction (70 AD), Pharisees at Jamnia wrote the tradition, creating the Mishnah (70-200 AD) and later the Talmud.

Intertestamental Literature

Jews wrote various literature during the intertestamental period: history, fiction, wisdom, devotional, and apocalyptic genres. Most writings were lost, with survivors preserved through Jewish Christians.

These writings are grouped as Apocrypha (joined with Old Testament in Septuagint manuscripts) and Pseudepigrapha (written during the period but not included in LXX). While historically valuable, they lack the inspiration and authority of canonical Scripture.

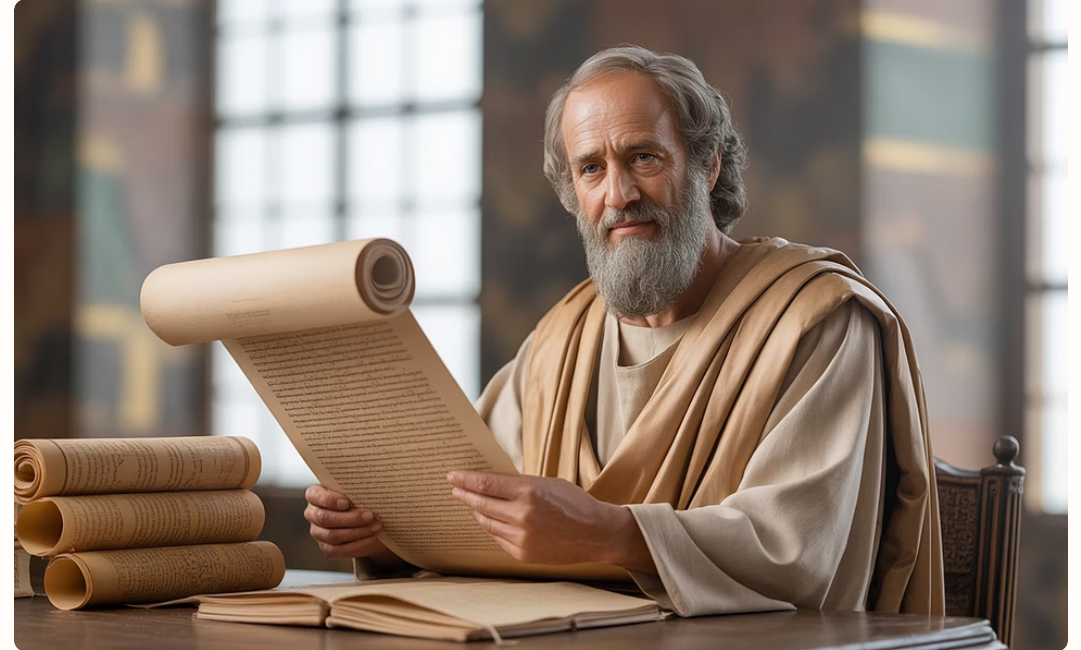


Judeo-Alexandrian Philosophy



Cultural Synthesis

Alexandria's Jewish community (estimated one million during Jesus' time) developed literature explaining Judaism to the Greek world, exhibiting marked syncretism.



Philo's Contribution

Philo (27 BC - 41-65 AD) used Platonic theory to interpret Jewish doctrines in terms the Greek mind could understand, emphasizing allegorical interpretation.

Flavius Josephus: Primary Historical Source

Born in Jerusalem around 37-38 AD, Josephus was contemporary with Christianity's birth and growth. Trained as a rabbi, he became Galilean governor during the Jewish-Roman War before becoming a Roman favorite.

His four works serve as apologetics for first-century Judaism: "Antiquities of the Jews," "Wars of the Jews," "Life," and "Against Apion." Despite some exaggerations, these remain our primary sources for this period's history.





Introduction to the Four Gospels

The Gospels are our primary source of information about Jesus Christ's life, work, and suffering. They are the most important New Testament books, providing almost exclusive knowledge of Jesus' life and ministry.

Unlike other New Testament writings that interpret Christ's work, the Gospels narrate the events themselves, serving as the foundation for Christian proclamation throughout history.

What is a Gospel?

1

Original Meaning

Greek "evangelion" originally meant payment for good news transmission, evolving to mean "good news" or "victory announcement" with religious overtones in Roman Caesar worship.

2

Old Testament Usage

Hebrew "besorah" meant proclaiming joyful news, especially concerning coming salvation and the messianic age (Isaiah 52:7-10).

3

Christian Application

Jesus presented himself as the messenger of joy, and Paul understood Jesus as the gospel's content - his coming, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection.

Literary Style of the Gospels

The Gospels represent a new literary genre without ancient parallels. Unlike biographies, they don't focus on physical appearance, psychological development, or chronological sequence. Instead, they are written proclamations about Jesus Christ.

Their purpose is awakening and strengthening faith (John 20:31). The authors aren't independent writers but witnesses or disciples of witnesses, intimately connected to apostolic tradition transmitted by the church.



Characteristics of the Four Gospels

Synoptic Structure

Matthew, Mark, and Luke follow simple geographical structure: Galilean ministry, journey to Jerusalem, Jerusalem events.

John's Approach

Describes multiple journeys between Galilee and Jerusalem for Jewish festivals, providing chronological framework for Jesus' ministry.

These different approaches reflect varying purposes: Synoptics organize geographically while John follows biographical structure to show ministry development over approximately three years.

Differences in Content and Presentation

Miracle Accounts

Synoptics contain numerous healing miracles and demon expulsions. John includes only seven miraculous acts, with no demon expulsions.

Opposition Identification

Synoptics distinguish various opponent groups: Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, priests. John typically uses the general term "Jews."

Narrative Style

Synoptics contain brief accounts culminating in striking Jesus sayings. John provides detailed, reflective narratives with extended dialogues.



Speaking Styles and Self-Designation

In the Synoptics, Jesus speaks directly and objectively in Greek linear thought patterns. In John, development occurs in circles with constant repetitions, reflecting Eastern speaking style and allowing deeper internalization of concepts.

Jesus' self-designation differs: Synoptics emphasize "Son of Man" while John focuses on "Son of God" or "Son," providing special insight into the unique relationship between God and Jesus.

The Synoptic Problem

Similarities

The first three Gospels show remarkable similarity in structure, sequence of pericopes, and even Greek text form across long passages.

Differences

They differ in theme selection, narrative context presentation, and frequently in Greek text form, creating an apparent contradiction.

The synoptic problem asks: How can we explain these observations based on the Gospels' origin history? Various theories attempt to resolve this literary puzzle.

Theories for Synoptic Relationships

01

Proto-Gospel Hypothesis

Lessing (1776) proposed an ancient Aramaic gospel as the common source, but this doesn't explain literal Greek similarities.

03

Oral Tradition Hypothesis

Herder proposed oral proto-gospel, but doesn't account for Greek textual similarities since oral tradition was likely Aramaic.

02

Fragment Hypothesis

Schleiermacher (1817) suggested numerous small fragments collected by apostles and translated into Greek, but fails to explain structural similarities.

04

Literary Dependence Hypotheses

Various theories of direct literary relationships between the three Gospels, leading to the Two-Source Theory.



The Two-Source Theory

This dominant theory proposes that Matthew and Luke independently used two sources: Mark's Gospel and a sayings source (Q - from German "Quelle" meaning source).

Markan Priority

Mark is shortest and most basic. Matthew and Luke agree in structure and content only where parallel to Mark, suggesting Mark was their source.

Q Document

Matthew and Luke show near-literal agreement in material they share beyond Mark, indicating a common Greek source of Jesus' sayings and some acts.

New Testament Letters Introduction

Contrary to casual appearance, the Gospels weren't written first. The oldest Christian literature consists of epistles - twenty-one of the New Testament's twenty-seven books can be called letters.

These letters, written from about 45 AD to the first century's end, addressed specific Christian communities with particular problems. They became the earliest literary deposits of the emerging Church.



The Literary Legacy

27

Total NT Books

Complete New Testament collection representing diverse authors, periods, and purposes unified in Christian message.

21

Letters

Epistolary literature forming the majority of New Testament writings and earliest Christian documents.

55

Years of Writing

Approximate timespan from earliest letters to final compositions, documenting Christianity's foundational period.

These documents, carried by trusted messengers and read in assemblies, formed the foundation for Christian doctrine and practice. Their influence shaped the emerging Church and continues to guide Christian communities worldwide, representing the written testimony of apostolic witness to Jesus Christ.

