



CHAPTER ONE

TOURING THE NEW TESTAMENT LIBRARY

The Bible can be likened to a library of books housed in two separate buildings. The first building contains the earlier collection of books that Christians call the Old Testament. This collection was recognized as Scripture and preserved through tumult and trial by the Jewish nation. Part of Christian teaching is that God delivered to the Jews his oracles—his holy word—for safekeeping (Romans 3:2). For this reason Christians accept these earlier books as part of their Bible.

The second building of the biblical library houses the books of the New Testament. These books were written by leaders of the Christian community. They were recognized as Scripture and preserved by Christian congregations in various parts of the Roman Empire.

The space between the two buildings of the biblical library represents roughly four hundred years. This period is known as the Silent Period because God did not speak to his people. No prophets arose. No Scripture was written.

Contrasts in Collections

As we begin our tour of the New Testament library, we notice immediately four obvious contrasts between these newer books

and those we observed on our tour of the earlier collection. First, there is a contrast in the number of books in each collection. As we count them in the English Bible, there are thirty-nine books in the Old Testament, only twenty-seven in the New. Second, there is a contrast in the time of writing. It took a thousand years—from Moses to Malachi—to complete the writing of the Old Testament. The New Testament books were all written over a period of only fifty years. Third, there is a contrast in the number of writers. About thirty-two writers contributed to the older collection, only eight or nine to the newer collection. Fourth, there is a contrast in the types of literature in the two collections. The Old Testament consists of books of law, history, poetry, and prophecy. In the New Testament the predominant type of literature is the epistle or letter.

How the Collection Grew

Most of the New Testament books were written to or for Christians in a specific congregation or region. As time went on the believers in other congregations made copies of these books. Still later the Christians began to publish manuscripts with collections of the books that they acknowledged to have been written by apostles or their representatives.

How the Collections Are Related

For the present it is important to grasp the overall message of the New Testament and how it relates to the message of the previous thirty-nine books. In our previous study (*Old Testament Books Made Simple*) we learned that the Old Testament was chapter one of the biblical story that might be entitled: *Christ is coming*. Chapter Two of that story is contained in the first four books of the New Testament: *Christ is here!* The rest of the books of the New Testament constitute the final chapter of that story: *Christ is coming again!*

Organization of the Collection

The early New Testament manuscripts present a variety of arrangements of the books. Sections of the New Testament library have not always been in their present sequence. For example, the General Epistles precede Paul's epistles in some manuscripts. Even the individual books within sections have not always been placed in the same sequence. The arrangement of our English New Testament, however, represents what came to be the generally accepted order of the books.

In our previous study of the Old Testament we discovered that the thirty-nine Old Testament books are organized into shelves that can be labeled as follows:

- ❖ **Foundation Books** (Genesis–Deuteronomy)
- ❖ **Framework Books** (Joshua–Esther)
- ❖ **Faith Books** (Job–Song)
- ❖ **Focus Books**
 1. **Major Prophets** (Isaiah–Daniel)
 2. **Minor Prophets** (Hosea–Malachi)

The New Testament library is organized in a similar manner:

- ❖ **Foundation Books** (Matthew–John)
- ❖ **Framework Book** (Acts)
- ❖ **Faith Books** (Romans–Philemon)
- ❖ **Focus Books**
 1. **Focus on current issues** (Hebrews–Jude)
 2. **Focus on future issues** (Revelation)

A Closer Look at the Shelves

Foundation Books

The Foundation Books of the New Testament are the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books are called

Gospels because they contain the good news of the birth, ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The four Gospels function in the New Testament in a manner similar to the first five books of the Old Testament. They are foundational to everything else that is recorded in the books that follow. The Gospels record the basic factual information about the life of Christ including his teaching on various subjects.

Framework Book

It took twelve books in the Old Testament to provide the framework for the thousand years that elapsed between Moses and Malachi. The New Testament is concerned about less than one tenth of that amount of time. From the ascension of Jesus to the death of the Apostle John is a period of about seventy years. The Book of Acts is the only Framework Book in the New Testament. It does not contain a complete framework for the New Testament period. Acts covers only about thirty-five years (one half) of the years of New Testament history. The second half of New Testament history must be reconstructed from hints given in the later epistles, the Book of Revelation, and early secular and Christian historians.

Faith Books

In *Old Testament Books Made Simple* we used “Faith Books” as the designation for the five books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These books explored how faith in God responds to the varied circumstances of life. In the New Testament we use “Faith Books” with a different connotation. The New Testament Faith Books are the letters of Paul. Some have referred to Paul as the first Christian theologian and the architect of the Christian faith. If such designations imply that Christianity owes its existence to the genius of Paul, then they misrepresent his role. It is true, however, that in the oral and written teaching of Paul the contours of the Christian faith were drawn by the Holy Spirit. In the writings of Paul above all other New Testament writers, the Christian faith was defined and refined.

In our English Bibles the letters of Paul are divided into two broad groups: public letters and private letters. The former group is arranged according to size:

Paul's Letters as Arranged in Our Bibles	
Public Letters	Private Letters
Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians	1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon
Written to 7 Churches	Written to 3 Individuals

The public letters were written to congregations. They were intended to be read as part of the Christian assembly.

If Paul's letters were to appear in our Bibles in the order in which they were written the layout would look like what is presented in the following chart.

Paul's Letters Chronologically Grouped			
2nd Journey Letters	3rd Journey Letters	Prison Period Letters	Final Letters
1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians	Galatians Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians	Colossians Philemon Philippians Ephesians	1 Timothy Titus Hebrews (?) 2 Timothy

In this survey we will look at Paul's letters in the order in which they appear in the English Bible with one exception. We will consider Galatians along with Romans because of the similarity of content. Here is the organization of Paul's letters utilized in this survey:

- ❖ **Evangelical Duo** (Romans & Galatians)
- ❖ **Encounter Duo** (1 & 2 Corinthians)

- ❖ **Ecclesia Trio** (Ephesians–Colossians)
- ❖ **Eschatological Duo** (1 & 2 Thessalonians)
- ❖ **Exhortation Quartet** (1 Timothy–Philemon)

Focus Books

The Old Testament Focus Books had two distinct subdivisions: Major Prophets and Minor Prophets. Likewise, the section of New Testament Focus Books has two subdivisions. The first subdivision consists of eight open letters that focus on specific issues that were of concern to the entire Christian community. Frequently New Testament scholars refer to these eight books as the *General Epistles*.

The eight General Epistles were written by five men. The authorship of Hebrews is uncertain. The position of the Book of Hebrews immediately following the collection of letters by Paul reflects the ambiguity of authorship of this particular book. Some regard Hebrews as the fourteenth book written by Paul. Others are content to attribute Hebrews to some unknown Christian teacher. James and Jude were the half brothers of Jesus. Three of the General Epistles were written by John the beloved disciple. Two were penned by the Apostle Peter.

The second subdivision of the New Testament Focus Books consists of one volume—Revelation. John’s fifth contribution to the New Testament library is unique in the collection. While it contains brief letters to seven churches, it focuses mainly on issues pertaining to the near and the distant future.

Observations about Writers

A quick stroll through the New Testament library produces some initial impressions about the contents of this collection of books in terms of authorship and date of the individual volumes.

A. Original Apostles Who Wrote

We first notice that the majority of the New Testament books were written by those who were apostles of Jesus Christ. The word *apostle* means one who has been sent out on behalf of another. The word, however, has a technical sense in the New Testament. It is used of one of the men chosen by Christ to be an official eyewitness of his resurrection. With the exception of Paul, who was a special case, these men had traveled with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. They had been with him 24/7 for the better part of three and a half years. Thus they could authoritatively testify that the same Jesus who died on the cross was the Jesus who appeared to them and other disciples over the course of forty days prior to his ascension.

The **Apostle John** wrote five books of the New Testament—the Gospel of John, the letter called 1 John, two postcards called 2 & 3 John, and the Book of Revelation. All together this material constitutes about eighteen percent of the New Testament text.

The **Apostle Peter** wrote two short letters. He may also have influenced the contents of the Gospel of Mark.

The **Apostle Matthew** wrote a Gospel. This large book constitutes about twelve percent of the New Testament text.

B. Apostle to the Gentiles

Paul was the last apostle to be named. He came from the ranks of those who hated Christ and his followers. In the fourth year of the history of the church Saul (as he was then called) was making a trip to Damascus to ferret out the Christians from the synagogues. He aimed to return them to Jerusalem for trial and execution. About noon he saw a blinding light. A voice from heaven identifying himself as Jesus directed Paul to go into Damascus. There he was to be given further instructions.

Paul had no doubt that he had both seen and heard the resurrected Christ on the Damascus road. Without question he came to believe in Christ. He repented of his vicious attacks on the Christians. In darkness he prayed for forgiveness and waited for the further instructions promised by the voice on the road.

Three days later the Lord dispatched a local Christian named Ananias to minister to Paul. First, Ananias restored Paul's eyesight. Then he exhorted the man to be baptized. Finally, Ananias told Paul that he was to be a light to the Gentiles.

Immediately following his baptism Paul began to preach the truth about Christ in the Jewish synagogues of Damascus. Clearly this anti-Christian persecutor was now a fervent Christian. The only possible explanation for such a sudden and complete turn-about in this man's life is that on the Damascus road he actually had seen the resurrected Jesus in his heavenly glory.

Both bookwise and wordwise Paul contributed more to the New Testament than any other writer. He wrote the thirteen books designated above as Faith Books. The Book of Hebrews is anonymous. Ancient tradition assigned the book to various authors, but the tradition that the book was written by Paul is very strong. If Hebrews is assigned to Paul, then the Apostle to the Gentiles wrote half the books of the New Testament and about twenty-eight percent of the actual text.

C. Non-Apostles Who Wrote

Four non-Apostles also contributed to the New Testament library: Luke, Mark, James, and Jude. **Luke**, the Gentile traveling companion of Paul, wrote two large books of the New Testament—the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Together these two books contain only ten fewer words than the combined epistles of Paul (Hebrews included). So Luke contributed about twenty-eight percent of the New Testament text.

Christian tradition indicates that **Mark** wrote his Gospel while in Rome working alongside of Peter. The early Christians considered Mark's Gospel to be virtually the memoirs of the great Apostle Peter.

The writer of the Book of **James** was not the Apostle James, the brother of John. Rather he was the brother of Jesus. The brothers were nonbelievers during Jesus' ministry. After his resurrection Jesus made a special one-on-one appearance to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). Thereafter James became one of the most influential leaders in the early church.

Jude (short for Judas) identifies himself as *the brother of James*. This means that two of the New Testament books were written by half brothers of Jesus.

The following chart summarizes the above data:

New Testament Writers		
Name	Books	Text percent
Paul	13 or 14	27.8%
Luke	2	27.8%
John	5	18.9%
Matthew	1	13.1%
Mark	1	8.4%
Peter	2	2.4%
James	1	1.3%
Jude	1	.3%
Eight Writers	27 Books	100%

Observations about the Time of Writing

According to some New Testament authorities, the earliest New Testament book was **James** (AD 48). This means that the early Christians met for worship for eighteen years before any part of the New Testament was available in written form for their study. They did have, however, the **apostles** who were guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth. The apostles recited the teachings of Jesus and taught the new truths that the Holy Spirit revealed to them.

In many congregations there were also **prophets**. These were people who received special revelations from God to share with the local brethren. The oral teaching of the apostles and prophets served the needs of the church until such time as the books of the New Testament began to be written.

Many think Mark is the earliest Gospel because it is the shortest. Ancient Christian tradition, however, regards **Matthew** (AD

50) as the earliest Gospel. That is why Matthew stands first in most New Testament manuscripts. Luke's Gospel can be assigned to about the year AD 58, and Mark to about AD 68.

There is some dispute about which of Paul's epistles is the earliest. Some think Galatians was the first letter Paul penned. A better case, however, can be made for designating **1 & 2 Thessalonians** (AD 50–51) as the apostle's earliest correspondence. The last letter Paul wrote was 2 Timothy. He wrote this letter just before his death in AD 68. So the writings of Paul span a period of about eighteen years.

The most prolific period for writing New Testament books was the **decade of the sixties**. Twelve books were written between the years AD 60–69.

The General Epistles are very difficult to date. The same is true of Revelation. Most date Revelation to about AD 90. Others think that the book was written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The following chart displays the approximate dates for the New Testament books:

New Testament Books according to Date	
AD 40–49	James (48)
AD 50–59	Matthew (50); 1 Thessalonians (50); 2 Thessalonians (51); 1 Corinthians (55); 2 Corinthians (55); Galatians (55); Romans (56); Luke (58)
AD 60–69	Acts (61); Colossians (63); Philemon (63); Ephesians (63); Philippians (63); 1 Peter (65); 2 Peter (67); 1 Timothy (67); Titus (67); 2 Timothy (68); Mark (68); Hebrews (68)
AD 70–79	Jude (75)
AD 90–96	Gospel of John (90); 1 John (90); 2 John (90); 3 John (90); Revelation (90)

We have now completed our whirlwind tour of the New Testament library. We have learned some fundamental facts about this wonderful collection of writings that for Christians is the final authority for matters of faith. We have learned that the New Testament is a collection of . . .

- ❖ **27 books**
- ❖ **By at least 8 human authors**
- ❖ **Written over a period of about 50 years**
- ❖ **Organized in 4 shelves**

Now it's time to go back and look at these books more closely. So let's get started!