

THE NEW TESTAMENT

An Introductory Study Guide

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How to use this study guide

Welcome to the New Testament – a strange and captivating world, removed from ours by over 2,000 miles and nearly 2,000 years. This New Testament study guide will help you find your bearings. It is no detailed roadmap, but it will show you the lay of the land and signpost the main destinations.

For each of the 27 books that make up the New Testament, you'll find a brief introductory section on the author ('Who?'), their core message ('What?') and how we can make sense of that message today ('So what?'). Before going through a particular book, you'll want to look at the corresponding introductory notes.

The section 'Questions to guide you' will keep you from losing the thread. Consider these questions while reading or listening to The New Testament.

Once you've completed a book, the sections 'For group reflection' will help you further explore its content with others. Alternatively, you can go through the questions on your own, though we recommend that you consider them as part of a group if possible.

Before you start, please take the time to read the Introduction on page 5. It will give you a quick but essential overview of the range of New Testament writings, and it will help you understand more of the historical and theological background against which they came into existence.

We wish you every blessing as you enter and travel through the world of the New Testament.

Introduction

The story of Jesus

As far as we know, Jesus didn't leave any writings to posterity. It was left to others to write about him.

Four literary accounts, known as the **Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John**, have been handed down to us through the centuries. Between them, they make up roughly the first half of the part of the Bible we call the New Testament.

The Gospel stories are set in first-century **Galilee and Judea**, a backwater of the Roman Empire. Two and a half centuries before the Romans, Alexander the Great had had his stab at world domination. He exported Hellenistic culture to the far corners of his realm, including the Middle East. As a result, Greek was still the official language across the region even long after Alexander's empire had fallen apart. So it doesn't come as a surprise that the Gospels were written in Greek.

Scholars generally **date the writing** of Mark's Gospel to around AD 70, John around AD 90 and Luke and Matthew somewhere in between. In other words, the Gospels were probably written a generation or two after the events they report.

The story of Jesus, however, began to spread much earlier. At the end of his public ministry he had taken on the religious establishment in Jerusalem, which was one of the factors that led to his arrest and execution by the Roman authorities. Remarkably, within weeks of his death, his followers were once again declaring him to be the **Messiah**.

Messiah – 'Christos' in Greek, from which we get the word '**Christ**' – means 'the anointed one'. The Jews had waited for many years for a king like David to come and rule God's people once more. This messianic expectation was widespread at the time of Jesus, and anyone who named Jesus as 'Jesus Christ' was claiming that the crucified carpenter from Nazareth was the long-expected Messiah. But Jesus wasn't just called Messiah, he was also recognised as 'Lord'; by claiming 'Lordship' for Jesus the early Christians were in direct conflict with the Roman Empire, which maintained that there was no Lord but Caesar.

Then as now, Palestine was rife with political, ethnic and religious tension. Jews who resented the Roman occupiers built their dream of liberation on the advent of the **Messiah**; and it was not uncommon for a charismatic leader to gather supporters who put their messianic hopes in him. Neither was it uncommon for such a leader to challenge Rome and be killed in the process. Provided they escaped punishment, his followers may have decided to join another rebellion. One thing they were unlikely to do was to go round telling everyone that their former, executed leader had been the Messiah. But this is exactly what happened in Jesus' case. What conclusions can we draw?

Firstly, Jesus must have been a **historical figure**. Had he been a mythical invention, as some people would have us believe, Christians would have ensured that Jesus matched first-century expectations of what the Messiah would be like: a spiritual superhero with God on his side. To tell your fellow Jews that the Messiah was a former Rabbi, a craftsman from Galilee, who had managed to get himself killed like a common criminal by pagan idol-worshippers, would have been a fairly bad marketing ploy. Yet, that is precisely what Christians did. Why would they, unless they believed it to be true? Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, is simply too counter-intuitive to be an invention.

Secondly, to deny the Christian claim that Jesus **rose from the dead** makes it difficult to explain the birth of the Church. As he hung on a Roman cross, his disciples naturally concluded that his mission had failed. All they could do was to go into hiding and wait for things to blow over. Instead, they soon began to preach publicly in his name – the very people who had given up on him only weeks before. What, other than the resurrection of Jesus, could have brought about such a change of heart?

The message of Messiah Jesus soon attracted new believers. In a matter of decades, Christian fellowships could be found scattered across the Roman Empire.

To deliver their message, believers largely relied on the **spoken word**. They told the story of Jesus in personal encounters, synagogues and market squares, and recited his words wherever they gathered for worship or instructed new converts. But while Christian fellowships were springing up all over the place, the generation of Palestinian Jews who had met Jesus in person was beginning to die out; preserving the good news for those who would follow became a necessity.

The Gospel of Matthew

Who?

The original Gospel manuscripts were not entitled ‘Matthew’, ‘Mark’, ‘Luke’ and ‘John’. Their authors were not interested in making a name for themselves; they wanted to proclaim Jesus.

Early Church tradition believed that **Matthew**, one of Jesus’ 12 disciples, had written the first of the four Gospels. His was thought to be the oldest of the four, which is why it is at the beginning of the New Testament.

For a number of reasons, however, most contemporary scholars think that **Mark predates Matthew**. Large sections of Matthew are strikingly similar to Mark, which suggests that one drew from the other. Matthew is more stylish and elaborate, so the ‘simpler’ Mark is more likely to have been Matthew’s source, rather than the other way round. Matthew also contains material that cannot be found in Mark, so he may have had access to one or perhaps even several additional sources.

If it is true that Mark is older, the question is why would Matthew, who was one of the disciples, base his Gospel on Mark, who was not – unless of course Mark had used Peter’s eyewitness testimony?

In the end, does it matter who wrote Matthew? Let’s remind ourselves that, by the time the four Gospels were written, their authors were able to draw from a rich, carefully preserved body of stories about Jesus, his sayings and collections of fulfilled Old Testament prophecies showing him to be the Messiah. That Jesus **tradition**, in turn, was based on the witness of the apostles. So, in a sense, it is secondary whether the Gospel was written by the disciple Matthew or a second-generation Christian who had access to apostolic witness. It certainly wasn’t important to the author; nowhere in the Gospel does he reveal his identity. He doesn’t seek to promote himself but his Lord.

What?

Matthew's Gospel is steeped in the **Old Testament**: having been born in Bethlehem, the city of David, Jesus is the rightful heir of Israel's greatest king. In Jesus the messianic prophecies have been fulfilled. He has not come to do away with the Law of Moses, but to fulfil it and take it to a new level. Matthew even seems to have arranged the bulk of his material in five sections, which could be read as echoing the five books of Moses, the bedrock of Judaism.

But Matthew is **not exclusively Jewish**. He is the only evangelist to include the magi from the East – pagan astrologers – in his account of the birth of Jesus. He ends his Gospel with the Great Commission: the risen Jesus commands his disciples to take his message to the far corners of the earth.

Matthew contains one of the most famous Bible passages: the **Sermon on the Mount**, which Luke only renders in part, while Mark and John leave it out altogether. The whole of Matthew puts great emphasis on practical Christian living.

So what?

Matthew appears to have written primarily for first-century Jews who believed in Messiah Jesus – a world from which we are far removed. Yet, Matthew's Gospel is **timeless** and speaks into our present-day reality.

Matthew is **for everyone**: his Gospel begins with non-Jewish astrologers worshipping the infant Jesus and ends with the risen Christ sending his disciples to the ends of the earth.

Matthew is the only Gospel to mention the word '**church**': the worldwide fellowship of believers that will prevail against the odds (Matthew 16.18).

Matthew reminds us that faith without obedience to **Christ's teachings** is worthless. The Christian life should be as counter-cultural as the Sermon on the Mount.



Questions to guide you ...

- Can you detect the major themes in the **Sermon on the Mount**?
- What do '**the Scriptures**' (the Old Testament) say about the Messiah?
- How do Jesus' **parables** describe the 'Kingdom of God'?
- What does Matthew say about the **end of time** and God's Kingdom?
- How does Matthew draw out the deeper meaning of the **death** of Christ?



For group reflection:

- Who, according to Matthew, is **Jesus**?
- What, according to Matthew, is a **church**?
- What, according to Matthew, is the **Kingdom of God**?

1 Timothy

Who?

This is the first of three letters known as the '**Pastoral Epistles**': 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. They are addressed to individuals, not churches. Both Timothy and Titus were co-workers of Paul's. Timothy was based at the church in Ephesus, while Titus was serving in Crete.

The Pastoral Epistles were written at a time when churches had become more **established and organised**, so much so that some scholars regard the 'Pastoral Epistles', or at least parts of them, as the work of a later follower of Paul's. We have to leave the debate to the experts, confident that, irrespective of human authorship, these writings rightfully belong in the canon of Scripture.

What?

Once again, Paul feels obliged to address **false teachings**. Once again, we have evidence that early Christianity was developing and diverse.

Chapter 2 includes a famous passage that combines Jewish monotheism ('one God') with the Old Testament concept of **ransom**:

'Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for us all'.
(1 Timothy 2.5–6, ESV)

The letter stands out on account of its detailed instructions for **bishops** (also translated as 'overseers') and **deacons**.

1 Timothy is (in)famous for its enigmatic reference to **women** being saved by childbirth and its seemingly negative attitude towards women – though some scholars would argue that it is not as negative as is sometimes believed.

The letter closes with Paul's **personal advice** to Timothy.

So what?

The first letter to Timothy contains some brief key passages that help us to grasp the **essence of the Christian faith**: Christ, mediator between God and humanity (2.5); Christ,

the ransom for our wrongdoings (2.6); Christ, who reveals God 'in the flesh' (3.16, ESV).

The letter is full of practical instructions for **Christian leadership** and **church relationships**. It offers guidelines to each generation on how to run a church according to New Testament principles.

Though it may not make comfortable reading, the letter needs to be included in any discussion on the role of **women in Christian ministry**.



Questions to guide you ...

- What kinds of **issues** did Timothy have to grapple with in the Ephesian church?
- List Paul's key points on **prayer**.
- What are the hallmarks of a godly **leader**?
- What does Paul have to say about **material wealth**?
- Take note of examples where Paul is dealing with **false doctrine**, and which topics he is addressing in particular.



For group reflection:

- According to some – though certainly not all – scholars, 1 Timothy appears to tackle the influence of an early form of **Gnosticism** on the Ephesian church (e.g. reference to '[Gnostic] knowledge' in 1 Timothy 6.20). Gnosticism reinterpreted Genesis 3 ('The Fall') as Adam not having been seduced but enlightened by Eve when she handed him the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. As a group, consider **1 Timothy 2.9–15** as a possible response to the Gnostic take on women. Does this change what on the surface reads like a blueprint for male supremacy? Might Paul's command that a woman should not teach be restricted to the women in the Ephesian church who, influenced by Gnosticism, may have been teaching female supremacy? Share your views as a group, bearing in mind that the influence of early Gnosticism on the church is disputed among scholars.
- Consider 1 Timothy 2.15: 'But women will be saved by having children if they stay faithful, loving, holy,

* Points 1 and 2 for group discussion
- source: Bruce Barron, 'Putting women in their place: 1 Timothy 2 and evangelical views of women in church leadership.' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33.4 (1990) 451-459. In www.ntgateway.com

and modest.' The Greek word for 'being saved' can also mean being '**healed**' or '**protected**'. Having just spoken of Eve's sin and subsequent curse resulting, among other things, in painful childbirth, might Paul be reassuring married and pregnant women in the fellowship of God's protection? *Discuss!

- As a group, **meditate** on this verse:

'He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory'.

(1 Timothy 3.16, NRSV)