

New Testament Overview

The New Testament is the exclusively Christian portion of the Scriptures, and consists of 27 books. All of these books (with the possible exception of the Gospel According to Matthew) were written – so far as we know – in Greek. In all cases, the oldest and earliest copies of the books we have are all written in Greek.

The writing of these books in Greek is not surprising – the books of the New Testament are written either as communications to Greek speaking individuals or communities, or were written for the edification of specific communities, groups or even the general population. Owing to the universal use of the Greek language in the Roman Empire and the former Alexandrian Empire following the conquests of Alexander the Great of Macedon, Greek was the logical choice of language. If the books were not written in Greek, they they would have had to be translated into many different languages in order to have the same reach and ease of understanding. (The one book which many scholars believe to have *not* originally been written in Greek is the Gospel According to Matthew. This special case surrounding this is addressed in the article on the Synoptic Problem.)

The New Testament consists of a number of major parts. The first is the Gospels – the first four books. Each of these is a historical account of Jesus Christ's life, death and ministry. These are not merely historical books, however. The Gospels were a totally new form of literature, invented in order to convey the Messianic qualities and qualifications of Jesus Christ. Because of their importance to the new and everlasting Christian covenant (a similar importance to the Torah to the Jewish covenant) they are placed at the very beginning of the New Testament. They are placed in the *traditionally accepted* order of authorship (but see the article on the Gospels and the Synoptic Problem).

Following the Gospels is the book of Acts. This is a history book detailing the early Church and the journeys of Saul of Tarsus (also known as Paul). Traditionally considered to have been written by the author of the Gospel According to Luke, Acts is a continuation of that narrative, but is not regarded as a Gospel as it does not address the foundation of the new and everlasting covenant. Instead, it describes the spreading of the Gospel message throughout the Mediterranean and the Near and Middle East.

The majority of the New Testament books (21 in all) are considered to be Epistles (a word meaning “letters”). These are (with the possible exception of the book often called “Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews” - which some scholars consider to be not by Paul, not an Epistle, and not to the Hebrews!) letters written by prominent Christian leaders to individuals, churches, or simply to “the Christian Church” as a whole (a sort of “open letter”). Thirteen of these letters are traditionally considered to be the work of Paul, and another seven the work of other Christians. The book of Hebrews is traditionally also ascribed to Paul, but this has been challenged by virtually all Biblical scholars, conservative and otherwise.

The final book of the New Testament is the Apocalypse (or Revelation) of Saint John. This is the only example in the canonized Christian Scriptures which we have of the so-called apocalyptic style of writing. This style of writing – very common at the time when Apocalypse was written (around 100 AD) – used symbolic language to convey spiritual truths. It has much in common in terms of style with the visionary episodes of the Prophetic works.

The New Testament is, much like the Tanakh before it, only intended to be used in conjunction with the oral tradition which fully explores and explains the text. The New Testament is – to human eyes – a somewhat eclectic collection of works, and is certainly not set out in a catechetical format which is easy to use on its own as a guide for Christians. Many of the works (particularly Paul's letters to churches) are not the easiest works to apply to the Christian life in general without the oral tradition which developed before and alongside the New Testament works.